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NIGHT  
PIERCER  
MERRY RAVENELL

# APHELION

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APHELION  
NIGHTPIERCER  
BOOK FOUR

MERRY RAVENELL



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*ABYSS*

# ONE

Lachesis traced her fingertips down the large stapled incision on her chest.

Rainer leaned against the doorframe. “Feeling better?”

“Is it a sin for me to say that?”

“No.”

“I wasn’t expecting to feel better so soon.” Aside from the cracked sternum held together by a few plates and carefully woven wires, the pain of staples and stitches, the strange sensation of being horribly bruised *inside* her body, and the pain of broken bones, she felt fine. Whole. Healthy.

Except that the slightest physical effort left her out of breath. Even walking from the living room where Forrest waited to change her dressing to the bathroom to look in the mirror had left her sweaty. But that was only because the new heart in her chest had zero cardio conditioning, and its beat was erratic—the band on her arm betrayed that the rhythm wasn’t stable when the heart was taxed.

Rainer’s expression didn’t change, but his scent seemed to soften at the same time it darkened. “Once the drugs leave your system, all that’s left is the bone and tissue damage. The internal stitches and blood vessels will heal faster than your skin, and the bone will haunt you for months. But that’s only pain.”

She dropped her hands back to her side. “Except someone had to be sacrificed. And the entire ship is in tatters. For what? To save one life?”



Rainer's mismatched eyes seemed to move with a slow rotation like Jupiter. "You would have done the exact same thing. I know, because you almost did. To protect *NightPiercer* from *me*."

Time to change the subject. She'd been isolated in Medical and then their quarters due to her compromised immune system from the anti-rejection drugs. She'd been, more or less, in some combination of drug-haze, excruciating pain, bone-deep exhaustion, kitten-like weakness, and then, Rainer refusing to tell her much of anything until Forrest cleared her heart for "stress."

And Forrest had just cleared her heart, so stress it was. "Is Arden back with Tsu?"

"It would seem Arden's anger burns both hot, uncompromising, *and* stubborn." Rainer's tone was matter-of-fact, but his scent grim.

She took a breath. Pain seared through her cracked sternum and torn tissues, but for the first time in months, it didn't feel like her lungs were trying to shove something out of the way. "Tsu did that for me. *She* did that for me."

Saying the she-wolf's name was still too difficult. It seemed wrong to have Evadne's heart, her life, and for her to just be a name on a crew manifest, while Lachesis' picture was up on that wall in the gallery level.

Rainer stepped behind her and kissed her shoulder. "She did it to save civilization, not you. "

"And her heart was wasted once I was done with it." She could read what was on the channels, and Rainer had told her what had happened with Bennett. It had been an impossible situation, but she agreed with the sentiment that the heart had been wasted when it could, maybe, have saved another life.

Rainer gently turned her to face him. "Lachesis, that heart kept the pack alive. It doesn't matter if it was only for a week. That was the week that mattered more than anything else in civilization's history since Exodus. A day, a week, a month. She saved all of us. No grand gestures, no heroism, no heroes,

no victories. Just a she-wolf saying *I will* and stepping into Gaia's Gaze."

Her eyes burned with tears.

Rainer's fingers tightened on hers, and his lower eyelids rimmed more red. "I like to think she sits at Gaia's side now, the finest example of a she-wolf and the First Law."

The emotions threatened to choke her.

Her husband's gaze reflected the hellish nightmares that tormented him and emerged into vivid, too-real paintings. "We can either believe her death was proof we're beyond redemption, or that her sacrifice is proof we can all still be redeemed."

A few tears slipped out of the corner of one eye. "That's the thing, Rainer. Right now, it's both."

"Then I choose to perceive it as we can still be redeemed."

Because Gaia gave a damn about Rainer's quantum theories. "I seem to recall you saying something insane about we're all just clawing in the darkness, so it doesn't matter that you were about to smash one ship into another ship and blow all of civilization to hell."

"How can I blow a civilization to hell when, by your own statement, we already *are* in hell? Are you suggesting the smashing of the ships would open a portal into another cosmos that might, in fact, plunge us into another hell? Because, in theory—"

"Are you being serious or just obnoxious?"

"Both, I suspect."

She took another deep, shuddering breath and closed her eyes against the urge to collapse into wracking sobs. Rainer had done exactly what everyone had always feared he'd do—and she hadn't done much better. Her zealot husband had uttered the word *mate* and threatened to destroy civilization over her. Which is exactly what everyone believed deluded werewolf zealots would do at the first provocation.

And she wasn't sure he *wouldn't* have done it. It was a question she didn't especially want an answer to.

Either way, Tsu had defended both of them—her taking her father back to *Ark* while Rainer had “bluffed” going full Alpha zealot—even though it had cost him his own family. And now he dangled on the precipice of losing his command when *NightPiercer* needed him the most. The ship would die in the cold dark if Bennett got his way, because Bennett's way would be to wait until Earth sent them a *come home* letter scrawled on fine paper.

Unless *Ark* decided to see if those old guns actually would still work and took *Haven* for themselves. Tomely had been completely silent. No *Ark* teams had attempted to return to *Haven* since they'd been chased off, but that didn't mean they weren't licking their wounds.

Rainer was already up to something. She wasn't *so* out of her mind recuperating she hadn't noticed that Rainer's usual frenetic pace of work seemed slower than usual when it came to *NightPiercer* and *Haven*.

Before she could say anything—or Rainer could say anything deranged—a throat cleared in the living room.

“It would be wise if I could re-bandage that incision,” Forrest said mildly.

“I'm sorry, Forrest. I know you have other places to be.” She stepped around Rainer and back to the living room where the Chief Medical Officer waited for her to finish her contemplation of her fancy new scar.

Forrest sat on their coffee table, a collection of precious wound dressings arranged on a tray by his thigh. He was neatly shaven, but smelled of stress mingled with fierce composure. He observed every breath and movement while maintaining a bland, benign expression. “Patients often need to contemplate scars, especially when the injury or circumstances are traumatic. It's a process, even though you would not think it would be. Serious illness and injury takes a significant mental and emotional toll.”

“It took more than that.” Rainer steadied her as she sat down on the big chair. Pain bore through her sternum and took her breath away, while her heart wobbled in its rhythm.

“Then, as my wife would say, we go take it back.” Forrest pulled the small sensor he’d stuck above her left breast off and contemplated his tablet. “You can feel the unsteady beat of the heart, I take it?”

She instinctively moved a hand towards her chest, then caught herself. “It feels like fluttering.”

“Not entirely uncommon with hearts that haven’t been fully conditioned, and very common with hearts that were pulled from the vat prematurely. The electrical wiring isn’t mature, and the heart becomes uncoordinated when taxed.” Forrest began to apply a fresh wound dressing.

“Is this one of those *deficits* you warned us about?” Rainer asked. “Because you’ve been very cagey about those.”

“It’s going to take time to get final answers, but Ang and I think whatever deficits there end up being, they’ll be minor annoyances and academic points of interest. I would prefer if you would turn your attention to *Ark*, *Tsu*, and the matter of our overall survival.”

Rainer resettled himself, resigned to be some version of reasonable. “I have no confidence those guns are anything but decoys, not that *Ark*’s hull can withstand the force of them firing. I interrogated the boarding party on *Haven*. They were *quite* forthcoming.”

She couldn’t believe *Ark* had guns at all—she’d *never* been trained on *anything* involving weaponry or even close to it, and flying a ship that had armaments qualified. Although she had not been *Ark*’s Chief Pilot or primary navigation officer, so knowledge of *Ark*’s armaments might have been restricted to the highest levels of need to know.

“But Tomely is still very dangerous. He’s taking his time planning his next move. I would.”

Forrest pulled off his gloves and strapped her armband back into place. “Until we’re *certain* your heart is simply weak

due to lack of fitness, Critical Officer with full monitoring. But that is an upgrade from Medically Relieved of Duty.”

A dull throb lanced through her sternum and cracked ribs when she sighed. Forrest had had to go so quickly for the final transplant that two of her ribs had cracked when he'd spread them, in addition to re-breaking her sternum. “How long?”

“Just another two weeks of full, proactive monitoring, then we'll go to alarms with rescue meds, then alarms. Six months, give or take. My main concern right now is ribcage ossification.”

“Sounds more like it's an excuse to keep this armband on me because of a certain person.”

Rainer clicked his teeth. “Bennett is suitably wary of that band.”

“Bennett also knows Forrest is no longer neutral,” Lachesis countered, “and that makes him a target too.”

Forrest's half-grin came with a flash of a wild, broken gleam in his eyes. “I'd like to see him try. That band is bad luck for Bennett.”

There was no reason to hope Bennett's “bad luck” would persist. “I'm not counting on it to trip him a third time.”

“Agreed.” Forrest gathered up his things, gave her a final warning about making certain to wear her pressure corset to encourage her ribcage to ossify, and left.

## TWO

Rainer watched the door close.

“Are you going to tell me what you’re up to?” She moved the fingers of her right hand to tug at the fabric of his pants.

He looked down at her.

It hurt too much to look up at him, so she didn’t bother. “You’re not working with the expected fervor on *Haven*. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re delaying.”

“I’ve been focused on you and being extremely unobtrusive. Graves is still running projections on how to wire in the *Haven* mesh, anyway.”

“Right. And you *aren’t* giving Graves a headache for not working fast enough? Or peeling up tiles in preparation?” The tiles on *Haven’s* side were baked to a crisp. She’d have expected Rainer to have at least a few off and ready to start harvesting mesh.

Rainer turned all the way and bent down to her level. “I am glad you are feeling well enough to gnaw on me again.”

Changing the subject. Definitely guilty of scheming “I would have to be dead to not gnaw on you. What are you up to?”

“My love—”

“What have I told you about that word.”

“*Wife*—”

That was *no* better. Who used *wife* or *husband* as a term of endearment? And Rainer couldn't just trade one term for another and think everyone on *NightPiercer* wouldn't notice. *NightPiercer* would, in fact, notice. They were on alert *waiting* to notice the slightest aberration or that their Third Officer hadn't been bluffing when he'd threatened to smash ships into each other and end civilization because of his *mate*.

Rainer told her, "...you have been barely alive and my lack of teeth marks proves it. I will not apologize for keeping as many options available to us as possible while you recover."

She kept glaring.

"You *are* my wife. That fact is not in dispute. Not even by you."

"Only you can make compliance so irritating and difficult as to not demand it of you," she said darkly.

He broke into a wicked smile that was equal parts charming and maddening.

"Except *NightPiercer* is looking for a fight, and you're going to give them one. Now isn't the time for you to be making things worse by falling into old habits." Real anxiety scratched at her throat. "*She* didn't give her life just so you could be... be... cavalier!"

He caressed her cheek, she jerked away and wished she hadn't the way pain snapped through her ribcage and skin. He withdrew his hand. "On that note, let me show you something before I put it up on display."

"Display? A painting?" Rainer didn't display his paintings unless Tsu ordered him to.

Rainer fetched his artist's tablet. "Yes, a new painting. I started to work on it—and a plan—while you were in surgery."

He set his tablet across her knees, then sat down on the arm of the chair. He leaned over her and brushed the tablet through an endless list of files. "Bennett intends to turn the heart into *his* weapon. He wants everyone to believe it was thrown away and discarded, as if it had meant nothing. Tsu has remained silent."

Grief wrapped around her cracked bones. “He doesn’t have a lot of choice right now. Anything he says is going to sound like *I know you hurt, but you shouldn’t, because we did the right thing*. And I don’t know how what we did can ever be *right*.”

“It’s not right. Nothing we did was right. It was the only option any of us had. The *right* option ceased to be an option at all.”

“That won’t make anyone feel better,” she said hoarsely.

Rainer shifted so his chest pressed against her back and his entire body seemed to envelop hers.

She closed her eyes. “Arden’s been through Tsu with euthanasia. Even *mine*. So if Arden says *this*, this is too far... what’s the ship going to think? I was hoping Arden would come around, but he hasn’t, and now people are talking about if Tsu should resign. Which is exactly what Bennett wants and is trying to make happen. But is that what’s going to happen?”

“Tsu won’t resign, like I won’t resign. Even though Bennett has also been trying to convince me I should. For the good of the ship. Like Tsu can step down from Captain back to Lead Engineer, and I can retire to be an Artisan Painter.”

“And then I divorce you and marry him to heal all the wounds.” She felt sick.

“Exactly. You are *exactly* what he needs, and Bennett *only* wants to win. And winning, for him, is being Captain. He knows it’s slipping away.”

“He can’t be Captain if there’s no ship to Captain.”

“Exactly.”

“What a short-sighted idiot.”

“I guess the life of a mid-level bureaucrat doesn’t appeal to him.”

“A mid-level what?”

“Never mind. Old Earth term.”



“You really should not be advertising to anyone how much time you’ve spent absorbing what’s in the archives. Especially not now.”

“Fine. Then I’ll put it another way. Bennett doesn’t like the idea he’s going to get mothballed and knit lace for the rest of his life.”

“Which I don’t understand. His lace is beautiful. I’m the one who’s going to have to take old instruments and wander through wilds to draw maps. While *you* get to stay at home and build a roof and paint.”

Rainer chuckled without humor. “As Third Officer, the duty has fallen to me to issue a statement in support of the Captain’s actions. The Captain is concerned with other matters, the First Officer has made it clear he does *not* support the Captain’s actions and the Second Officer has chosen silence.”

More like Keenan was buried in the misery of population projections and rebuilding society’s warm body count. She *almost* felt bad for the Crèche Commander. But she didn’t, because Keenan was also (probably) in league with Bennett on some level. “I’m not sure anyone on *NightPiercer* wants you and me to say a damn thing.”

He swept through some screens until he got to a folder full of sketches and files. He brought up a finished painting.

A sob caught under her stitches.

It was a painting of the heart, so crisp and realistic it almost looked like a rendering. It had been removed from her body, placed on a medical tray, complete with drops of blood, and a shallow pool under it. But Rainer had painted it with delicate wiremesh, ornate hull plating, slender tubes, with fine filaments carrying tiny streams of blood in ornate blood-tinged-coils flowing to and from it, extending off the margins. It was exquisite and tender and fragile and so, so painful to behold.

The delicate metallic etching, the scrollwork on the wire mesh, the tiny blood vessels and tissues on the heart itself,

faces of the crew in the drops of blood and scenes painted into the reflections of the metal pan. Everywhere, even in the smallest, most insignificant part of the painting, were small details. Tiny vignettes from the ship shaped from the network of blood vessels on the heart. More stories were in the shadows of the wires and panels.

The title of the painting was *Civilization*.

Rainer brushed his lips along the fine hairs at her temple.

“Her heart?” Lachesis squeezed the words from her throat.

“*Our* heart. All of ours.” Rainer brought up another screen—the one allowing him to post something to the Command staff public feed. Without comment or hashtag, he dragged the painting to the feed.

He turned off his screen, set his tablet on the coffee table, and drew her—carefully—down against the chair’s back with him. He let out a breath while cradling her gently. The dull, unrelenting pain in her sternum matched the ache in her core.

Rainer stroked her hair. “It is a charm offensive, my love, and the only way I have ever been able to charm anyone is with my paintings. The ship’s soul may be lost, but I am still going to fight for it. Even if I have to wrestle it from Gaia’s Maw.”

She put one hand over one of his wrists. “How do you know that’s not what She wants us to do?”

“Then you will be pleased to know that for once, I will do as I am told.”

## THREE

The air in the officer conference room was, in a word, tense.

Rainer's arrival did not help that. Every shred of attention focused on him. This was apparently the first formal officer meeting that had taken place since just before her second transplant—so nearly four weeks. It had never been that long between meetings. All of them locked into a room together now seemed one spark away from erupting into chaos.

Forrest, though, looked completely calm, hands in his lap, swinging back and forth in his chair.

Tsu looked like he'd aged a solid five years. Shocks of gray had appeared at his temple, and strain had carved hollows and lines in his face.

She hadn't seen him since... well, that she could recall, since she had left for *Haven*.

The Captain raised his eyes to her as she entered. He might have been slightly withered, but the force of his determination hit her.

Bennett, by contrast, eyed her with something slithering under his skin.

She sat carefully. The pressure corset she was obligated to wear to encourage her non-weight-bearing ribs to heal limited her movements. The effort of getting up to the conference room had left her breathless as well.

“Lachesis.” Harkins sized her up with a quick up and down glance.

She tried not to gulp for breath. It wasn’t working. “Harkins.”

Bennett’s tone was exactly between a murmur to himself and a statement intended for comment. “Not the picture of fitness.”

Forrest kept swinging steady as a metronome. “Her heart had to leave the vat prematurely. No time to condition it. Her cardio is worse than a newborn’s.”

Keenan’s attention slid towards the doctor. “But she’s recovering.”

Lachesis hid a bristle. She was in the room, not some medical curiosity.

Forrest didn’t miss a beat. “No consequential deficits due to premature vat removal. The primary issues right now are a lack of strength and fitness, as well as two broken ribs and a separated sternum. Extremely painful, but not dangerous.”

“Broken ribs *are* a problem. They don’t heal,” Harkins retorted. “Why are her ribs broken?”

“Because I had to separate her ribs to get her damn heart out and put the new one in. Emergency ribcage separations aren’t pretty. She was *dying* and wasn’t going to survive long enough for me to make it *nice*. I had to get the old heart *out* of her chest.”

“And into the incinerator,” Bennett said under his breath.

Rainer forced himself to recline in his chair in an imitation of civility.

Forrest stopped moving. “Yes, into an incinerator. Eventually. I noticed *you* didn’t come to pay your respects.”

Bennett raised a brow. “To an organ?”

“Every single other person in this room sat vigil with it. It was more than an organ to all of us.” Forrest’s voice got rough with emotion. “It was a *life*. It was the *future*. And it’s the only

reason *any* of us still have *any* hope our children will grow up to weigh what we did to survive.”

Bennett started to say something but Keenan put both of her hands flat on the table. “We’re not here to discuss the heart, Civilization Management, or the *Haven* incident.”

Graves flicked his fingers. “Maybe we should. Clear the air.”

“The air doesn’t need clearing. We all know where we stand,” Rainer said.

Bennett shifted to say something but Harkins cut him off before his tongue so much as twitched. “We are here to discuss the fact this ship is blind and numb, and *Haven* is an idiot with a computer core the size of an almond. That is *all* I showed up for, and that’s *all* I am dealing with right now.”

Bennett bristled with aggravation, his expression flickering back and forth like the rattling of a serpent’s tail. “And there are other serious problems facing this ship. Like the festering wound that’s the heart and our Captain.”

Her skin turned cold and clammy and sweat patched her spine. Tsu barely seemed to flinch at the direct attack, but the scent in the room suddenly shifted as everyone’s frayed nerves threw sparks.

Rainer growled, “It’s triage.”

Bennett snarled. “Really. Did you *triate* those Kitchen problems?”

“I did, because my wife was in heart surgery and I needed something inconsequential to do while *not* being underfoot. I’m sorry if my discovering those fridges weren’t keeping safe temperatures meant you had to shift focus to meal planning.” Rainer leaned on his elbow towards Bennett. “Such a *shame* you had to wrestle your attention to the matter of dinner at *just* that time that you needed to be campaigning to get the others to sign that petition to stop Forrest.”

Bennett barred his teeth.

“Enough.” Tsu sounded calm, but in an exhausted and hollow way.

The tension at the table focused on him.

Tsu, calmly, said, “We’re here to discuss the most immediate problem facing *NightPiercer*, which would be the mesh and the underlying systems.”

Bennett said, “I don’t agree that the mesh is the most serious problem.”

Rainer moved to say something, she kicked him under the table to silence him. Harkins had already jumped halfway across the table. “You don’t want to know if *our ass is on fire*? For fuck’s sake, a lot happens on this ship that isn’t on the bridge. We *have* to fix the mesh or there isn’t going to be a ship to fight over. So stop with the dick-measuring, clit-comparing fuckery.”

Sudden hot quiet.

The Captain made eye contact and held it with everyone, individually, before he spoke again. “We are all in agreement that we are here to discuss the mesh and repairs, and not *Ark*, the *Haven* incident, or the fall-out from *Haven*.”

“Agreed. It’s possible to talk and work at the same time, and most hands are a little too idle.” Keenan flipped her hands palm-up, expression dry as roasted crickets while looking at Rainer.

Rainer folded his hands in his lap. “There are no unexpected problems with *Haven* beyond the ship is so primitive it seems implausible that it sustained life or flight for even a month. The biggest issue facing us is the computer core is extremely limited, and the AI is problematic.”

“Considering how it let you fly the ship? That’s problematic,” Bennett said.

“That’s what I just said.”

Graves leaned forward on the table. “The AI is considerably more autonomous than ours, and has been trained on grotesque circumstances with no re-training to maintain

healthy baselines. We need to be careful that there's no transfer between the two ships."

"So the plans to harvest *Haven's* logs for preservation are tabled," Tsu said.

"I would not feel safe bringing any data from *Haven* to *NightPiercer*. Not even a single text file."

Talking about the *Haven* data was not talking about the mesh, but it *was* talking. Harkins seemed resigned to wait until the conversation circled back to what concerned him.

Tsu permitted himself a little sigh of disappointment as Graves stressed that no data could be harvested from *Haven*. Keenan said, "I was hoping we'd be able to harvest some of the genetic material and the records to go with it, in addition to the Crèche data and crew logs for analysis and understanding."

"Same," Forrest said. "Morbid as it sounds, the AG data is still valuable, and there is probably a solid fifteen years of coherent data to analyze, if not more."

Time to cut Rainer off before he said something feral-sounding, or Bennett said something callous and she put a fist through his throat. "And I'm sure even though it's AG-related decline data, that it'd still be useful in some ways planet-side."

Tsu pointed at her. "We are *not* discussing a planet."

Bennett was watching Rainer, practically salivating, as he waited for the opportunity to strike. Time to take Tsu's old advice of *would you rather them bite you or me smack you*. "That data is useful and we'll—"

"*Enough*," Tsu growled.

"People *died* for that data. We can't just abandon it."

Graves cut off her Rainer imitation. "Belle's reports are it's too dangerous, and I'm inclined to take her at her word."

Harkins smirked. "Where's your sense of adventure, Graves?"

"Somewhere between *Haven* and *Ark*. And I'm not inclined to go retrieve it."

Rainer told Forrest and Keenan, “I could arrange for either of you to go to *Haven* to take hand-written notes *and* retrieve Graves’ sense of adventure.”

Rainer did *not* know how to sit quietly and let an argument pass him by, even now.

Graves twisted in his chair towards Rainer. “I question why you’d even *consider* bringing a line of that AI code here.”

“Because that AI was trained on nothing but inevitable death, of course,” Bennett murmured.

“Every AI is trained on inevitable death. I didn’t tell that AI anything it hadn’t already had *extensive* real-world training in.” Rainer shot back. “I have *always* kept the best interests of this ship and its crew as my *first* priority.”

“So that’s why you were going to smash two other ships together? Clear out the neighborhood and make room for us?” Bennett replied in a tone like hot ice.

“You are unfamiliar with the concept of a *bluff*, Commander.”

“I do not for *one second* believe you were *bluffing*.”

Tsu rapped his tablet on the table. “Enough.”

She said, “I wanted to at least get a crew manifest to take with us. We’re taking *LightBearer*, so it seems fair we take *Haven* since that crew didn’t do anything wrong besides be last in line for resources.”

“Denied,” Graves said flatly.

Tsu nodded to the Tech lead. “Mesh update.”

“Still planning how we’ll patch it in. The samples I have indicate about thirty percent data transfer capacity compared to *NightPiercer*’s mesh. It’s required a complete re-do of the planned repairs and we’re debating instead of a transplant, making new mesh from multiple strands of *Haven* mesh. That won’t leave enough mesh for *Ark*. It will barely be enough for our own repairs and some reserves. But that’s the option of last resort, since it would require modifications to our fab facilities here on *NightPiercer*.”



Grim news.

“So this has been pointless.” Bennett swung his attention to Tsu. “This entire *Haven* exercise has been completely pointless. We can’t manufacture enough tiles to cover our hull, we can’t use the wire mesh, we can’t harvest the data or repurpose their computer core, which renders all their bio and genetic material useless.”

Captain Tsu raised his chin a few degrees, but not in a way that exposed his throat. “You say that like we had other options, Commander. I don’t recall you presenting an alternative.”

Bennett tensed as his scent shifted to match: a burst of anxiety followed by a rush of anger at himself. He moved as if to speak, then caught himself and, stiffly, inclined his head slightly to yield the point.

She pressed the side of her boot into Rainer’s ankle. His scent smoldered but he managed to stay quiet.

Tsu folded his hands together and rested his chin on his clumped fist. “We had been planning on using *Haven*’s intact Telemetry array to detect hazards, notably solar activity, given our own very compromised situation due to damage. We had also been planning on using *Haven* to recalibrate our instruments as they are repaired. The problem is that *Haven*’s computer is grossly underpowered and cannot make the calculations fast enough for its own safety, much less get us the data so Lachesis can re-position us.”

Lachesis twisted her fingers in her lap. “It explains why *Haven* stayed out here and didn’t go to Jupiter with the other ships. *Haven* doesn’t have the computing power or maneuverability to stay safe in the Jovian system. They decided to take their chances with the Sun.”

“But you did come up with a way to make *Haven* useful to us. The proposal,” Tsu turned his greater attention back to the table, “is to use the engine test shuttle as a relay buoy. Someone flies it out to about here...” Tsu turned around to the large screen and pulled up a map of their local area. “...and *Haven* can transmit raw Telemetry data to *NightPiercer*, and

we'll use *NightPiercer* to do the calculations. The shuttle's been fitted with a version of *NightPiercer*'s navigation systems as it was a testbed. It's also scrap. Rainer confirms he can repair it enough for one final brief flight and it has sufficient flight-worthiness that it will be able to hold relative position."

"Except someone is going to have to fly it, and space-walk to another shuttle." Keenan pointed out.

Translation: *obscenely* dangerous mission.

Well, she *had* been somewhat out of her mind on medications and in organ rejection when she'd concocted it.

Keenan pointed at Rainer but did not look at him. "Don't even suggest it. *You* aren't doing it."

"I'm the most—"

"No."

"I—"

"That is an *order*, Third Officer," Keenan snarled.

Rainer stiffened.

Keenan bit out, "That's right. I'm one of three people on this ship that can give you a direct order, and I just pulled rank. *You* aren't flying that mission. Neither is Lachesis. End of conversation. That's an *order*."

Visibly un-tensing each joint like a mechanical device in need of lube, he yielded the point. "Yes, ma'am. But I *am* the most qualified for it."

"I would hope so. You're Lead Engineer. And you're not flying it."

"Don't trust any of your other staff with it?" Bennett inquired.

Rainer's joints snapped back into tension. Lachesis grated, "Quit. Both of you."

Both males looked at her in surprise. She gave them her best dour look. Rainer was letting Bennett drag him into a

fight, and Bennett wouldn't be openly dragging Rainer into a pissing match without a plan.

Bennett gave her a look of polite, amused surprise and something else that made her shudder.

Gross. He *liked* it. He'd enjoy wringing the fight out of her and teaching her how to be a Good Dog.

Keenan put her hands on the table and stood. "Now that the conversation has spiraled into pointless bickering, I have had enough and am done."

Keenan did not say goodbye to Tsu—or Bennett—before she left.

## FOUR

“**Y**ou are *exhausting*,” she said, pissed and aggravated and hurting. She tried to paw at the stays to get the damned brutal corset off, but couldn’t reach them and her ribs punished her for the effort.

Rainer moved towards her. She growled and clicked her teeth. “*Stop.*”

“You are just going to hurt yourself.”

“I am *not* going to hurt myself. I already hurt! There’s nothing I’m going to do to my ribs!”

“Except slow whatever healing they’ve already done. *Stop.* Let me help you.”

This was all fucking futile. Nothing ever changed or healed. She balled up her fingers into fists and submitted to Rainer loosening—but not undoing—the stays.

After Keenan had left, everyone else had followed, not waiting for Tsu to dismiss them. She and Rainer had left last, hoping for *something* else, but there was nothing from the Captain.

“That was bad.” Every word hurt. “Keenan just said *I’m done* and left?”

“It was better than Bennett doing it,” Rainer said. “Or Graves, at this point.”

She dug the heels of her palms into her eyes and forced herself to *not* take in the shuddering, deep breath she wanted to.

Rainer tried to herd her towards the couch. “Your buoy plan is solid and no one argued against it. I’ll repair the shuttle to send it on its final mission. And I’ll find a pilot for it.”

“And that’s fine and good and not what I’m upset about. Bennett came *right* for Tsu right in front of us. We’re on the brink and you’re still acting like we’re not!”

“No one is going to believe I became a good dog overnight. I am the best pilot to fly the shuttle, I am the best candidate to do an external transfer. We only have one shuttle and we *must* succeed. *That* is what I am protecting my section from. That level of responsibility is *my* responsibility.”

“No, your greater responsibility as Third Officer is to Tsu and not to feed Bennett’s ambitions. When was the last time Keenan was so over everything she actually gave *you* an order? I’ve never seen Keenan play her Second Officer card.”

Rainer twitched one brow. “I believe she’s letting Bennett know he’s not going to be Captain just because he’s XO, or if she ends up XO, he’s not going to run over her. Which does not match with our suspicions they’re allies, but maybe that alliance fell apart. To my knowledge, the donor heart was *her* idea, and she pitched it to Tsu. But at the same time, she hasn’t accepted responsibility for it publicly and pulled the blame off Tsu.”

“So you accepted her authority because it sends a message you’ll support *her* as Captain, but not Bennett?” Lachesis asked. She hadn’t known that the heart transplant had been Keenan’s idea. That changed the dynamics of the situation quite a bit—Bennett wasn’t attacking Keenan, but Keenan wasn’t defending Tsu, and how could a Bennett/Keenan alliance exist without public cries of hypocrisy?

Keenan seemed to be distancing herself from Bennett *and* Tsu.

A rogue Keenan in business for herself was a *very* dangerous proposition to Bennett *and* Rainer. “I wonder if their little alliance did fall apart. Or if she’s protecting you for some reason. But I’m sure her version of protection is going to

be to control you. She knows you're not really in a position to resist now that Tsu isn't holding your leash."

She had to stop to catch her breath, which hurt like hell. It was nice to not feel like she had a bundle of sodden rags bundled under her ribcage, but the never-ending pain of just fucking *existing* was too much. "I can't keep doing this."

Rainer froze. "Do what?"

"Function like this. I *can't*. Hand me a tablet." She couldn't even bring herself to bend forward to pick up one of the tablets on the coffee table.

Rainer blocked her. "You *can't* resign. I won't let you. You are a skilled officer, and things are—"

"*Resign?* I'm not resigning! Give me my damn tablet." Tsu had saved her life in more than one way, more than once, and she *wasn't* about to abandon him now when he needed every ally around that table he could find. Tsu was the only way civilization survived, because Bennett wasn't going to save anything except the best seat on the bridge for himself.

Rainer handed her one of her tablets.

It *also* hurt to type. She couldn't function like this, and she was *not* going to not be able to breathe while she had the combined forces of the other officers waiting for one fatal mistake. She had not survived this long just to get undone by ribs being broken in the surgery to save her life that had also destroyed the soul of the ship.

She might not be able to get the ship's soul back from the abyss, but she could keep her *life* out of the damn void's grip and go down fighting, not whimpering in an exhausted puddle.

*To: Tsu [ CAPTAIN :: ENGINEERING]*

*From: Lachesis [WARRANT OFFICER :: NAVIGATION]*

*Subject : Biome Request*

*I need authorization for several hours in a Biome to force my ribcage to heal.*

*From: Tsu [CAPTAIN :: ENGINEERING]*

*To : Lachesis [WARRANT OFFICER :: NAVIGATION]*

*CC: Forrest [CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER :: MEDICAL]*

*Subject: Re: Biome Request*

*If you mean shifting forms, granted pending Medical clearance and you take Rainer.*

*From: Forrest [CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER :: MEDICAL ]*

*To : Lachesis [WARRANT OFFICER :: NAVIGATION]*

*CC: Tsu (CAPTAIN :: ENGINEERING)*

*Subject: CC RE BIOME REQUEST*

*Denied. Bone re-modeling must already have started in order for shifting to cause sufficient ossification.*

*To: Tsu [ CAPTAIN :: ENGINEERING]*

*From: Lachesis [WARRANT OFFICER :: NAVIGATION]*

*Subject : Biome Request*

*I am genetically an Omega and spontaneous ossification is possible. I'm not going to dislodge any bone fragments. It will just hurt like hell.*

*From: Forrest [CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER :: MEDICAL ]*

*To : Lachesis [WARRANT OFFICER :: NAVIGATION]*

*CC: Tsu (CAPTAIN :: ENGINEERING]*

*Subject: CC RE BIOME REQUEST*

*Precisely: it will hurt like hell. Excruciating pain causes significant endorphin release. Spontaneous feral shift-heal only extends to injuries. This is well-documented and proven. Your mind is willing, your heart is too weak.*

*Hit the gym.*

SHE GLARED AT THE TABLET. “GAIA DAMNIT.”

One of Rainer’s tablets pinged. He picked it up, scrolled, and leveled her with a look that made her scowl at him.

“Per Forrest, I am to make sure you don’t get any clever ideas,” Rainer told her.

He wasn’t going to have to work very hard. “I am fresh out of clever ideas.”

“This is the part of recovery that’s the hardest.”

“What part is that? The part where you run out of clever ideas?”

“The part where you’re recovered enough to have the energy to be frustrated about not being recovered more.”

She fought the urge to throw something.

Rainer approached her again and slid his hands, very gently, down her arms. She tried to shrug him off, half-heartedly. He said, “Get to work on calculating the right position for the buoy. Harkins will send you the ideal relative placement for it. If we keep the other staff focused on a specific goal, and push specific short-term goals and



objectives, there's less room for them to chat about unrelated matters."

"You mean Tsu's personal life," she said.

Rainer squeezed her hands in his. "Bennett *will* make Tsu's marriage *the* fundamental issue facing this ship. But if we can keep people focused on fundamental issues, then Bennett will have fewer opportunities to convince people to add it to their mental workload."

The classic Counseling advice on managing stress and anxiety: find something that consumed your mental energy. Suggestions on *Ark* had been to go *hard* at the gym, play competitive sudoku, or timed jigsaw puzzles. She curled her fingers around his. "A harder time and fewer opportunities doesn't mean Bennett won't find a way."

His fingertips rubbed her knuckles. "We won't make it easy for him. And we need the buoy."

"I'll get to work, obviously." She wasn't going to kick the can down the road, as Rainer or Simone would say. Graves would probably have the position he wanted the shuttle calculated shortly, and then she'd have to translate that into a practical solution within space, in addition to creating a routine to have the crippled shuttle's autopilot maintain that fix. With three ships within close proximity of each other, there were cluttered comms, EM fields, gravitational eddies, and the assorted drive fields of the three ships, all of which had different engine cores. It'd take time to run all the simulations and take everything into account.

Rainer gathered up his tablets and brushed a kiss along her cheek. "I'm on shift. I'll see you for dinner."

"Stay out of trouble." And by that she meant stay out of sight of the other officers, or their potential spies.

He hefted his bag over his shoulder. "I plan to be conveniently inaccessible and unavailable to everyone but you."

---

RAINER UN-SHOULDERED HIS BAG AND BRUSHED HIS FINGERTIPS over the biometrics panel of his workstation. The system came up in a cascade of lights and soft whirrs, while the dozen screens illuminated with the familiar arrangement of widgets showing him *NightPiercer's* current status.

Still unsettling to see so many *[SENSOR UNAVAILABLE]* or *[PARAMETERS OUT OF BOUNDS]* or *[NaN]*, with wireframe diagrams exposing the large affected portions of *NightPiercer* in red outlines.

In some cases, those interior decks no longer, functionally, were decks, and were just collapsed rubble. He had no way of knowing what was happening in those areas, interior or exterior.

En route to *Haven*, he had designed makeshift blast doors to seal off and isolate those decks. Tsu had overseen the reclamation of useable and accessible debris to break down and fabricate into doors. There was no other way to repair those areas. They'd have to fly *NightPiercer* like that for the rest of its service life.

It was one of the major reasons that the ship's remaining lifespan was so short.

The buoy-duty shuttle assignment was an excellent way to further delay harvesting mesh from *Haven*. Once he started harvesting mesh, there would be no going back. There would be no evacuating Lachesis and those close to him to *Haven* once that happened. If he could even convince Lachesis to go.

If he could convince *himself* to go.

It had been done before, of course. That was the entire reason he was alive: because the wolves before him had done *exactly* that.

*Try to save them all, and none will be saved.*

He had only seen a few archived recordings of his great-grandmother, and she had never uttered those words in any of

them, but the weight of those words echoed in his mind as if she'd told him herself.

Time wasn't necessarily a straight, discrete line, so it was entirely possible that he *was* hearing the echoes of her voice, if he calculated for—

He yanked his mind back into the reality. *His* reality and point in time. In *this* reality, at this point in time, the accepted version of events had been a general summary of what had been said to spur the wolves into action. What Gaia had *actually* said, word for word, had never been said to the press, public, or committed to the archives. But the exact warning had been shared with the pack.

He knew the truth from his mother, who had gotten it from *her* mother.

The warning haunted him like it was being whispered in his ear.

*Try to save them all, and none will be saved.*

Was this soul-sucking feeling what his great-grandfather had experienced? The First Law mandated that the pack must survive. That the pack *was* life itself. *Pack first*. Everything else came later.

His muscles clenched with the need to *do* something while he struggled to breathe. A hot, terrifying, dark *need to do* grabbed him.

He seized the edge of his desk and growled. His fingers dug in while the voice pleaded with him *try to save them all, and none will be saved* and then it was Lachesis saying it to him, while she stood on a walkway overlooking a shipyard, her red hair whipping in the wind to match the dust-filled sky.

“No!” His nightmares did not get to warp his mate into them, or take her with them.

And then he was back on *Haven*, seeing her *stare* at him, *dying*.

“No, *no, no,*” he growled to himself, wrenching and twisting the fibers of his nightmares into a single strand, and

spinning it, winding it, over and over, into something useful.  
“One. Two. Three.”

He counted until the haze cleared and his fingernails retracted to a human shape and he stopped feeling the whip of his nightmares against his spine, and *he* was the one that held the whip.

Tsu was still Captain, and Bennett wouldn't make a bolder move unless he was confident in his base. Harkins had already rejected his first attempt.

There was still time.

## FIVE

She picked her head off the pillow as blankets settled over her in a chaotic tumble.

The scent of *nightmare* came with them.

Her new heart throbbed as she heard the distinctive sound of Rainer's choking, gasping breath, the half-shifted feet, then him vomiting in the bathroom before he stumbled through the darkness—still half-shifted from the sound of the footfalls—and to the kitchen.

She pushed the blankets off. In the shadows of their large screen, her husband's silhouette was not entirely human. He breathed hard, deep, frantic.

"Rainer," she said softly.

"Save them all, or save none," he muttered. "Save one, two, three, four, or none...it's burning, it's all burning, five quakes in an hour, and—"

He raised his head, looked around, looked at her.

It was Rainer who saw her, Rainer looking at her, but... not.

Rainer waking up in the grip of a night terror? Standard.

Rainer waking up in the grip of a night terror so severe he partially shifted and threw up? Less common, but not without uncomfortable precedent.

Rainer waking up in the grip of a night terror and *not* having a grip on reality? *Terrifying*.

Had her husband's mind splintered under the immense stress?

Had... *Haven*... not been a bluff?

Rainer leaned on the kitchen counter and clenched the edge in his hands. Every muscle pushed against his skin, and hair traced the patterns and grooves of his muscle while his fingernails extended.

He bowed his spine, then dropped it and lifted his head. He took a deep, forced breath, and counted. *One, two, three...*

She counted with him, but didn't dare approach.

At twenty-eight, he shoved off the counter and went to the couch, but instead of picking up his tablet, he leaned forward on his knees and held his head in his hands.

Now she approached, carefully, and when he didn't flinch or lose count, she sank down close to him, her body pressed along his. His skin dripped sweat. His tormented scent pulled at her, but she kept counting with him so he'd know she was there.

If they got to five hundred, it was time to get Forrest. The scent of *nightmare* was so thick in the room it choked her.

Finally, at three-hundred and fifty-two, Rainer lifted his head again and stared at nothing. The lights of the screen illuminated his eyes strange shades of marled green. He glanced at his tablet, then back at nothing.

"I can't do it," he finally said, straightening fully.

It *sounded* like Rainer speaking. Cautiously, she asked, "Do what?"

He stared at the kitchen. "What my grandparents did. I can hear my grandmother telling me, and I know I have to, I *know*, and I can't."

Rainer sounded lucid, but that didn't mean he wasn't having a psychotic break. "What's she telling you?"

"Leave *NightPiercer*."

He meant *leave* it. Not just bounce back over to *Haven* for salvage work. “You want to leave *NightPiercer*?”

He cricked one shoulder, then the other, and rolled his neck to stretch the scarred skin. “Do you know what Gaia told my great-grandmother?”

“You mean the Warning? Everyone knows it, more or less.”

“No, the exact Warning. Not the summary that’s been recorded in the official history. You were raised in the faith. Was it passed to you?”

She shook her head. “No, I know what was taught in school, I suppose. My mother just told me it was all true. That Gaia *did* speak, but Hade let the humans think it was motivational propaganda the desperate were willing to believe. It didn’t matter as long as the ships got built.”

Rainer’s expression turned ghoulish again, but this time, it *was* him talking to her. Too bright, too sharp, too *there*. “The worst part of Gaia’s Warning got erased. *Try to save them all, and you will save none.*”

Lachesis recoiled. “...I... no.”

“It’s been on my mind. And it’s like I can *hear* it being said to me. I can remember it.”

“You mean a *vision*? *Gaia* never gave visions to anyone. That was the Moon’s Gift, and it was for females. Gaia speaking to your great-grandmother was unprecedented. It was why many wolves didn’t believe it. Gaia always left the chitchat to the Moon.”

“It’s not a vision. I’m not saying that, I don’t think—”

“You don’t *think*.”

“Gaia makes the rules. She ordered the First Law broken.”

“You’re getting distracted.”

Rainer gestured to his head with slight frustration. “Have you ever had a song stuck in your head?”

“Of course. My father called them earworms.” Maybe it was time to get Forrest...

“That’s what this is like. It’s like the shreds of a strange dream that keeps echoing like a fragment of a song.”

“And just now you were...”

“Having a typical night terror, with *that* as the background noise. Except it’s a fragment of a song I’ve never heard. It’s been going around and around in my head.”

“Why?”

He looked at his tablet instead of answering.

Wait a second. She drew away from him as it dawned on her what Rainer was talking about. “Wait—the *LightBearer* plan. You’re thinking of moving all of us to *Haven*? That this ship is so bad off we have a better chance on *Haven*?”

His planet-like gaze was as remote, unmovable, and ever-churning as Jupiter. “Not all of us.”

*This* was what he’d been working on. *This* was what he’d been keeping from her, and why he’d been letting the mesh-harvest be delayed. Abandoning *NightPiercer*. And most of *NightPiercer*’s crew.

“But it doesn’t matter.” Rainer dropped his head between his shoulders. “We lost so many during *LightBearer*. There’s no way to move more than a very small group to *Haven*. Too small a group to do anything but watch civilization die in the end.”

She rubbed his thigh in long, firm strokes, smoothing the tension along his iron-strong quad.

“I can still *hear* it.” Rainer winced. He gestured to his head with his other hand.

She reached for one of her tablets and pulled up the low-priority OIC ticket queue that would be awaiting her during her next bridge shift. She sorted to bring up the tickets that had been pushed to the bottom by Operations middle management. “Then let’s read some of the tickets in the command queue. How does stolen pillow bunk drama sound?”



“Terrible.”

“Excellent. Then it will drown out your dreams.”

He shifted his eyes towards her.

“One of us is going to get stuck dealing with these on shift, may as well get a head start.” She smiled at him mischievously, and proceeded to start with a ticket from an eighteen bunk where one person accused another of stealing their pillow (which was a perfect pillow) and she wanted the serial numbers on the suspect’s pillow checked and the suspect properly disciplined for pillow theft.

“Pillows don’t have serial numbers,” Rainer muttered.

“In this bunk, they do. They have their own little inventory control system because apparently things grow legs and walk away. Now, let me finish reading...”

## SIX

Rainer shoved his utility tablets into his bag, gulped down the last of his tea. “What are you doing?”

“Going to the gym.” She contemplated her hairbrush and one of her hair ties.

Rainer’s expression clouded with disapproval.

“I *have* to go to the gym.” Forrest had still banned her from the officer’s gym without an escort (her biometrics wouldn’t unlock the door), but she was otherwise released to go muddle her way back to fitness. She’d never been the sort of highly committed gym rat that sculpted her body and pushed it to the limits like Rainer or Bennett, but she’d also never slacked off at the gym either, and didn’t intend to start after two heart surgeries. “I’ve lost eight percent bone density, still have AGRS, and now have broken bones. I’m not putting off going back to the gym.”

“You should wait until someone can go with you.”

Going to the gym was the fastest way to get that ossification started so Forrest would let her shift. “Everyone we mutually trust to not conveniently miss a spot and drop a bar on my neck is on *Haven* for two more weeks. In two weeks, I intend to be in a Biome shifting until my ribs ossify.”

“I can go with you.”

“Your duty shifts and my CPU allotment times are conveniently not at the same time.” Her CPU allotment times *conveniently* being during Rainer’s open block of time—which

he used for the gym and personal matters—couldn't be by chance. Had Bennett's fingerprints all over it.

“You shouldn't go alone. I don't trust anyone with your safety.”

Translation: he didn't think she could handle herself if things got spicy at the gym. “I am Chief Pilot, I passed Entry, I sit in the big chair, I tell Tsu how to fly his ship, I've had two heart transplants and consumed the ship's entire stockpile of antibiotics, anti-rejection drugs, painkillers, anesthesia drugs, medical skills, and medical supplies. If I can't handle myself in a public gym by now, I better figure it out very fast.”

Rainer paced over to her. “You're also very weak. I had to tighten your stays because your grip strength is so poor.”

“You had to tighten my stays because the lacings go up my *back*.”

“And you still need me to brush your hair.”

*Need.* That made her snarl and bristle with anger. “Which is why I am going to the gym. So I can brush my hair again. The only thing I'll be picking up is my own towel. Maybe I'll even sweat enough it will be slightly damp.”

Rainer checked one of his tablets.

She growled, “Are you *really* going to argue with whoever made the duty roster? Now *isn't* the time.”

“I was considering it. However, this is interesting.”

“Don't say that. Either of those things.” Rainer did *not* need to be meddling in her career, and there were enough “interesting” things happening right now. More of either was not necessary, required, or desired.

He showed her what had caught his eye. The new OIC duty roster wasn't changed from what had come through a few hours earlier, but Graves had left a comment on Rainer's bridge shift.

*Has this been reviewed and approved?*

— GRAVES

RAINER MADE AN AMUSED NOISE SOMEWHERE BETWEEN A chuckle and a growl. “So Graves is showing what side he’s on.”

*Cmdr Rainer has been released from family leave and restored to the regular duty roster.*

— FORREST

LACHESIS SIDE-EYED RAINER. “GRAVES KNOWS TSU SETS THE OIC schedule. It doesn’t get reviewed or approved by anyone.”

Rainer ran his thumb over his lower lip before brushing his hand back over the tablet, sorting through a dozen screens in quick succession before he contemplated a directory. He frowned, glanced at the main public feed on the big screen, counted under his breath to twelve, and grimaced as he selected a file.

A few seconds later, a new entry popped up on the primary public feed. No title or comment beyond *Untitled* and a date about six years earlier. It was another one of his paintings, this was a scene from an Earth beach, with exquisite *blue* water that seemed to glow with its own light, and the froth of waves, and the texture of beach sand, and to the side, a skyline of an Earth city beyond dunes and brush grasses, and to the other side, nothing but beach and water and sky and sunlight.

There wasn’t anyone in the painting, and yet, it didn’t feel empty or remote. It *felt* like there were people all around, and this was a little sanctuary from an otherwise busy, chaotic life.

That feeling *everyone* on every ship had tried to gain. Everyone had a little alcove or dark corner they snuck away to for five minutes (except chances were someone *else* had also found that little spot and might be there), or that happy moment when you were *all* alone in the bunk, or you spent precious recreation credits to buy ten minutes in a sanctuary room.

Rainer's picture captured exactly that shivering-skin, quiet, guilty, selfish glee of realizing you were all alone.

"If you're posting paintings, how concerned should we be about Graves?" Her gut instinct was they should be *very* concerned.

"Tsu has ordered command officers to issue no public statements or commentary on my actions or the heart. Graves is extremely close to violating a direct order. It's a warning to Tsu that he is aligned with Bennett's way of thinking. And of all the other command staff, that worries me the most."

"Why him?" Aside from the fact Graves was the head of Tech, which made him only slightly less dangerous than Rainer in terms of how much trouble a rogue Graves could cause. They'd have to install the *Haven* AI like a virus to have a chance of surviving a rogue Graves.

Rainer tapped his fingertips on the edge of the tablet. "Tech rarely has to give orders that will put someone in mortal danger, or deny someone something they desperately want, like a child or antibiotics for a loved one. Graves often puts himself into the position of advocating for the ship's emotional core. He makes those arguments from a position of being informed, since the ship's AI already has large language models that parse crew comms looking for hot spots and problematic discussions."

"So you're saying he could fork those LLMs and specifically train one to analyze comms for a given topic or set of parameters."

A grim smile. "Can and has. Bennett bringing Graves to his way of thinking would *not* happen if it wasn't already on

Graves' mind because the data strongly supports such a dramatic position."

That explained a *lot* about Graves. "Consensus isn't leadership."

"But resource management is."

So much for Belle being determined nobody was ever going to be locked in that box again. They were all locked in it with each other. Despair tried to steal all the resolve from her bones, like it drained them of their marrow. "So we've lost Graves to Bennett, because we've lost the ship to Bennett, because Tsu lost Arden. The fate of civilization shouldn't hinge on their marriage, or for that matter, ours!"

But it seemed to.

Rainer moved behind her and gathered up clumps of her hair in both hands.

She shivered all over. "What are you doing?"

He curled his fingers into the strands. "Braiding your hair for you."

"You don't have to." She instinctively pulled away. "I need to go, and so do you."

He brushed his lips over the nape of her neck, then gathered the three strands between his fingers and brushed them smooth before beginning the braid at the base of her skull.

"Do you forgive me?" he asked as he worked, his tone low and soft like his pelt in wolf-form. "Forgive me for what I had to do to save your life? Forgive me for what I did to protect *Haven*? Forgive me for breaking my promise to not say the word *love*?"

She closed her eyes. Her heart tumbled with turmoil like an old Earth summer storm.

Rainer separated her hair into three thick coils that he deftly slid between his fingers. One strand over the other, under the other, over and over. He brushed his chapped, rough knuckles against the sensitive skin of her neck.

He tied off the loose, lop-sided braid, and slid his arms around her waist, mindful of her painful ribs. Held her like she was a brittle, aged canvas that would crumple at the slightest touch.

She placed her left hand over his iron wrist. “You shouldn’t be late for shifts. Not now. Especially not now.”

“Still advising me to be a model officer?”

She extracted herself from his gentle grip, but managed to wink at him. “Get to your shift, Commander.”

THE *NIGHTPIERCER* GYMS, BEFORE *LIGHTBEARER*, HAD BEEN broken out by seniority. The gyms were all equipped exactly the same, it was simply the crowd each gym was intended for that mattered. The gyms had names like *Junior Gym 26* or *Senior Gym 8* or *General Gym 4* (which was meant for mixed company, like families) or *School Gym 2* (which was for minors still in School), and while anyone could use whatever gym they wanted, bringing your toddler to a Junior or Senior gym, or being a junior crew member trying to chat up and curry favor with your shift lead over in Senior, was going to earn a reminder that not all rules of good behavior were written down.

Now, after *LightBearer*, with all the damage to the ship and collapsed decks, there were fewer gyms, and people prioritized getting their workouts over social conventions. So no guarantee that her chosen *Senior Gym 38* wasn’t going to have herds of small children learning how to do calf raises and incline bench press crawling all over everything.

The doors to the gym swung open as someone else left, and they gave her a confused double-take before hurrying away.

For a strange second, she was back on *Haven*, with the dead, chiseled bodies of nameless crew who had tried to out-exercise a lack of gravity. Especially the dead, staring, frozen eyes of the nameless man on the bench.

In his plain *Haven* PT gear, there was no way to know who he was, or who he'd been to the ship beyond he'd been human. Had he been the Captain? The last survivor? Both? Neither?

No one had moved him to the pile of bodies.

He may have been the last. Someone had to be first, and someone had to be last.

*NightPiercer's* PT gear had rank stripes on it. Her shorts had two gray stripes and a dotted third stripe on her left thigh, while her shirt had matching stripes slashed over her left shoulder. The stripes bent to a point over her breast and shoulder blade, ending in the emblem for Navigation, trimmed with the OIC and Chief Pilot bars. Despite the fact there were other officers who outranked her, she was part of a mezzanine inner circle of rank: the officers who got to sit in the big chair.

It should have taken longer for her to enter that circle, if she'd ever qualified for it at all, but she'd been called up in the hours after *LightBearer*. She'd been on the bridge. It had been Condition Black. No one had questioned it when Tsu had directed the badges and pins be stitched onto her uniforms and her OIC qualification made official.

Not that her hair didn't automatically give her away and attract attention. So far, she hadn't spotted any other member of *NightPiercer* crew that had long hair. There hadn't been many people on *Ark* who had indulged long hair either. Most people preferred to spend their spare credits on something else.

The gym's energy was intense. Almost hostile. Fierce. It had nothing to do with her arrival (but probably had plenty to do with her).

The walk to the gym had required a stop to catch her breath. How was it possible to even be that out of shape and not dead? The ache in her bones made her grouchy. She'd fit right in.

Nobody went to the gym to socialize, anyway. If you were socializing, you weren't working hard enough. That's how bones turned brittle, blood vessels disintegrated, brains shrunk.



Low AG had killed *Haven*. Maybe an insidious mental decline had been a factor in *Sunderer* and *LightBearer*.

Medicine balls and tiny weights first. Only a few other people were using them, from the looks of things, they were rehabbing various injuries too. *LightBearer* had caused a massive amount of injuries. Not just serious ones, but plenty of painful bruises, bumps, scrapes, abrasions, and every possible variety of soft tissue injury in medical textbooks.

“Would you roll me the green one?” she asked the person closest to the green ball.

“Sure.” He gave it a little nudge with his foot. “You okay?”

She *did* look a little gray and clammy. She pulled up the hem of her PT shirt. “Corset. Broken ribs.”

“From the—” He stopped short and turned a little green.

“Heart transplants.” Might as well say it and make eye contact while doing so. And make it plural, because she’d had two. “The chest has to get cracked and wired back together.”

He shifted the small yellow ball he’d been holding in his hands, turning it over and over.

She twisted her lips against the upswell of aching emotion that followed a fiery line along her incision. She pulled down the neckline of her shirt to expose the top of the scar. No point in hiding it. It had happened, and dishonoring the memory of the heart that had kept her alive—and Forrest putting himself and his family against Bennett on a going-forward basis—wasn’t on her list of things to do.

He, and the female tech who had been tossing a blue ball, paused to take it in.

Her eyes stung, but she managed to not cry. The most important thing she could do was *live*, and that meant she had to get to her workout. She placed her foot on the ball.

Damnit. Balancing was painful work. And exhausting. Damn little quivering muscles that had atrophied first, and how they all seemed to be attached to her ribcage.

A kerfuffle broke out near the pull-up bars. Tempers ran a bit hot and short during intense workouts, and when people with mismatched tempos wanted the same equipment, things could get testy. A bit of pushing, shoving, growling, and everyone went back to business.

She kicked the ball against the wall, shifted her weight to her kicking leg, and waited to see if *this* time she'd kicked hard enough for the ball to bounce against the wall hard enough to roll back to her.

*Clang.* Raised voices and the regular rhythm of the gym noise slowed. The scuffle appeared to be ongoing and escalating. Two males, maybe three, in the usual shoving, forehead-pressing match while making noises at each other. Maybe someone had been doing too many sets and hogging a station. That was usually how it started.

The raised voices turned to shouting and the usual taunts. The scent of anger wafted across the gym through the circulation system. A few bystanders proximate to the situation tried to separate the three angry people, and were shoved, and *they* shoved back, and the ripple of shoves began to self-propagate through the layers of crowd.

There weren't enough shower credits left in civilization for her to be within twenty meters of a gym brawl. Too often *everyone* within vicinity got caught up in the disciplinary blast wave.

The shoving increased, and the voices got louder, and the air hummed with a combination of nervous tension and frayed nerves throwing sparks just looking for something flammable to set on fire.

Gaia damnit. A gym brawl while she stood back and let it happen would give Bennett something to sink his teeth into.

On the other hand, a gym brawl that she proved incapable of containing was *also* something Bennett would sink his teeth into.

She snatched up her towel, wiped off her face and stalked through the thickening crowd to the epicenter of the seismic

social bullshit.

“Move,” she ordered a few people who looked at her in shock, sort of not processing anyone was going to issue orders.

“*Move*,” she snapped, and this time, the fleshy waters parted. She snatched the sleeve of the squabbler nearest her.

He spun on her, yanking his sleeve out of her grip, fists raised, then yanked up short in bewilderment. “Stay out of this!”

The other guy took advantage of the distraction to shove the first squabbler hard enough he shot backwards into a rack of plates and bars. The entire gym inhaled an *oh shit*.

Her chest pounded and her ribs ached and breathing fucking *hurt*. “I don’t know which of you started this, and I don’t care. I don’t know what you’re fighting over, and I don’t care. Knock it *all* the way off and get back to your PT.”

The first guy was still sort of untangling himself from a bunch of plates and bars while the second guy shook out his arms and approached. “Mind your own business.”

The tattoo on her neck throbbed under her pulse. “I’d like to, but you have confused your PT with Security training. So march yourselves down there to continue your training, or get back to PT.”

The second guy lowered his face to hers and pointed at the space between her breasts. “Get in the grave where you belong.”

She ignored the finger shoved into her scar and turned her attention to the guy he’d shoved into the racks. He was now arguing with the gym goers trying to tell him *just walk away, walk away* and he was *not* going to walk away, thank you. “So you *are* a fan of cheap shots. I’m impressed with your commitment to consistency. *You*,” she pointed at one of the onlookers who looked like she had some physical presence, “drag *him*,” she pointed at the guy who was arguing, “off to some corner.”

Her designated helper looked shocked for a solid second. Then her brain ticked over. “Yes, ma’am.”

Lachesis pointed at two more gym goers, one with a Science emblem and one Crew. “You two, it seems your fellow crewmate has lost his common sense.” She pointed at the man who *still* stood with his finger between her breasts. “Kindly provide him with yours until his prefrontal cortex takes back over. And *you*,” she pointed at two more people. “Looks like it’s your turn for pull-ups. I’ll stand by and count.”

## SEVEN

She poked at her gruel-sludge. It congealed on her tray in a round puddle that held its shape unnervingly well despite the fact it also jiggled in the center when jostled. “Not quite gruel. Not quite a pancake.”

“Surface tension,” Rainer commented.

“Beg pardon?”

“Surface tension is hold—”

“Shhh.” She reached across the table and pressed her finger to his lips. “Shh. You’re ruining the moment.”

Rainer lifted his face away.

The mess was crowded. A few members of Engineering sat nearby, but had given a few seats buffer.

Two more people carrying trays made their way down the line of seats. People leaned and shifted to make room. A voice said behind her, “May we sit here?”

Rainer looked at the person speaking and nodded, expression exactly neutral. The person who sat down next to her was the human woman who had helped her in the gym the previous day. She had short-cropped, ice-blond hair that was longer on the sides than the crown of her head, and her pale gray uniform had the Crèche badge. The person next to Rainer must have been one of the men from the gym incident—an onlooker—and he had a Science badge.

The Crèche tech said to Lachesis, “You didn’t file a report.”

Rainer swung his attention around. “A report? About what?”

She dismissed it with a flick of one finger. “Some nonsense at the gym yesterday.”

“You had to break up a gym fight?”

“Don’t make it sound more dramatic than it was.”

“What were you thinking getting in the middle of a fight? With your broken ribcage? And you didn’t file a report? We do *not* approve of—”

“Enough. *I* passed Entry, unlike you, so don’t tell me what I should have done. Interpersonal conflict resolution was *also* one of the modules I passed with positive comments. I resolved the conflict. I think we all have enough reports to read, write, *and* prioritize right now that two people shoving each other over a chin-up bar is an annoyance and not a disciplinary situation.”

“Ma’am,” the Science person demurred, “he *did* tell you you should be in your grave.”

Rainer’s fork hit his tray with a *ding*. “He did *what*?”

“*And* touched you,” the Science person added.

“Are you trying to piss him off?” Lachesis pointed at her husband with her fork. “Because if you just sat down to stir up trouble and see how many statements you needed to make before you pissed him off, go away.”

Rainer *better* not start acting feral and bitey in front of people in a crowded messhall. She indulged in a dramatic would-be-but-can’t-because-ribs sigh-face. “Rainer. *Stop*.”

“Someone mouthed off and then put their hands near you?”

“And you’re *just* now hearing about it, so I’d say I resolved it.”

Rainer glared at her. At least he didn’t have anything else to say to that.

She told him, “The only life and death decisions that Specialist gets to make involve single-cell organisms in small dishes, and at the rate he’s going, that’s all he’s ever going to do. But I welcome whatever aspirations to better he has.”

Rainer swung his too-intense attention on the Crèche tech. “Do you *believe* he’s going to hurt her?”

Comments wishing death and misfortune upon her husband were probably a daily occurrence on *NightPiercer*, given his reputation. But one random comment from one low-level specialist that she *should* be dead, and he was Commander By-The-Book.

The tech leaned away from the Lead Engineer. “Ah, no sir. Not at all. I only mentioned it because he’s expecting the report to be made. We’re all in that bunk.”

“So is he *gloating* she hasn’t made the report, or is the bunk squirming the report is coming and some collective punishment is going to be meted out?”

Now the Crèche tech shook off how spooked she was. “The latter. And everyone’s telling him he was an idiot.”

Ah, collective bunk discipline. Very technically, bunkmates weren’t responsible for each other’s behavior. In reality, it was more complicated, even if that complication was second-hand embarrassment that the guy who sleeps two beds over from you behaved like a jackass and you’re within five decks of him. She had made it a personal policy to avoid being anywhere within the general vicinity of idiots like that.

Rainer managed to not say anything. She had been the officer in the room, so it was her matter to handle, unless he wanted to take over because he thought she wasn’t handling it. He’d voiced his opinion and now had his tongue firmly between his front teeth.

Lachesis debated the merits of lifting the forkful of gruel-sludge to her mouth. “They acted like idiots, but as long as I don’t have a reason to remember, I’d already forgotten. I have other things to do, so I don’t appreciate distractions or having to write reports during my CPU allocation time. I don’t want

to have to explain at the next officer meeting that I couldn't get my work done because I was busy writing reports about gym drama. That sounds like a job for Operations.”

Chuckles, then they instantly went quiet.

Rainer and Lachesis turned in the direction of what had made the mess suddenly hush, then quickly start chattering again.

Bennett had arrived and gotten his tray—but with him was *Arden*, Tsu's husband.

For a split second, this seemed to be a mere random collision of warm bodies, until the two chose one of the last places with any space: the end of a table in the farthest, dingiest, most un-frequented corner of the mess. Nobody liked those corners. They were drafty and prone to the occasional ambitious escaped cricket.

Rainer's expression could have cut glass. Their two meal companions audibly gulped.

“Should I be jealous, you think?” she asked her husband, unable to keep the utter disgust from dripping off her words.

Arden was, of course, free to eat with anyone he wanted. Except in *all* the time she'd been on *NightPiercer*, he had very conspicuously *not* associated with any of the other command staff except at formal events in his role as the Captain's spouse. He ate with his family, or his direct coworkers, or his select personal friends.

Arden had mastered the delicate etiquette of balancing his own career and place as *NightPiercer* crew with being the Captain's husband, and he was popular and well-respected for it.

Rainer raised both brows. “Seems like you may have some competition.”

She bit down what she really wanted to say given they were packed in like pressed meat chunks. She wasn't about to hide her disapproval, but she probably should stop short of *actually* accusing Bennett of trying to break up the Captain's decade-long marriage for good.



Even though it was obvious that Arden and Bennett were continuing an intense conversation that had started before they'd arrived. Bennett leaned forward in his chair, nodding between bites of food while Arden spoke. Arden moved his hands to emphasize his point. In the general din of the mess, it was impossible to hear what they were saying or even get an idea about what they were discussing.

Could have been something down in the Biomes. Or a mole on Bennett's ass. Or the newest mess assignments.

...or Arden's marriage. Or marriage prospects.

"Oh fuck," her new Crèche friend muttered under her breath, just loud enough to know Lachesis had heard. The other tech looked sort of aghast and uncomfortable. The entire mess seemed to work very hard to *not* notice what was happening in the corner. Arden and Bennett could have been having sloppy cricket-dust covered gruel-lubed sex from the general public reaction.

And Tsu *was* going to hear about it.

The other tech leaned over to Lachesis and whispered, "They aren't... divorced... are they?"

"No," Rainer said in his best *I have no comment, but you can guess what my comment would be* tone that silenced all conversations. "They aren't."

One of them needed to tell Tsu before Tsu stumbled upon the information, because chances were Arden wasn't keeping Tsu up to date on his social calendar.

Lachesis made herself finish her gruel-sludge and her last cricket while keeping a side-eye on the Bennett/Arden corner. Rainer polished off her algae cakes, and they excused themselves from the table.

"Graves' comment emboldened Bennett," she muttered to him as they walked back up to their quarters.

"Yes," Rainer said flatly. "It did. Bennett is going for the throat."

“One of us needs to tell Tsu. We can’t let him find out this information through gossip. Bennett will crack him over the head with it at the perfect moment.”

“I’ll do it. You play neutral for now.” Rainer placed his tablet across his forearm and began to type.

*[RAINER] > [TSU] >> FYI, Arden spotted in mess having lunch with Bennett. Crowded shift. Intense, close conversation.*

No further context was necessary.

Back in their quarters, Rainer said, “So Bennett, knowing he has enough political capital with the crew to have Graves on his side, is attempting to secure power through the most old-fashioned and antiquated way possible.”

“That being?”

“A politically advantageous marriage. Specifically, to the surviving spouse of a vanquished enemy.”

“You have such a way with words.”

“*Both* our species have nearly destroyed ourselves on numerous occasions thanks to ‘politically advantageous’ marriages. How poetic this is happening now, in the twilight of civilization.”

Her skin chilled, and an ache went through her ribcage. “I know they happened during antiquity but...”

“It continued right up until Exodus. It wasn’t between royalty in modern times, but between powerful families. It was called *marrying within your class* or *according to your station*. The oldest way to consolidate power in civilization, and it’s about to happen here. Arden can’t make Bennett Captain, but it’s a hell of a show of force, isn’t it.”

Her heart shifted under her battered bones. “Are you going to try to stop it?”

Rainer shook his head once.

“But you have a plan. You aren’t—” she paused, trying to wrap her head around what she was about to say. “You aren’t thinking of...are you?”

She couldn’t say *mutiny*. Spousal privilege was down in the firmware, but she didn’t trust that the algorithms that scrubbed conversations between spouses didn’t also contain a few exceptions.

Rainer made a frustrated noise. He paced, muttering numbers under his breath.

“Dear Gaia,” she whispered. “We are talking about this, aren’t we?”

She pulled off her comm and threw it into the bedroom.

“We know if Bennett becomes captain that we will *never* get to a planet and we will die here,” Rainer told her.

“Established fact, if unpopular.”

He stopped pacing and faced her. “This ship can’t survive without *Haven’s* parts, and *Haven* can’t survive unless it’s intact. I am still Captain of *Haven* and yes, I’ve been delaying harvesting the mesh to leave *Haven* intact, although I know that has a fatal logistical flaw.”

“Save them all.” She sat down on the couch.

Rainer sank down next to her. “I still hear it in my head, but there’s no way to tell my grandmother’s echos that the only way civilization survives is if all of us survive.”

“If Tsu and Arden don’t reconcile, there aren’t any other options. Bennet will make his move, and civilization will die.” Bennett might *still* make his move even if the Captain managed to reconcile with his spouse, but Arden currently had the door *wide* open.

Between the two of them, they could take the bridge. The question would be could they *hold* the bridge. With Forrest’s help, they could buy time, but they’d need Tech. And Tech was firmly on Bennett’s side of the argument.

Or maybe they only needed to hold the bridge for a few hours. Just long enough to spool the engines and for her to

lock in a course to Earth... or somewhere else.

Rainer's knee brushed hers. He placed one hand over hers.

The words came far too easily. "Should we start planning? It's the perfect time because of repairs to the core systems. Install options. Contingencies. Buttons to press."

Rainer gave her a feral half-smile. "My love, I started doing that before you ever boarded *NightPiercer*."

# EIGHT

**D**iscussing a second round of Gaia-ordained Command Aptitude with Rainer had left a sickening chill over her skin. Her husband was dead serious when he'd revealed he'd built various contingencies into Engineering so that if he *did* have to do "something," he could, in fact, do "something."

Bennett was already laying the groundwork for *his* plan. His plan was just more palatable, because that's how Bennett liked to serve his poisoned meals to the crew.

If this was what it was coming to, she had to know she had done everything in her power to avert this crisis. And that now included sticking her snout where it absolutely didn't belong.

Arden might not be the key to stopping Bennett for good, but Arden *was* the key to the crew, and that meant Arden was the key to Graves.

Several days of stalking (and being forced to watch Arden have meals with Bennett) led her to where she'd be able to corner him in that *oh, we just happened to be in the same time and place* manner.

She spotted him walking with his daughter, just up ahead of her, having gotten off the lift before hers. The corridor wasn't empty, but it also wasn't crowded.

Nothing like trying to flex her limited Emotional skills. "Arden."

Arden turned towards her, expression gray and gaunt and haunted under the usual handsome composure the Captain's husband had acquired over the years. "Navigator."

She closed the space between them as quickly as she could without looking more than purposeful. “May I speak with you for a minute?”

“No, we’re in a rush.”

“That was a polite, but rhetorical, request.” Pulling rank on the Captain’s husband. Grand way to start a conversation she likely didn’t have the Emotional ability to navigate. But on the other hand, could she really make the situation much worse? It was already fucked sideways in a way nobody was enjoying.

Arden didn’t flinch, and kept one arm extended to shield his daughter from the conversation. “If you want to talk about your heart transplant, there’s nothing to discuss. I don’t blame you. You had nothing to do with the choices my husband made on your behalf, or the horrifying thing he did to keep you alive. If you don’t know the details, don’t go looking for them.”

“I am completely aware of the details. *She* deserves to be looked upon fully, and she also deserves all of us to be alive to remember her.”

Arden’s expression flickered under his carefully constructed mask. He glanced at his daughter. “Go ahead. I’ll catch up in a few minutes.”

“But, Dad,” she protested. “She wants to talk about *Tsu*.”

*Tsu*. Not *Dad*. Gaia, it flayed *her* heart, it probably would have crushed the Captain. Or anyone with a soul. She kept her attention on Arden. “Even now, people still feel like they can and should offer an opinion on *my* marriage, and that opinion being I should divorce Rainer. I am not here to discuss mine or anyone else’s marriages, either.”

“I being of the opinion the fact you won’t divorce him after what he did means you approve of what he did.” Arden’s tone took on real bite.

“That my continued presence conveys my tacit approval?”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Depends on if you believe he was bluffing or not.”

“I don’t care if he was or wasn’t. There are things you don’t do.”

“Like bring silver bullets on a boarding party and try to take another ship’s salvage?”

Arden’s expression flattened while his daughter smelled of sudden anguish and anxiety. He inhaled through his nose, then let it out slowly. “I can spare a few minutes. A *few*.”

Arden gestured to his daughter to go ahead, she protested, he glared at her, and she sulked away. Then Arden stalked off to a quiet alcove of the corridor, which opened up onto some storage or conference rooms. “What do you want?”

Her new heart picked up the pace. She took off her comm. Aggravated, Arden did the same.

She said, tone low, “I want to warn you about Bennett.”

“I know all about your conflicts with Bennett. Don’t involve me in them.”

“If you don’t want people offering their opinion on what you do in public, don’t take your meals with a member of command staff when you’ve *never* done that in a decade of being married to the Captain. You know *exactly* what you’re doing, Arden.”

“You’re not in a position to scold anyone about their behavior with their spouse.”

“Bennett isn’t offering you his shoulder as consolation, he’s just slithering into your good graces. He would *prefer* a werewolf wife to have a finger in both species, but the previous captain’s estranged husband and daughter will do too.”

Arden recoiled slightly. “Now you’ve lost me.”

Not a student of Old Earth politics, then. “I’m about to tell you something only Rainer knows. We’ve never told anyone, and we’re regretting that now.”

Arden shifted on his feet. “I’m listening.”

“Bennett has been trying to convince me to leave Rainer and marry him since the first time I left Rainer. He *hasn't* relented. The last time he tried to convince me otherwise was when I was on my way to *Haven*. He styles himself as concerned Rainer is alarmist about the ship's condition, that we have a few decades yet, that my transplant upset his lofty moral code, that everything has gone too far, and the Command staff as a whole have lost the thread. Sound familiar?”

Arden shrugged.

“It's all an act. His actual goal has always been to be Captain, but he isn't going to get that fourth stripe until he's married and Tsu is out of the way.”

There was no *rule* that said a captain had to be married, but it went without saying that a captain needed Civilization Management's endorsement. If they weren't chosen to parent a child, how could they be expected to parent an entire *ship*?

She pressed on with her argument. “You've been a captain's spouse for ten years. You know how that works. Even idiot me knows how it works. I'm a good choice to be a captain's spouse because I wasn't raised here. I don't have family, friends, history, connections, or entanglements. Werewolf and superb biopsy scores. It's not as crazy as it sounds once I put it like that.”

Arden said, “It makes a certain degree of sense.”

“And he's even told me he'll let Rainer fuck me to try to get me pregnant. Just so he can rub Rainer's snout in it if I do have a baby. I've told him to fuck off. Repeatedly. Now you and your daughter have come on the market. He has another iron to toss in the fire.”

Arden's entire spine tightened. “That's a hell of an accusation.”

“You know that it was Rainer who caught him with my comm, right? Confronted him. Bennett kissed him to prove Rainer can't actually stop him. We chose not to report any of it because we were afraid it would cause a court martial and trial



by public opinion. Forrest can vouch that my comm may have been in Bennett's quarters, but I never was. It's why I was banned from being unattended in the gym. It was Bennett's favorite hunting grounds, and he harassed me until I ended up in Medical."

"Fine. Let's say I believe you. Why does he care so much about being captain he'd risk everything?"

"Being Captain *is* everything to him."

Arden's brow creased. "Even before *LightBearer*, he had to know he was going to be the ship's last captain, and his life would likely end on a planet."

"Remember my Command Aptitude, and how Marcus didn't process that I had warned him about the moonlet? He *still* swears he wasn't to blame, and he's being unfairly maligned. A lot of people in the bunks support him. Nobody wants to actually look at the situation and contemplate the implications."

Arden crossed his jaw. "Your point?"

"What happened in my Aptitude happened on *LightBearer*, on a bigger scale. I have seen command officers not be able to process facts. I've seen data get falsified, but they believe it's real. Wait, are you a shuttle pilot?"

"No."

"Shuttle pilots are trained on the ways sentients break. It was discovered and studied back on Earth. It's called 'human factors.' Fatigue makes you drunk, prolonged stress creates mental exhaustion, task saturation, decision fatigue, target fixation. There's also something called *continuation bias*. Where you're inclined to stick with the plan even though it's really obvious the plan's not going to work. Then there's cognitive lockup, where you can't triage disasters properly, so you work them in sequential order rather than urgency. Then there's how our brains react to new information that challenges our understanding of reality and truth. Being told *no, that's not how it is, you're wrong* generates a threat response in our

brains. Rainer trains *all* his Engineering staff in human factors, and *all* shuttle pilots get trained on human factors.”

Arden shifted his weight again, and his scent shifted too, to something thoughtful.

“Bennett has built his entire life around being captain. That was his mission, his goal, his life, and up until *LightBearer*, it looked like it was going to work out for him. You and me? Our goal is to get a planet or live long enough to give Generation Four a chance to try. His singular goal is to be Captain and die Captain.”

Arden shifted once more and angled his chin slightly to look down at her over one carved cheekbone. “What’s your point?”

“Bennett only approached Keenan, Graves, and Harkins to try to force Tsu to force Forrest to keep the heart in me, except *Keenan was the one who presented the idea to Tsu in the first place*. He didn’t ask Forrest if it was even doable. Forrest only found out because Harkins asked. That’s the *real* reason Forrest rushed me to surgery and put a premature heart in my chest. Bennett was going to stop him.”

“Lachesis, please understand I don’t want you to feel that you have to defend being alive to me. I know it wasn’t your choice, and I can’t imagine how difficult living with the survivor’s guilt must be.”

Not nearly as difficult as living with watching it all come to nothing because of Bennett. “You aren’t connecting the dots, and that’s my point. Bennett was fine with me dying when there weren’t enough drugs to keep me alive until my vat heart was ready, but then he wanted to put off my vat transplant until a recipient for the donor heart could be found, *despite being told there weren’t enough drugs*. He appealed to Keenan, but deliberately didn’t consult Forrest. So when did Bennett’s ability to comprehend limited Medical resources disappear?”

Arden’s glare intensified.

“It didn’t,” she whispered, leaning towards him. “That’s the point. Because it’s *never* been about his offended moral code. I’ll also bet that Bennett has been telling you Forrest has too much authority, but at the same time he’s omitted all the facts. Because who really wants facts when they’re having all those *feelings*?”

Arden said nothing, but his scent shifted again and confirmed Bennett had been lying by omission. Tsk, tsk.

She tried not to growl. “Come closer, put your head on his shoulder, tell him your woes.”

“So what do you want?” Arden demanded darkly.

She almost laughed. “This conversation. Make of it what you will, and if that means you prefer to ride off to Earth on his cock, go right ahead. But he *will* suggest you marry him, and when you say Crèche decides those things, he’ll make sure Keenan sees things his way.”

Arden gave her the side-eye. “You’re suggesting Keenan is in league with him.”

“I’m telling you Civilization Management is too massive a task for one person, and Keenan, like all good officers, is not above accepting feedback or input from those around her. How do you think I came here? It was suggested perhaps a match for Rainer could be found on *Ark*. And I was that match.”

Bless Arden, for all he was Tsu’s husband, the thought had never dawned on him from the scent.

Time to exit the conversation. She turned to go.

“So how did you forgive Rainer.”

Arden’s tone made her pause. “I thought we weren’t discussing our marriages.”

Arden’s words dropped from his lips like nails. “I’ve *never* believed you’re with Rainer because it’s what you want.”

“Since when is what we *want* any factor in Crèche’s calculations?”

“I’ve been the voice in Tsu’s ear warning him about trauma response, bonding, and abusive interactions. I’m not the only person concerned Rainer is, at best, toxic, and probably something much worse. I was *furious* when Crèche removed you and you were left in restraints while Tsu tried to send you back to *Ark*. He didn’t mitigate damages to you by demanding you be held in Security. My husband is the reason you developed AGRS. Has he *ever* apologized to you or even explained himself?”

She moved closer, eyeing him for clues, but Arden didn’t betray anything. Being the Captain’s spouse—and chosen, *specifically*, for that role—meant Arden was above her pay grade in certain areas. “He may be responsible for my AGRS, but Ersu is to blame for our current situation. Otherwise, I’d still have my original heart, all our crew would still be alive, and we’d be in Jovian orbit arguing about Earth.”

Arden seemed to shift and re-form like he was deciding what version of events he wanted to believe. “So why are you still with Rainer at all? To control him? Because you’re afraid of what he’ll do if you leave him?”

“Control him? Rainer still assumes I’ll go along with whatever crazy plan he has because he thinks we’re mates. I made him promise to *never say it* and what did he do? Says it to all of fucking civilization, while telling me later, *but I had to save your life*. But to answer your question, part of it was strategic because I knew Keenan would make me marry Bennett. The other part? I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“But you *can* leave him. You’ve made a career for yourself here. Tsu has his eye on you to be Captain, although I’m not sure he’ll get much say in that now.”

Color drained from her face. “*Me?* The next Captain? Not a chance.”

Arden smirked, which transformed his normally composed, mild-mannered facade into something wicked and sharp. “If Tsu didn’t retire for another five years, that’d give you six years OIC experience, and that’s a considerable amount. You’re already a bridge officer.”

And it would also have meant all the other command staff had six years plus however many they currently had. “Being Chief Pilot comes with a seat wherever the flight controls are, which happen to be the bridge.”

“It comes with a nice view, but not an OIC badge. You’re looking at this the wrong way. *If* Bennett pursued you like you claim, it was initially as an asset, but now you’re a threat he needs to manage. Style leaving Rainer as they both treat you like a commodity to be fought over, and you become an obvious choice to be captain. Keep Keenan in Crèche and tell her you’ll accept an embryo, demote Rainer from Third but leave him Lead Engineer, replace him with Harkins or Graves, keep Bennett as XO but on his dogwatch leash. Get us to a planet, then reconcile with Rainer if you want while turning Bennett into a work ox.”

She blinked several times.

“I know a thing or two about politics.”

“I feel like you just laid a trap.” There was not a *chance* she would be Captain of *NightPiercer* unless she was literally the last person on the ship.

“I’m inclined to support the person I feel is the best option to get us off this ship. My daughter is thirteen, and I intend to see her twenty-fifth birthday.”

“Then your best option for that is your husband remaining captain,” she shot back. “Don’t make this about *me*.”

“My husband didn’t make you take Entry and Aptitude because he felt sorry for what he’d done. He has an impeccable eye for talent, and he cracked you open like some old Earth clam to get to the meat. He destroyed your life and your body, and all he felt he owed you was bare-bones opportunities where you were sent in ill-prepared and ungroomed. This *is* about you, but it’s also *not* about you.”

“And if your husband hadn’t thrown me to the pigs, I’d have been in my quarters during *LightBearer* and we would be dead. Rainer trafficked me to this ship, inadvertently turned me into an extremely public problem, and Tsu saw a chance to

solve a bunch of problems at one time. Forging me into something useful had to happen quickly, and that meant it was *never* going to be pretty.”

Arden leaned forward. “And if you’re going to break free of your past, now’s the time and you’re not getting another chance. If you’re as committed to civilization as you claim, perhaps you need to be less committed to your husband and mine, and when everything falls apart, *you* shove yourself to the front of the line.”

Holy *fuck*. This *had* to be Bennett talking through Arden’s mouth. Since Arden was human, he wasn’t going to smell the anger rising off her skin. “Stop twisting this, it’s not working. Admit you can’t stomach what your husband did to save all of us. You were comfortable gambling your daughter’s life on the flight computer’s best guess, but he wasn’t. Maybe he should be angry with *you*. Stop listening to Bennett’s pretty, easy lies. Both our species would rather believe easy lies. We sleep so much better. They make lovely lullabies that put ships to sleep forever.”

## NINE

Tsu walked into the twelve-bunk. Without a doubt, him being here would get around the ship in short order.

And if this didn't work, it didn't matter. Without his husband and daughter, everything for him was over. Rainer's painting of *Civilization* had actually bought him some time. It would seem that Rainer showing his emotional side, and sharing his torment over the heart, had made much of the ship pause and reflect.

Rainer had followed *Civilization* up with another painting Tsu had never seen, painted years earlier, apparently, of an exquisite oceanscape from Earth. The shades of blue were vivid unlike anything he'd ever seen, and the waves and shore and blinding sunlight peaceful, calming. Then there'd been another one, this one the interior of an Earth house decorated with flowers and a comfortable bit of mess. A *family* lived there.

So the Lead Engineer had decided he was going to fight for the soul of the ship. Rainer might not have been winning, but he also wasn't losing.

Arden and Bennett had always had a very cordial relationship, but Arden had maintained cordial relationships with *all* his direct reports. Arden eating with Bennett? No. *That* was an aberration.

Something searing sliced through his chest. Jealousy, perhaps? Fear? Anger? All of those things?

Bennett did not approve of what had happened with Lachesis, and had been building consensus among the senior staff. Arden was clearly part of his plan and what the *fuck* was the XO doing dragging *his family* into it.

The first rule of Engineering currently applied: shut up and fix it. Sort out blame later.

At first, Arden had at least *spoken* to him, even if it had been heated. Now Arden refused to talk to him, meet him, or see him. Attempts by Counseling to mediate had failed. Arden refused to show up to the appointments. Keenan had *ordered* him to show up to no effect. It was a direct order with no bite behind it, and Arden knew it. Keenan wasn't going to make the insubordination a public spectacle.

And under Arden's generally benign and diplomatic exterior was someone who had not just taken Command Aptitude, but passed. When Arden wanted to fight, his husband *fought*, and when Arden fought, Arden fought *dirty*. Arden knew how to survive, and when he made up his mind, it was made up. He was the mediator of every situation until he wasn't.

His husband, despite exiting Command track two years after Aptitude due to Aptitude-related trauma, had received the highest endorsement a ship could really give. He'd been chosen from the Crèche Pool to not just be a father, but to be the actual biological sire of his daughter. She had been passed to him straight from the womb, gooey and wet and screaming and all.

Arden had *always* been fiercely protective of her, and made it clear that in the hierarchy of his family concerns, Tsu was a *distant* second. Which was fine with him.

Tsu hadn't come into her life until she had been two, and he'd known in that instant, she was his daughter too. It had taken a few extra years of being persistent in his marriage (which had also included a promotion to the XO spot) and a *great* deal of Counseling before things had finally gelled into a family unit.



His daughter was the brightest light of his life, the thing more precious to him than anything, the thing he'd destroy *NightPiercer* itself for.

The *only* hope he had left was Arden hadn't demanded a divorce.

Arden always said what he wanted. Directly and plainly. Be that what he wanted in bed or for breakfast. It was one of the things Tsu liked best about his husband. With Arden, there was no guessing or teasing out or deducing what he wanted or how he felt.

And Arden had *not* said he wanted a divorce.

As long as that didn't happen, there was a shred of hope. And a shred was all anyone needed to survive.

The regular channels of mediating a marriage in crisis had failed. So he'd tried the time-honored tradition of "space," except Bennett had moved into that space.

Tsu gestured for the crew in the bunk to be at ease. They eyed him, shuffling and watching without trying to watch while he headed for the last bed on the left, closest to the small open area near the sink and towel-drying racks. The airflow was better back here, the air a trifle more humid and warmer than the rest of the bunk, the lights a bit more intense. And indeed, hanging on the edge of the upper bunk, which had a couple of make-shift lights that had been cobbled together from parts that had probably been pilfered from Engineering, was exactly what he'd come for: a collection of several plants in makeshift hanging containers, spilling green leaves. The hanging ropes had been braided from strips of rags and fabric, and there was a scent in the bunk that told him somewhere there was a small box of left over food scraps being turned into mulch.

"Who owns the plants?" He glanced around the entire bunk.

No one came forward. There were two men in front of him, but neither had claimed ownership of the bunk. Bunks like this became little sub-packs of their own after groups of

people had lived together for a time. Tsu turned a blind eye to contraband plants and mulch bins. Rainer and Bennett kept an eye on the conditions of the bunks, and if they did not care, he did not waste energy on caring.

The vast majority of privately nurtured plants—which were kept like pets, and frequently were unofficial bunk mascots—were contraband smuggled out of the Biomes. If Keenan didn't worry after a stray plant or kitten, neither did he. There were things to be aware of, and things to be concerned about, and those lists didn't always intersect.

“I said,” he repeated, “who owns the plants? Otherwise, no one will own these plants in five minutes.”

One of the two men in front of him—a tech from Crew—stepped forward and put his hand on the bed post. “They're mine. Sir.”

“Excellent. Then you are who I want to speak to.”

The tech's fingers tightened on the bedpost and the bunk's air shifted half a degree to tense and hostile.

“I am not here to dick over plants,” Tsu said dryly. “As everyone on this ship knows, I have much bigger problems, and a new position as Plant Enforcement is not one of my career aspirations.”

The half degree of hostility did not abate. The tech in front of him just said, “Yes, sir.”

Time to get down to business. “I want to acquire a cutting.”

“Not for sale. *Sir.*”

No surprise. Plants were priceless, especially the particular variety of flowering vine. Tsu had seen it in the Biomes the few times they'd successfully gotten it to flower. He couldn't remember the name (Arden could), but the tumble of broad, dark green leaves dotted with exquisite pale blue flowers with deep throats and splayed petals was striking. It was an extremely difficult plant to grow in AG, and extremely valuable as a pollinator for the bee hives, hence acquiring seed

or cuttings from the Biomes was nearly impossible and *was* something Biome Management would come looking for.

This particular plant had been (somehow) smuggled out of the Biomes years earlier and survived in various bunks through repeated propagations and had been bred to be an exceptionally glorious dark blue shade with a violet star bursting from the long throat to spread across the petals.

Officially, the plant didn't exist. Keenan knew it existed. Her official unofficial opinion was the original smugglers had evaded capture for so long, and done such an amazing job breeding it to a legendary beauty, that they might as well keep it as a prize.

Keenan likely was one of those original smugglers, and Tsu suspected hiding in her bedroom was, in fact, an offshoot of the original plant that she had been smuggling through her bunk assignments for years.

It had taken a great deal of analysis of bunk air ventilation data to track this damn thing to this bunk. The plant supposedly traveled when it was under threat of discovery.

"I don't sell from it, sir," the tech added firmly, with an air of daring. "We *never* sell from it. Never have. That's the deal."

"Trade it is." Credits didn't buy everything. The most valuable things on the ship weren't for sale, anyway.

The tech licked his lips. "We don't trade either."

"You're telling me there is *nothing* in all of civilization you'll trade for a cutting from this plant. I know for a fact that isn't true."

"The cuttings don't propagate well," the owner said. "I don't cut from it to see the offshoots wither, the plant doesn't like it either."

The plant looked extremely healthy and sizable enough to get a cutting. The tension in the bunk wasn't lost on him. The plant had an owner, but a plant like this was a collective effort and everyone shared in the enjoyment it gave. This plant was their prized pet.

The tech finally said, “There’s nothing that would cost a captain enough.”

Tsu allowed himself a dry chuckle. “There are plenty of things on this ship that not even the Captain can buy. Like a cutting of this plant from the Biome. Why do you think I’m dealing with you?”

“Because this one is better than the Biome version.”

“Agreed. So what do you want that is equally rare and impossible to acquire? A transfer to *Ark*, perhaps?”

“Can you arrange that?”

“Captain Tomely would probably find it rather amusing.”

The Tech backed up a step, gaze shifting.

There was something he wanted. Something he didn’t want to admit to.

A spouse and family? Probably not something he could convince Keenan to do. Although... *perhaps*. Keenan was extremely distressed that a marriage that had functioned for a decade had failed. If tossing a spouse at this tech who probably was not high up in the Crèche Pool would fix things between him and Arden, she might be interested.

One of the bunkmates went to whisper in the tech’s ear. Then someone else had a suggestion. The expressions warmed and thawed, and the energy in the room shifted as the bunk realized there *was* something worthy of a cutting.

The tech turned back to him as the whispers went through the bunk about what they’d be asking for. Some people seemed discontent or unimpressed. But it was the tech who made the final decision. “I want a painting.”

“A painting. Any particular one?” There were quite a few paintings on *NightPiercer*. He couldn’t assign a priceless canvas to a bunk, but might be able to arrange some sort of three-way deal for a canvas in private ownership.

“A special one. Just for me. I want one from Commander Rainer.”

“Which one?” There was the one he’d painted for his mother, the one in his living room, and a handful of others. Even before *LightBearer*, getting together the paints to do even a small canvas had been a challenge, and Rainer had typically deferred to other artists so those other artists could have opportunities to work with physical media. Tsu also suspected that because all physical canvases had to be displayed in the gallery (due to how precious the paints and canvas were), Rainer had deliberately avoided doing many physical works.

There might be thousands of digital Rainer paintings and drawings, but there weren’t that many Rainer canvases.

The tech shook his head. “A commission. A digital one. So I can always have it.”

“Commander Rainer doesn’t paint for anyone except himself unless I give him a direct order,” Tsu said.

“He painted the heart,” someone said in a low grumble.

“He’s been posting paintings to the public feed,” someone else said.

“That’s not him advertising his services.”

The tech shrugged. “That’s what I want. A painting. Just for me.”

He’d have better luck getting Keenan to give this man a spouse. “What do you want him to paint?”

“I’ll tell him that.”

Ordering Rainer to do it was absolutely out of the question. Arden would never forgive him. “Fine. If I can convince Rainer to take the commission—”

“And the painting is what I want,” the tech interrupted.

“I see the Commander’s reputation precedes him. Fine. A painting to your satisfaction, and I get a cutting.”

“Yes. Deal. No guarantee the cutting won’t wither and die.”

“You will supply a *quality* cutting in good faith. Or I will tell Keenan where she can find this plant and that I believe it is in ill health.”

The tech huffed.

Tsu held out his hand. “Deal.”

The tech shook his hand. He had a good grip. Firm.

Now he had to go convince Rainer to do him a favor.

# TEN

\*Ding\*

Rainer looked up from the final plans for the buoy shuttle.

Lachesis bit down a sigh before it traveled to her battered ribs. Rotten timing. The buoy shuttle was ten hours away from launch, and neither of them needed distractions right now, even though it was largely out of her and Rainer's hands at this point. "Nobody who ever knocks on our door these days is bringing *good* news."

Maybe the mission had been cancelled?

"That depends on how you define good news." Rainer shifted his tablets off his knees and went to the door. It had not dinged a second time.

It didn't merit the effort of pointing out her definition of good news, which would be anything that didn't overstay its welcome or spur more drama. She tried to arrange her face to look a little less tired. She tried to limit her sass to three comments every hour.

Captain Tsu leaned against the wall outside their door. He did not have on boots. Just socks. Mismatched socks. But did have his uniform on, even if the collar was loose. "May I come in?"

Oh, Rainer *best* let him inside so she could hear what crisis had brought the Captain to their door in mismatched socks and an unbuttoned collar.

Rainer stepped to the side.

Tsu shoved off the wall and wandered into the living room. He stepped onto the precious Earth rug, considered it, and wriggled his toes in his socks. “Hello, Lachesis. How are you feeling?”

“Sore.” Now two comments in ten minutes. Going through her allowance.

Tsu dug his left big toe into the weave, then raised his head. “Rainer, I need a favor.”

Tsu in mismatched socks, unbuttoned collar, *and* in need of a favor? Calamity was right down the hall. And its name was Bennett.

“What sort of favor?” Rainer asked.

Tsu shrugged. “One you are *not* going to like.”

“I ascertained that from your scent.”

“You’re free to tell me to fuck off and I’m half expecting you will.”

The Captain’s scent carried quite a few scents from around the ship, but it was also tragic, with a bit of wild, *well, fuck* to it. And if she could smell it, Rainer could smell it. There was only one thing she could think of that would upset the Captain that much. “This is about Arden, isn’t it.”

Tsu nodded. “I found a gift for him, but I can’t buy it with anything a captain may have within reach. Not that the seller wants anything a captain’s influence can buy.”

“You mean like an atonement gift?” Lachesis asked. “But Arden is human.”

“Yes, he’s human, but we both had wolf fathers, and nothing else has worked to get him to even talk to me.” Tsu’s normally composed exterior shell had been thoroughly cracked. “Keenan has thrown every marriage-in-crisis trick at this she has. Arden refuses to speak to me, but he *will* talk with Bennett.”

Rainer raised a brow. “Jealous, are we?”



Tsu snapped, “Fuck you. I have put up with *your* marriage drama for a damn decade. You can put up with *mine* for ten minutes.”

“It hasn’t been a decade.”

“It also hasn’t been ten minutes.”

“So what’s the gift?”

“A legendary plant that’s been circulating the bunks for a generation and Arden has wanted a cutting his entire life, and cuttings are never sold or traded.”

“The violet-starred glory?”

“Is that its name? Vines, blue-violet flowers with light throats, a faint scent like honeysuckle if you can get close enough?”

“That’s its name,” Rainer said. “Or one of them. I saw it once about twenty years ago when I was a pup. I don’t think I saw the one you saw, though. I believe I saw a progenitor, because the one I saw was distinctly purple.”

“This one leans very blue.”

“They’ve been breeding it to be more blue, I believe, since blue is the most difficult color in plants or such due to light. I’m not exactly sure.”

So there was a plant moving through the bunks and not even *Rainer* knew where to find it? Now she had to see this plant for herself.

Tsu said, “I tracked it down and negotiated an offer, but the price is *you* taking a commission for the seller. Don’t know what he’s going to ask you to paint. But it’s got to be to his satisfaction.”

Rainer’s lips drew into a thin, compressed line. “This could be a terrible mistake, Captain. He could have the intention to refuse to accept my work as inadequate on principle and as a power play.”

“I am well aware of that.”

“And you will be dragging me down with you.”

Tsu raised a brow at Rainer. “You dragged *me* down with *you*, wolf.”

Lachesis glared at the both of them. “You two clung to each other and rode to the bottom in the same lift. Rainer, paint the painting. Tsu, get out of my den.”

Tsu cracked a grin and half-bowed to her. “She-wolf. My respects and thanks for permitting use of your den for this conversation.”

Ass. Easy to see how he and Rainer got along.

Rainer watched him leave, eyes narrowed.

“Paint the painting.” The effort of speaking meant she had no energy to conceal how grouchy she was.

Rainer stared at the closed door. “I will. But I don’t like getting entangled in the Alpha’s marriage problems. Tsu knows Arden best, and if he’s desperate enough to come to our door, he’s at the bottom of the ladder with broken rungs and nothing else.”

And if Tsu truly lost Arden, and Bennett at least gained Arden’s association, if not his partnership, then it didn’t matter what happened to them. Rainer would be Bennett’s first victim. “That means we’re already dead.”

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“WHAT DOES YOUR NEWEST PATRON WANT?” LACHESIS ASKED, setting tea down in front of Rainer. Her husband had gone to speak with the crew member who owned the plant after the buoy shuttle mission had been completed and deemed a success. A pilot she had never flown with—Chance—had been the sole pilot in the buoy shuttle, and successfully got the extremely fragile shuttle into position, engaged the umbilical tether and autopilot, then completed a quick walk to a second shuttle flown by Juan and another pilot.

Mission completed. Belle’s tether software appeared to be working perfectly, feeding raw data to *NightPiercer* for processing while the shuttle kept itself in position between

*Haven* and *NightPiercer*. *NightPiercer* was no longer blind, and *Haven*'s crew would get hazard warnings with more than sixty seconds to spare.

Rainer glanced at the teacup, gave her a disapproving look that she shouldn't be bending over her ribs at all, and kept moving his stylus across the tablet. "A home."

On the tablet was a roughed out painting of a leafy grove tangled with endless flowers, opening up onto a field of endless green and sunlight so intense it was almost white and painful to look at. In the distance there was a ribbon of blue, glistening water, and perhaps the shadows of structures—a little house, perhaps. Waiting for the viewer at the edge of the grove was a white and gray cat.

"A cat?" Cats were almost always in the Biomes, participating in pest control. Although very, very rarely the staff of Crèche's Biome division took cats as pets. Just like the Biome handlers had pet dogs to maintain familiarity with domestication. Not that cats had ever been properly domesticated.

Discussing the cat was much more relaxing than doing a post-mort on the buoy. It was over, it was done, it was a resounding success. All she wanted was a drink she wasn't allowed to have and to sit and not think about it.

"He said he always wanted a cat." Rainer continued his drawing. "He encountered a friendly gray and white cat a few years ago in the Biomes. Hence the cat."

"How do you paint sunlight like that?" she asked softly.

Rainer paused and turned to look at her. "What do you mean? *How*?"

"It's so... this isn't the right word, but luminous." *Luminosity* had a specific meaning in her line of work. Like how Rainer was precise on *zero*, she was precise on *luminous*.

"Variations on a technique called *chiaroscuro*, although the key to painting luminous light really is the contrast. That and spending an inappropriate amount of time looking at old Earth photos and videos. And very vivid nightmares."

“I’m sure other people who paint as a Dying Art have done the same thing. But maybe not the nightmares,” she said. Perhaps not to Rainer’s extent, but their light wasn’t like Rainer’s light. Rainer’s light felt so *real*. That was something that Generation Zero had always spoken about: that the light inside the ships wasn’t like sunlight. That the paintings and artwork of Generation One—who had never seen or felt actual sunlight—didn’t capture. That something had been lost. That the light in the Biomes could grow plants, and keep circadian rhythms in place, but that *real* sunlight and *real* moonlight and starlight were something you *felt*.

Just like real weather—the Biomes could produce wind and mist and even snow and frost to mimic Earth’s cycles, but it wasn’t *real*. And, of course, there were no clouds. Paintings and drawings from Generation Zero always had a *realness* to them.

The concept of *feeling* sunlight was so foreign. One did not want to *feel* sunlight on the ship. Feeling it would be very brief and extremely painful. In fact, *feeling* the sunlight was one of the major problems *NightPiercer* and *Ark* and even *Haven* currently had. Nobody wanted to *feel* sunlight.

And yet... looking at Rainer’s painting, she could almost feel what it would be like to stand under sunlight and not be instantly reduced to atomic ash.

“I am a singular talent,” Rainer said without a hint of irony or arrogance.

“There is that,” she muttered, rolling her eyes towards the ceiling. “But even you’ve said that learning to paint from media isn’t the same as the real thing. Like my hair. Or you’ve modeled pelts and scars.”

“True. But what are you getting at?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe nothing, I suppose.” His nightmares were so real and vivid, and the paintings from those nightmares gave her an idea of how real his dreams felt and were to him. They were extremely specific and eerily vivid. And they were also increasing in frequency, although Rainer

maintained that while he regularly had nightmares, sometimes there were periods of more or less.

Except now he was talking about memories. The memories of his great-grandmother speaking, except he'd never heard her speak.

Epigenetic and ancestral memories *were* real things. Confirmed to exist, but not well understood. She had been warned she might start to have strange dreams that seemed to belong to someone else, or have a change of taste or preferences, or even personality because of her heart transplant. But given the heart had only been in her chest a short time, whatever chimeric transfer had happened was expected to be extremely minimal.

She didn't mind the idea of taking some of the she-wolf who had saved her life with her. It was a nice thought, and a small way to repay the impossible gift she'd been given.

But the biggest proof of ancestral memories was how many people on the ships had dreams of Earth. Not vivid night terrors like Rainer, but more than could be explained by just watching videos or having a vivid imagination or stories passed down from Generation Zero. Werewolves tended to have more of them, and more vivid, mostly dreams of scents and sensations. She had had them herself—mostly a dream where she smelled salty water laced with kelp, which was a very familiar scent, but this scent had been *different*. And somewhere in her, she had known it meant *ocean*. It had not been a nice dream or a bad dream, just a strange experience.

*Had* Rainer been genetically engineered, and the trauma and stress had stirred up fragments of memories buried in the DNA of his Omega sire, and the mtDNA from his mother and grandmother?

Keenan hadn't been Crèche Commander when Rainer had been conceived. Keenan wasn't that much older than Rainer—so it was Keenan's predecessors, who had worked with Rainer's mother, that would have overseen whatever extremely illegal genetic engineering might have been done on Rainer. Keenan would have inherited the criminal liability for

it if she hadn't revealed the truth about her predecessor's indiscretions.

Keenan, instead, had (seemingly) continued the work. The scientific curiosity probably was too much to resist. It explained why Keenan was so damn persistent in getting offspring. It didn't explain why Keenan had tried to throw *her* away at the first opportunity.

"Forest sprite," Rainer said, having turned to look at her again.

She studied his mis-matched eyes. They'd tried to repurpose one of Rainer's hearts and re-sequence it for her, but the biomass had failed without explanation. So she'd gotten a custom grown heart. Rainer had been a weakling pup. His sperm didn't survive freezing, extending, or even handling.

"In your dream of your great-grandmother telling you one versus all," she asked, "who was she talking to?"

"Me. Why?"

She settled back on her haunches. Looked at the painting. Then she picked up one of her tablets and searched for a picture of a young Hade. There weren't many, and his resemblance to Rainer was striking, but only striking. Nothing that would catch too much attention.

She looked at Rainer's personal file again—he'd given her access to it, although the file still lacked the details of his heart transplant. There were also notes about how he'd been a fragile kid. Born premature (with a note that his mother had had a problematic pregnancy), low birth weight, bad suck reflex, then as he'd grown up, delayed immune development, and just generally hadn't thrived and had been a weak, puny pup until he'd hit about four or five. Not entirely abnormal, all things considered, especially when dealing with a legitimately brilliant mind that prioritized developing the physical brain over the body. Brains were hungry things.

His father was identified as an Omega-generation wolf from Hade's pack, but no further information. His mother was also Omega-sired. There was a lot of crossing back to

Omegas, so interesting choice there. What had Crèche been trying to maintain? If anything, Rainer should have been a very vigorous pup with his pedigree.

She pulled up Rainer's DNA sequence and examined it. She'd never looked at it before, never any reason to, and she wasn't an expert, but she knew more than most from her time in Crèche on *Ark*. She scrolled through the helix, examining it. Apparent microdamage on some of it, but no surprise, they all had some damage.

But there was some strange fragmentation at the very edges of some genes.

"What are you looking at?" Rainer asked.

"You, with my Crèche-eyes," she said, examining his medical reports over the years and comparing the reports against his genetic profile.

"Why?"

"Not sure," she said thoughtfully. "There's something... different about your mtDNA."

"Different how?" Rainer asked.

"I'm not sure." Rainer's file was linked to his mother's, which she couldn't access. She didn't even bother trying, it'd just send a warning to Graves she was sniffing around records she had no business sniffing around. Rainer's biological sire's record was a dead-end with no DNA on file. No DNA on file for a wolf that had been used to produce offspring?

That made *no* sense.

Unless the DNA wasn't supposed to be seen.

Just like...

His heart transplant.

"Oh," she breathed. "Oh, oh... no. You weren't genetically engineered."

"Of course I wasn't," Rainer said.

She grabbed Rainer's tablet and pulled up his art portfolio and poured through it. Specifically the dreams of her, the compound, the Final Days.

*Her* nightmares, and everyone else's nightmares, they were of *space*. They took place on the ship. And maybe they were haunted by Earth, but even "Earth" nightmares took place in Biomes.

"Rainer," she asked, "do you ever dream of *NightPiercer*? The biomes? Space? The nightmares you're compelled to paint, I mean."

Rainer thought a moment, then shook his head. "I've rarely painted the ship at all. Not my preferred subject, obviously."

"Oh, Gaia. I...I thought your nightmares might be ancestral or epigenetic memories of Earth, stirred up by being genetically engineered." Her heart beat at a crazy, panicked pace.

"I am not genetically engineered."

"No... no, Rainer... I'm saying if you were having ancestral memories passed from your maternal line, you should have your *grandmother's memories of Hade*. But you have *Hade's memories of her*."

"I'm still not following."

"Rainer, you're a *clone*. You are a clone of *Hade*."



## ELEVEN

Rainer's instant response was about what anyone would have expected. "That's not possible. Aside from cloning being banned by the Accord Between Ships, sentient cloning wasn't done on Earth either."

She sat back on her heels, her weight spread across his thighs and her hands on his chest. "I know what I'm suggesting sounds insane. We don't even clone livestock. Livestock from Earth clone-stock and lines wasn't put on the ships. But the tech for animals is two centuries old, and the science does exist. Your biological father of record probably didn't exist and if we pressed about his records, we'd get told *oh, those were lost, Omega, you know*. No, I don't know, because Crèche would *never* use some random DNA they had in a drawer somewhere. You being a clone explains your low birth weight, your initial failure to thrive as a child, your delayed immune development, your fertility problems, why your spare vat heart rejected a re-sequence, and why your original heart failed so dramatically and the records were 'lost.' You had plasma burns and radiation exposure. There must have been some kind of incriminating damage."

"They used my *mother* for it?" Rainer was still stuck on *this can't be happening*.

"It would be the only thing that would make sense. They inject the genetic core of the donor into the female egg. It's best in cloning to use a female relative—as close as possible—to create the embryo. There's some microchimerism and exchange of DNA between the host egg and the donated

genetic material. Your DNA is, superficially, an identical match for Hade, which they don't have a DNA record for—probably intentionally, but easily justified as why would they—and they pass off your underlying microfracturing as the same thing we all have.”

Cloning humans had never been legal on Earth, and according to official record, had never been more than embryos. She didn't know a single werewolf it had ever been attempted on, *ever*. Clones weren't even perfect genetic copies. They were superficial genetic copies. Environmental factors played a dramatic part in the actual gene expression from the first cell division.

Except for the pure scientific achievement and exploration potential, there was no point in cloning a person, since a clone wasn't a duplicate. *And* a clone would carry the epigenetic memories and genetic shape of the original at the moment the DNA was taken. A clone of Hade created from DNA taken when Hade had been twenty would be a very, very different clone than the one created from Hade at sixty. And not just because of the natural aging process that affected DNA, but because life itself shaped that DNA.

Based on Rainer's horrifying nightmares, he was a clone of Hade taken right before Exodus. A fully matured, experienced, brilliant Hade at the height of his powers but the end of his prime, thoroughly broken and chiseled by the Last Days and twenty years of fighting with an entire planet to save a civilization that didn't realize it needed saving. The material had been taken *with the intent to create a clone*. Had Hade *known*? Had he participated? His actual participation or consent wouldn't have been necessary. Samples of his DNA sufficient to create a clone could have been obtained via any number of seemingly innocent medical procedures or exams.

How long had *NightPiercer* been trying to produce a Hade clone? Was Rainer the first, or had there been others?

She realized he was staring at her with the same gaunt expression from his nightmares. Oh, hell. She gripped the front of his shirt and gave him a tug. “Most people don't realize this, but clones aren't duplicates, like our printed

replacement organs. Clones are superficial copies. Scientists originally thought DNA was this immutable thing between an egg and sperm, and if you duplicated the DNA, you got a duplicate. Once they started cloning higher vertebrates, they realized that it's not that simple. You can recreate a body, you can recreate a brain. You can't recreate a *person*. You can't recreate a *mind*."

"Or a soul."

"Rainer, you have your own soul. You have *me*, and you believe I am your mate. Therefore, I cannot be a clone of Hade's mate."

"Why not? Why can't *you* be a clone as well?"

"Aside from the fact it would have required a coordinated effort to commit high crimes on both ships? They finally got a Hade clone with you. They were *not* going to fuck it up by having you breed with a clone female. That's *way* too many variables."

Rainer closed his hands over hers. "Then why go through the effort of cloning Hade? Scientific curiosity is not a driving force of us being out here, nor was it a consideration in the building of the ships."

"No fucking clue. You're not a perfect duplicate, and they *knew* they wouldn't get one, so I have no idea why the fuck they'd create a whole person. Holy shit, though, this ship's Crèche is out of their *fucking minds*."

Rainer's grip tightened. The bones in her fingers creaked. "I still know you are my mate. I *know* it. And perhaps I have always known it because, if you're right, I am Hade, and I recognized my mate so clearly. *He* had a mate. Perhaps I feel so strongly about children because I've raised my own, and I know I died alongside mine on Earth. Although I am unsure how I—or you—feel about knowing I am not actually *me*."

Oh no, Rainer didn't get to have an identity crisis. She twisted his shirt in her hands and gave him a fierce shake. "You are *not* Hade! Haven't you been listening to me? You *aren't*. You can't clone *people*. You're made from the same

blueprints by a different hand. And if you need proof, you have your own soul, that Gaia *gave* you your own soul, *I* am with you.”

He caressed her cheek. “Are you? You have never acknowledged you are my mate. You have forbidden me from even saying the word. Perhaps what I feel for you is *not* what you feel for me, and you’re right: Gaia is punishing us. That you are *my* mate, and I am a blasphemous artifact, but *I* am not yours. I’ve been wrong all this time.”

Her new heart broke and her scar burned and the thumping pain wracked her entire body. She gripped his shirt with all the strength left in her hands and her knees clamped against his thighs. “Rainer—”

>> **GENERAL QUARTERS** <<

>> **GENERAL QUARTERS** <<

>> **GENERAL QUARTERS** <<

Rainer grabbed her with one arm and somehow twisted around her to grab their comms off the table. She wriggled and rolled onto the couch, pain briefly suffocating her as her ribs protested. The main screen and their tablets blazed red and klaxons sounded. There was *no* way to miss the summons to whatever the new emergency was.

Her brain froze, paralyzed for a second, right back at the moment before *LightBearer*. Had they *actually* fallen through reality *again* back in—

>> **HAVEN BUOY WARNING: SOLAR IMPACT  
INCOMING**<<

>> **HAVEN UMBILICAL STATUS: 97.329%**<<

>> **HAVEN UMBILICAL TETHER INTEGRITY:  
EXCELLENT** <<

>> **HAVEN TETHER HASH VERIFIED: Y** <<

>> **SOLAR IMPACT INCOMING : VERIFIED** <<

No, still in *this* terrible reality.

There was already a timer: fourteen minutes, thirty-seven seconds and ticking until it hit. The telemetry wasn't excellent—*Haven* couldn't provide that—but it was better than what *NightPiercer* had. Which was nothing.

Data streamed to her tablets.

“That is *big*.” There was no way to outrun it or outmaneuver it, it was too massive and dense. More calculations streamed in as Graves collapsed CPU processes in real time to free up resources for Harkins as more packets arrived, and the computer painted a picture of the anticipated impact.

Rainer held still, body tense and ready to bolt, but he was rooted to the ground at the same time. “Which way are you moving the ship?”

Her mind stumbled on the stripes around her wrists.

The *Haven* buoy data fed in *Ark*'s movements as well. The other ship had begun a rotation to take the impact on its relatively undamaged side—unlike *NightPiercer*, *Ark* had only suffered extensive tile-stripping on one side, and its other side was able to take a hit. The badly damaged engines and power core towards the rear? Not so much.

Did they need to run for it? *Could* they run for it? If they did, they'd be leaving *Haven* to fend for itself. And *Haven*'s hull tiles were baked to a crisp.

The crew on *Haven* was likely already dead. They'd never come up with a solution for what to do in the event of a massive solar event, because re-tiling *Haven* wasn't going to happen.

*Focus.*

She'd wasted forty-three seconds flailing about in her own head. Time to process an actual course of action, because she did not have time to do anything else.

It would take fifteen minutes for her to *run* to the bridge. She'd never make it. There hadn't been enough time from the first klaxon. Unless she lived on the bridge permanently, she'd never make it.

She arrayed her chimera tablet on the coffee table and moved her fingers over the primary screen. The tablets locked into the navigation system. “This can’t hit the engines, can it.”

“It would be best if it did not.” The big screen flickered with Rainer’s orders to Engineering to start emergency Core control procedures.

She brushed her comm to the channel she wanted. “Harkins, there’s no time for me to get to the bridge. I’m going to rotate the ship head-on to take it on our crumpled and evacuated sections. Thoughts on what that will fry?”

Harkins’ voice crackled in her ear, already distorted from *Ark*’s movements causing drive field distortions and EM interference. “Nothing that will kill us or shut us down, probably the best of a bunch of bad choices. Graves is already shutting down the computer core. Rainer?”

“Engine core ramp-down already initiated,” Rainer said. “How bad is this one, on a scale of one to I may as well pour myself a drink and sit on my couch?”

“Keep the drink handy,” Harkins replied.

“And here I thought Rainer always went down fighting,” Graves said darkly.

“Unnecessary.” Keenan’s harried tone sounded brittle and terse while her comm picked up the sound of people rushing and glass rattling.

The big screen half-blanked and under it:

**>> CAPTAIN ORDERS : HUDDLE PROTOCOL. ALL  
CREW MOVE TO ASSIGNED INTERIOR DECKS <<**

**>> CAPTAIN’S ORDERS: CONTINUATION OF  
COMMAND PROTOCOL <<**

“Oh hell,” she whispered. Continuation of Command? He may as well have declared Condition Black. Every command officer went to their designated spot, each one at different parts of the ship, spreading them out as much as possible.

The goal? To ensure at least one of them survived.

Rainer's grim scent and stone silence said everything.

The interior deck call was the option of last resort. She'd personally only had to experience it once during a wicked solar storm that had coincided with Jupiter being in a period of high activity *and* an Io transit, and she'd been a little kid with her parents pressed in with everyone else. It had all been fine and an extreme precaution, even called an over-reaction by some.

This was not an over-reaction or extreme precaution. This was all they had.

Rainer shoved his tablets under his arm and offered her his other hand. Emotions knotted in her throat like old-fashioned barbed wire. He bowed his head towards her. "You know where your spot is?"

"Yes," she heard herself say while everything howled once again at the thought of being separated from him.

"If it suits you," he told her, like he had told her before *LightBearer*, "wait for me at the River. Even if you won't spend eternity with me."

He kissed her cheek gently. The moment felt like forever. She sighed and closed her eyes. Time sometimes felt like taffy, and for once, that was a good thing.

Everyone was in the hallway outside the crew quarters. Lily and her little pup. Arden with Tsu's daughter. No Tsu—he was elsewhere—and Forrest was on staff. Bennett seemed to be missing as well. She gulped down the knot of emotions as she stepped onto the lift with Lily and her pup and Graves' wife and son. Rainer stayed behind to take the next lift.

She focused on her tablets and keying in the calculations for the adjustments. There were various flare templates she'd created from the existing ones, and it was a matter of typing in the numbers mingled with some good old gut instinct based on *NightPiercer's* exposed state.

*NightPiercer* began to move. The ship swayed. She caught herself on the side of the tube and bounced against Lily, and almost dropped her tablets as pain shot through her ribs.

Fuck. If she lived long enough, she was going to shift her bones back into place. First stop: the goddamn Biome, and *no one* was stopping her.

The ship swayed harder, and this time Lily and Graves' wife pinned her to the side of the tube.

Eight minutes.

The lift stopped. Her floor. She stepped out onto the deck, which was a press of people all moving towards the most interior parts of the deck while Operations staff urged them to proceed in an orderly fashion. She continued working, watching the data stream from *Haven* via the buoy, detailing the shape and characteristics of the incoming flare and she made what adjustments she could to *NightPiercer* as the ship groaned and creaked and shuddered in space.

Above her, there was a *crack*. Somewhere in the walls, something metallic fell through layers of something else metallic. The lights flickered. The ship groaned and chugged as the engines increased power to come about with little regard to the ship's crippled spars.

A deep throb pulsed through their legs while the ship's chorus of groaning and creaking intensified.

They crowded into one of the largest gyms on an interior deck used for mass recess for School. It was eerily silent and noisy—breathing, coughing, whispers, quiet weeping, bodies—at the same time.

The lights dimmed, flickered, then shut off completely.

People gasped. Tablets glowed.

Two minutes.

*NightPiercer* jolted. They swayed and bounced off each other. In the darkness, parents passed their children towards the center. The children sobbed and refused to move, so adult hands pulled and pushed them closer and closer to the center.

She passed one crying human child's hand to the adult next to her, who passed the child to the next, until the children were herded to the center of the people no matter how much they



screamed and resisted. Then the pregnant women, then the parents carrying infants, and then the young women like herself.

**>> CMDR RAINER: ENGINE CORE HARNESS  
ENGAGED <<**

The emergency lights flicked back on as the reserve power kicked in. The lights were very dim and yellow. The youngsters wailed for their parents.

**>> Lt CMDR GRAVES: MAIN CORE HIBERNATION IN  
10 SECONDS. <<**

“Devices off! Devices off!” the two Operations crew members wrangling them shouted.

Her comm went dead and released its grip on the nerves behind her ear. Her tablet timer ticked ninety-one seconds as she turned her devices off.

She braced herself on the shoulder of the stranger next to her to steady her descent to the floor. She tucked her knees and curled into as small a ball as she could manage. Everyone else around her did as well. They huddled in the dim, sickly yellow dusk.

Someone—probably the Operations crew—started counting. The ship creaked and groaned into final position. She couldn’t say the numbers around her throbbing ribs, but she mouthed them.

There was no sound as a solar flare hit. No wave, no motion, nothing to indicate when it had hit or when it had passed. The Telemetry from *Haven* indicated it would be a singular event and the flare would pass in approximately twenty-six minutes, or, in the darkness, one thousand five hundred sixty seconds.

Twenty-six minutes sounded so *long*. One thousand seconds sounded much faster.

She imagined the ticking of the second hand of Rainer’s watch and tried not to think about the crew lost on *Haven*.

One group of counters hit sixty, a voice belonging to one of the Operations handlers said *ONE*, and another group picked up the count to one-twenty.

*TWO.*

*THREE.*

Each breath she braced to smell ozone. She watched the ceiling for the dance of auras on the pipes or light fixtures. She listened for the sound of vomiting over the low chant of numbers and the sobbing of youngsters. Tried to ignore the wracking ache in her soul while her thoughts of her family spun with the tangled, thorny knot of Rainer and anguish over *Haven's* crew.

*TWELVE.*

*THIRTEEN.*

*FOURTEEN.*

Someone on the other side of the room threw up.

The counting faltered.

The male human pressed against her back snaked his hand around and grabbed her forearm, his breathing quick and rough. The scent of fear bloomed across the entire room to mingle with the scent of sweat and bodies and the youngsters' wailing turned to screeching and howling, and a few from the center tried to bolt into the mess of adults to find their parents. They were caught by the other adults and pushed back into the center.

"You have to *stay*," a stern but desperate female voice told them. "Stay *there*. Huddle, like in School. Remember?"

But panicked youngsters were well... only slightly less reasonable than panicked adults, so the screaming and howling continued, drowning out the count, while the nearby adults kept pushing the children back into the huddle.

*SIXTEEN.*

*SEVENTEEN.*

More vomiting. Mostly from the kids, but some adults too. The scent of urine to mingle with the growing strain. Every breath felt thick and hot and increasingly fetid.

*EIGHTEEN.*

*NINETEEN.*

The sobbing from the puddle of children in the center of the room continued.

*TWENTY-FIVE.*

At the count of twenty-six, everyone let out a collective breath. The lights were still off, the comms still asleep against their ears. The room stank of bodies, vomit, urine, and a cocktail of emotions. Her back was soaked with sweat from the human she'd been leaning against. He still held her forearm in a grip tight enough to leave bruises and make her skin numb.

*She did not feel nauseated. She just felt numb. But not numb in the all my nerves were just killed by ionizing radiation way. Numb in the too many feelings, not enough brain to process them all way. Which was, all things considered, a good outcome.*

A shiver went through the floor. Then a prickle ran over her skin, followed by a static charge, and a split second after, the lights came up. Another shiver, some clicks and ticks, the environmental controls kicked back in to full power. Her comm clicked into her ear, but for now, silence.

She tugged her arm. The man behind her twisted, then snapped his grip free.

She wriggled her fingers while her tablets booted.

**>> MAIN CORE ACCESS LIMITED : AUTHORIZATION  
KEY REQUIRED <<**

She keyed in the lesser of her assorted authorization codes, and the system unlocked and her tablet populated. From the scrolling terminal in the corner of her screen, the main core was simply waking back up from hibernation and running assorted diagnostics. It threw an error every couple of lines,

but Graves had posted in the officer channel that that was expected due to previous *LightBearer* damage. He'd tell them when to be worried.

No check-in post from Rainer. She swallowed the dry lump in her throat. He had to be fine. The lights were on, and Rainer couldn't be assed to chat when he was busy down in Engineering.

>> *Lachesis: Any word from Haven?*

>> *Harkins: Give it an hour before we get worried*

Too late for that. The worry had set in long ago.

## TWELVE

It took eight hours before she found herself back in her quarters and able to grab a shower and wash the scent of the Huddle off her. Bone-deep exhaustion clung to her, and her soul barely seemed to fill out her body.

It should not have taken so long, but somehow, it *had* taken that long to get *NightPiercer* settled, to evaluate the ship's position, ascertain the position of *Ark* and *Haven*, to review damage reports with Harkins, to gently and tentatively maneuver *NightPiercer* a few degrees this and that way to make room for everyone in their new positions, and to finally stagger back up to the officer deck with a relieved and exhausted Forrest accompanied by Lily and their son.

Forrest leaned heavily on his wife and did not bother to hold up under his relief the catastrophe was one that could be delegated to his staff.

"He'll be fine," Lily assured her, arm under Forrest's shoulder while her husband staggered behind her like an animated doll. "We all need to be floppy sometime. It's how he gets through it all. Shuts down and lays still. Especially right now."

Lachesis met the she-wolf's gaze and nodded. Lily smiled wanly, her son toddling behind Lachesis instead of his parents. Instinctively, Lachesis brushed the pup's hair to cue him to follow but stay out of the way. "If you need me, come find me."

“Oh, he’s fine. You’re just seeing it because he’s letting you. But damn, Forrest, you are heavy.”

“Average weight and height,” Forrest muttered.

“Right, right. *Average*. In every *possible* way?”

Forrest mumbled something that probably was *shut up*.

Lily tugged him close and gave him a big smooch on the hair. Forrest grumbled deep in his throat but suffered the playful abuse all the way down the hall to their door.

As Lachesis opened the door to her own quarters, a deep creak followed by a metallic, cavernous groan traversed the entire ship. She braced herself on the doorframe. Then, quiet.

She counted to ten before moving all the way into her quarters.

The uneven heating on the hull due to the lost tiles and exterior plates made the ship expand and contract more than before. But the ship’s groans and creaks and cracks as it adjusted its broken body sent chills through her.

It was hard to know exactly how much damage *NightPiercer* had taken. The abandoned forward collapsed sections had eaten most of the blast, but now were completely irradiated behind the blast doors Rainer had designed, and since the seal wasn’t total, an exclusion zone had pushed deeper into the ship.

Rainer had used the Core’s “harness” (whatever that was) to increase its magnetic field (somehow), which was not normally something they’d *ever* want to do at idle since it risked destabilizing the Core itself (and *Haven*’s Core, and *Ark*’s Core), but the result had been generation of a field around the ship similar to the one that protected Earth from the Sun. Coupled with pointing the ruined part of the ship at the blast as a sacrifice, it had been enough to keep the crew safe.

This time.

*Haven* had managed to send word that they were fine. Comms were scrambled because of the disruption, which would last a while longer until the Sun settled, but *Haven*’s

crew were healthy. She desperately wanted to know what they'd done—submerged themselves in wastewater? Rolled up in some lead-lined blankets?

Rainer hadn't pinged her. The only reason she knew he was alive and well and not dying of radiation sickness was because he was posting in the officer feed about his work in the forward section of the ship establishing the exclusion zone. That meant fixing radiation leaks, re-routing utilities and life support, and everything else that went into further isolating the expanded off-limits section of the ship.

"I deserve it," she told herself, sitting down on the edge of their bed while water dripped down her back from her wet hair.

After months of Rainer being a pest, persistent, overwhelming... him *not* being there felt hollow. Even when he'd been on *Haven* and she'd been on *NightPiercer*, it hadn't felt like this. This wasn't them not being *able* to communicate.

It was like when he'd cut her off from messaging him when Bennett had taken her comm. The silence said more than emptiness ever could.

She deserved this silence.

"Fuck, Lachesis, you are *such* an idiot." She raked hands through her wet hair. "Didn't you learn from *LightBearer*?"

Why was the idea of loving him so terrifying?

Because... it was. Because of what it meant. And because Rainer barely understood *discretion*.

She put her hands over her mouth and closed her eyes. "You're as bad as Arden."

If Rainer didn't forgive her for this—and plus, he now had to grapple with his being a clone of Hade, and who knew what kind of mindfuck *that* was—she'd understand. Her heart would break, but you didn't get infinite chances. Cats might have nine lives, but as far as she knew, wolves only got one.

And she'd already used up one life that wasn't even her own. *This* was how she spent it?

She shuddered on sobs.

Why had she even mentioned her belief Rainer was a clone? Couldn't she have thought for five seconds? They already knew *NightPiercer's* Crèche was a meatgrinder. They already knew Rainer's mother had participated. She'd landed on Rainer being a clone like it had mattered.

And it didn't. Knowing wouldn't cure Rainer's nightmares. It probably would make them worse. And she'd just blurted it out without thinking about how it would affect him at a time when he did not need to be further affected, and he needed to know she'd be by his side.

He had found out he was a clone. He thought his mate didn't love him. He thought Gaia was playing the worst game possible with all of them. She had shattered his faith and rebuilt it into something horrifying.

And she was going to sit in their quarters and *wait*?

She took her own chimera tablet just to make it look official, put on a clean uniform, and headed to the exclusion zone.



# THIRTEEN

Several members of Security stood guard at the exclusion zone. They moved to block her path. Were these the same ones who had barged into her quarters and wrestled her down to Security the first time she'd tampered with the navigation system?

It was a blur in her memories—all her memories of her first few weeks on *NightPiercer* were distant and jumbled—but from their scents, at least one of them now had some awkward feelings towards her. The other, like the Security Chief, just plain didn't like her.

“Exclusion zone.” The one who didn't like her moved to block her way.

She used her clump of tablets to point down the corridor. “No, the zone is another ten sections that way.”

“Authorized personnel only,” he grunted.

She'd play along for another ten seconds. “Authorized by who?”

“Commander Rainer.” As soon as he said it, it dawned on him how he did *not* want to ping the Lead Engineer for that particular reason.

She brushed him aside with her tablets.

The corridors had a slight smell to them that wasn't quite ozone, but wasn't normal either. A faint acrid scent mingled with the smell of soldering and metal shavings and wiring and conduits. A fine layer of dust clung to the surface of

everything, and the noise was the fizz, hiss, crackle, knocking, and banging of Engineering's work, along with an ominous creaking and groaning of the ship's broken bones. The lights were dimmer and the air less filtered. Limited environmental and life support.

At the edge of the perimeter, there were no lights at all, and string lights had been hung on hooks all along the corridors. Floor fans moved air instead of the vents. A large cylindrical filter stood at a central junction, keeping the air free of the fine particles being kicked up by the work. Massive coils of colorful wiring and pipes sat in neat stacks, interspersed with tubs filled with various small parts, and then even more buckets of screws, nails, bolts, nuts, and other hardware, all sorted by size and type.

Two members of Engineering sorted bits from two huge wheelie bins into all the containers and buckets. Another member of Engineering pushed a third bin towards them. This one had smaller coils and lengths of wire and tubing.

Cheshire was the first person she recognized from the Engineering crew. He gave her a warm smile. "Lachesis. What are you doing up here?"

"Looking for Rainer."

He gave her a strange look—almost sad and grim—and nodded to the hallway to her left. "He's down that way. We've got one of the rooms set up as a staging area and break room."

"Is he hurt?" she asked.

"No. He's... he's been on shift a long time." Cheshire's tone meandered into the dusty background noise.

"I'll find him." Her new heart tried to escape into her gut and disappear into the abyss.

"Second hallway, first door on the left. You won't miss it."

"Thank you. We've heard from *Haven*, by the way."

"Are they okay?"

"Comms are still garbled, but yes, it seems like they found a way to ride it out and are fine. I don't know how, though."

She would like to know how. Everyone on *NightPiercer* had taken a dose of radiation. The amounts varied and nobody had taken enough to be sick or even scald the skin, but radiation damage could be acute or it could be cumulative. Two or three more events over twelve months resulting in those same exposure levels? Just another fun and exciting way for all of them to die painful deaths. Gaia was having Her due.

Cheshire breathed a sigh of relief. "I'll pass it down the line."

"Was nice while our luck with the Sun lasted."

"We always knew we were on borrowed time. Still are."

"Just depends what bin we're borrowing from." She glanced back at the Engineering crew faithfully picking through the wheelie bins and sorting all the salvaged bits.

In the break room, a few people she recognized clustered around a table discussing plans and drinking water and shoving some crickets in their face. On the far wall, sitting on the floor with his knees up and his wrists on his knees, was her husband.

He wasn't in his uniform, just down to his skivvies, which were semi-wet, and matched his semi-wet hair. Someone had put a cup of water next to him, but he hadn't touched it. He stared at the ceiling without moving. His expression, unguarded, was grim and empty, like the Sun had blasted something from him. His hands were clean, but stained, and scraped, and his skin all over had been scrubbed raw with a harsh brush. The scars along his neck and shoulder were especially red and inflamed.

At first, he didn't move or acknowledge her, but then he slid his gaze towards her. She swallowed, brushed his shoulder with her knee, and extended her hand. He looked at it for a long, long moment, like he was searching for something that wasn't there. Slowly, he reached to take it. His skin was rough and chapped, but his grip tender and infinitely gentle.

"Why are you here?"

Her heart split at the longing in the brush of his thumb over her knuckles. She knelt next to him. “Because we didn’t get a chance to finish our conversation.”

“We don’t have to finish it.” He tilted his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

“I feel like we do.”

“I would prefer if you left some things unsaid.”

There was one thing that shouldn’t be unsaid. “I’m sorry.”

He drew the pad of his thumb over her knuckles. “You were always honest. I didn’t listen. I know you are fond of me, and care for me, and you’ve chosen me. That still brings me happiness. You didn’t *have* to choose me. But you have, and in some ways, that’s more than Gaia choosing you for me.”

She squeezed his fingers.

He squeezed back, but there was little intensity to it. “I was blinded by my faith. I believed one day you’d trust me enough, and feel safe enough, to unlock your heart and let me in. I know that’s not possible. I would still rather have the pieces of you that you’ll give me than not have any of you. I love you with every part of my soul.”

Her heart split and cracked. “Rainer, I mean that I am apologizing.”

“You don’t have to. Gaia made you, and Gaia allowed me to be made.”

Her heart broke, and she inhaled, choked on a sob.

“Don’t cry.” He brushed his thumb over her knuckles again.

“I’m sorry for being a coward,” she said hoarsely. “I am so sorry.”

“You are *not* a coward.”

“I pushed you away because I’m afraid. If we’re mates, Gaia is real.”

“Yes, I remember everything you said. I wish I could deny you’re my mate, since it distresses you so much.” He didn’t release her hand, but turned his head back to look at the opposite wall.

She grabbed his hand with both of hers. “Rainer, I *am* your mate, and you are mine, and Gaia is real, and I am *terrified* I just admitted that.”

She shimmied closer on her knees until his arm rested between her breasts and against the sensitive scar. A brush like hot metal wires snaked over her shoulders and down her spine. “I didn’t want it to be true. You lied to me, you let me believe things, then you changed course. How you make me feel terrifies me, and when I’m with you, everything makes sense, even when it doesn’t. My brain howled that I had to escape your pull, while every instinct I had told me to stay and fall into your grip.”

The knot of emotion sat in her gut as squirmy and confusing as it had been nearly a year ago. “Then, I began to... creep up to it all. I avoided giving it a name. But you knew, and in my soul, I knew.”

“What are you so afraid of?” he asked quietly. “Me?”

“A little,” she admitted. “I’m afraid Gaia hates us. I’m afraid the reason we ended up by Jupiter wasn’t because of unanticipated Earth changes, but because Gaia chased us to the edge of the light, and we haven’t been brave enough or smart enough to move on, and now She tires of us even being in proximity.”

She slid across his legs into the same position she’d been in before the Sun had belched on them. She tucked her knees against his iron thighs and leaned towards him, willing herself to somehow find a way to say what she needed to say without making it worse. “But I *don’t* believe She hates us enough to make *you* bear the weight of our sins. You believe that you and I are evidence She’s called us home. I believe it’s Her final warning. Leave instead of die trying to take Her territory for ourselves.”

A network of fine lines appeared between Rainer's eyes and at their corners. "You love me?"

She gulped down a wad of emotions. Which just forced the emotions back up and towards her eyes, where tears brimmed on her lower lids. "Yes."

He closed his hands over hers. "You believe I am your mate?"

"I've always known I am."

Rainer's grip clenched down on her hand. "Do *not* lie to me. I will do my duty to this ship and pack the way I always have. I don't need to be placated or mollified or coaxed like a dangerous animal."

His grip made her fingers creak. She tried to jerk free, but he held her firm, so she shoved her hands into his chest. "You think I'm taking sole responsibility for the mess between us? Not a chance! You lied to me, pushed my boundaries if not outright trampled them, flouted good manners, and broke promises to me. You said *because mates* like it was some magic spell that justified everything. More than once, someone asked me if I needed help to escape you. I'll apologize for pushing you away. I will apologize for being a coward. And I will promise to hold you tight and close. And I will *keep fucking squeezing until you are hypoxic and docile.*"

She had half a mind to bite him, but he'd enjoy that. Unless he didn't, and that would be extremely sad. So either way, this was infuriating, and he was infuriating and it was all infuriating!

The scent that erupted off his skin was deep, fierce joy, but his voice was guarded. "Don't lie to me. Not even a little one to ease my feelings."

"Are you *trying* to get me to bite you?"

"...yes."

"You maddening wolf!" She tried to shake him, but he was too heavy and the pain kept lancing through her ribs in her flailing. "You maddening, maddening wolf! I am here

blathering my soul out to you and you just want me to bite you!”

“You did promise to squeeze me until I’m docile. Which part of me will you be squeezing?”

She growled. “You inappropriate, horny, unrepentant—”

“Keep telling me the truth. I don’t need or want your pity.”

“Do you want permission to say *I told you so* now?” How was it possible to have so many emotions at once *and* for them to be all so blessed uncomfortable?

“No. I didn’t make myself *safe* to love.”

Her emotions tried to gush over. She inhaled a deep, shuddering sob that wracked her ribs.

He shifted her on his lap, drawing her higher as he curled closer. “I will try to be better.”

“I will too,” she whispered.

“Tell me again you love me.”

“You heard me the first time.”

“And I will remember it for the rest of my life. But just to be sure.” He held her carefully, mindful of her broken ribs, his arms tense with holding back the urge to crush her in his embrace.

“I love you, and I am your mate.”

He kissed her gently. She instinctively hesitated, aware of everyone watching/not-watching them, then surrendered and parted her lips for him. His tongue grazed hers, drawing her closer, his hands running down her back like it was the first time.

Her skin warmed under his touch. Tension fled her muscles. Relief filled her joints. Anguish made her eyes sting.

“Don’t cry,” he told her.

“I nearly lost you.” It felt like she had wandered right up to the edge of an open cargo bay door and stuck her head into the

abyss to get a look at *gee*, *it really does just go all the way down, doesn't it?*

“I’ve nearly lost you at least once.” He splayed his hand over her cheek, his fingers finding the tense spots of her jaw, temple, hairline, and he kissed her slowly, tasting her.

“Come home.” Then, she added, “Back to the den.”

“I have work here to do yet.”

He’d been on duty for nearly a full day. It wasn’t Condition Black. Did he just want to hear her plead a little bit? Because getting an invitation to the den was no small thing—it was *her* den. If he wanted her to be insistent and play the part of the petulant-but-earnest she-wolf, she could do that. She raked at his neck, lightly, and indulged in her best soft, lupinesque whine. “*Please?*”

Rainer ran his hands over the back of her thighs before settling them behind her knees. Was that a smile lurking on his lips? Hard to tell. But his scent smelled bright and so... joyous? Was that the word?... that it tasted bittersweet.

He slipped out from under her, deftly was on his feet before she had even shifted out of his way, and helped her to her own feet in one smooth motion. He pulled her hand through the crook of his elbow, pausing to search her face as if she was not real.

“Yes.” And right after she assured Rainer she had finally found the courage to love him like he deserved, she was going to turn right around and defend their den.

Starting with Keenan.



## FOURTEEN

Lachesis stepped around the Crèche Commander's path, blocking her way to her quarters. Time to mop up this matter with Keenan... *permanently*.

"What the hell, she-wolf. I do not have the patience for this," Keenan growled at her. "Nor the time. And I heard about you and Rainer's little confession of love and being mates. Be happy I've been too busy to want to manage *that*."

So Keenan had spies in the exclusion zone—probably Security.

"You're going to make time, and I don't care about your reserves of patience. I have questions you're going to answer."

"I do not take orders or demands from *you*, Navigator." Keenan pushed past her.

Lachesis pushed back. "I know what Rainer is."

Keenan snorted. "I would hope you'd know your husband by now."

"No. I know what he is. What your predecessor did."

Keenan's expression didn't change, but her scent burst off her skin with a pulse of shock and intense anxiety.

Ambush: successful. "Cleo knows too, doesn't she. Makes sense, of course, her carrying the zygote."

Keenan grabbed her forearm. "None of this matters now. Go back to your life, and I will go back to mine."

She shoved her forearm into Keenan's gut. "I spotted Rainer as genetically engineered within ten minutes. But he's not. He's a clone, isn't he. An Omega-generation sire that doesn't have a DNA profile, atypical DNA damage, no cryosurvival, sub-fertile, initial failure to thrive, initial sub-optimal immune system, sudden heart failure, biomass disintegration when Medical re-sequenced one of his vat hearts for me."

Keenan looked bored. "All of that is like saying a mild cough is the newest flu strain."

"Then explain his nightmares and his paintings."

Keenan frowned. "He's not the only talented painter we have, he just happens to be a generational talent. And we all have nightmares."

"He has *Hade's* memories. That was the goal, wasn't it. That's what Cleo and her mother's research has always been about. Not microgravity or genetic degradation. They were studying DNA as a way to extract Hade from it. But it didn't work, so you cloned Hade, hoping the memories and experience encoded into the entirety of the old wolf's DNA would be available. That's why Rainer has such horrifying nightmares. They aren't things his brain is conjuring from too much old Earth media. They're *his fucking memories*."

Keenan broke free and laughed. She jerked her head for Lachesis to follow her into her quarters. "Come on, wolf. You've really lost the thread if you think our science can extract scraps of memories from DNA. Hell, the thought never even occurred to me to try to do that."

Keenan's quarters were surprisingly messy, with things scattered about. There was an old battered couch, no rug, no coffee table, no evidence of whatever Keenan's Dying Art might have been. There was no artwork on the walls, but there were several old sock dolls fashioned to be bunnies on the couch to go with an old patchwork quilt. The view into her bedroom—she had a one-bedroom suite—provided a glimpse of a rumpled bed and several cups on a battered nightstand.

There were tablets strewn everywhere, some styluses, and a scent of stress and grief and urgency permeated everything.

Keenan tossed a few patchwork pillows to the side. “You’re right about Rainer being a clone. He was the last, but not the first, and the only one that was successful. Rainer was my predecessor’s project.”

The Crèche Commander casually dropped herself onto the couch, crossed one ankle over the other knee, and nodded for Lachesis to sit.

“He wasn’t the *first*?” Lachesis asked, “How many *were* there?”

Keenan shrugged. “I don’t know. I know my predecessor made at least five attempts, but I’m not sure the project hadn’t been ongoing since Exodus. I don’t know the history, and I don’t know the technique. I didn’t ask questions.”

“...what... happened to the other five?”

“All were successfully implanted, is my understanding, but all failed to develop past ten weeks. Cleo carried two attempts and gave birth to Rainer on the third.”

Lachesis brushed a few sock bunnies to the side. The couch was battered and squishy and comfortable, and smelled of Keenan and no one else. “Does Cleo know what she was implanted with?”

A dry, dry chuckle. “It was Cleo’s program.”

Lachesis gasped. “*What*?”

“Well, not *exclusively*. But it was hers and my predecessor’s. They worked on it during dogwatch. Nobody ever really knew what that section did off in the shadows, but you knew not to say a damn word and to be somewhere else during dogwatch. And before you ask, the records were never digital. Handwritten, on paper.”

“And Crèche having paper and pens is why you think it had been going on for a while.”

“The original team who put together the concept of Crèche and Civilization Management realized Crèche would probably

want the ability to have clandestine projects. Crèche and Civilization Management are supposed to be walled gardens from Tech, but that's only so practical and possible." Keenan shrugged. "So they shipped in a few palettes of notebooks and pens as part of the original Crèche supply allocation. I had your same reaction when informed about Rainer. When I became Crèche Commander, I burned everything in that vault without looking at it. I have no idea what I burned and I do not care and I do not regret it. The only living people who know Rainer is a clone are myself, Cleo, and you. And I presume you shared your suspicions with Rainer before ambushing me."

Lachesis frowned. "What about Luton?"

"Rainer's father? No idea if Cleo told him, but she probably didn't." Keenan rested her cheek on her fist. "The fact you want a conversation means you're not about to go run off with this information, either. Did you just want the truth? Because congratulations, you caught the prey and solved the puzzle. Yay."

Keenan lifted her head enough to give a little pat-pat-pat clap, then put her cheek back on her fist.

No, she'd come here for something else, but some information to sweeten the pot would be lovely, since Keenan was feeling forthcoming. "That's why you put Rainer through everything trying to get offspring. And that's when Cleo came to you and said she'd found me, you consented. You still wanted to run the experiment."

Keenan flicked her ankle around and sighed, pained and tired. "Oh, little wolf, you really need to improve your hunting skills. You're so good at tracking the prey, but absolutely rotten at knowing what you're hunting. That's the sort of mistake that will get you killed one day. That was what I *initially* thought. But once I saw your file, I smelled a rat. Since the engine re-fit, Rainer has constantly pressed that we *need* a Navigator and Pilot, and we should import one from the other ships. Rainer also informed me on no uncertain terms, *no* more Crèche. *No* more marriages. He was done. Hell, he was even done with sex. Not that Rainer ever seemed to have the

libido of his peers to begin with, even when accounting for how discrete senior staff must be with playmates.”

“You monitor libido,” she said dryly.

She waved her other hand in a seesaw fashion. “Sexual compatibility *is* an important parameter in a successful marriage, and that matrix isn’t just appearance, genital, gender, and personality preferences. We learned back on Earth that sexual drive is also a key factor.”

“I know I shouldn’t ask this but—”

“Where did *Ark Crèche* rate *your* sex drive?” Keenan grinned. “Far below what we would consider average or typical. Your interview questions indicated you actually over-estimated your baseline libido.”

“What the *fuck* does Tech train a LLM to do?”

“Exactly what you’re thinking so we can know what you’re *actually* doing. And who you’re doing it with. Trust me, I don’t ask for the transcripts and I am ever so grateful when I get someone married off because I know their antics are no longer anywhere I might possibly stumble upon them. Except for you and Rainer and your good luck incantations, which leads me to my next point. I answered *your* question, answer mine.” Keenan’s smirk was decidedly feral.

“I’ve sort of had AGRS and civilization is on the precipice of disaster.”

Keenan raised an expectant brow. “How often do you play? Once a week? A month?”

She breathed out through her nose. Fine. “If things weren’t a mess? Probably a few times a week. Maybe more.”

“Really,” Keenan said, intrigued.

“Why is this so shocking to you? You made Rainer feel like all he was was a set of balls with a body attached and sex was meaningless and mechanical. Recreational sex lost its appeal.”

“Fair enough. And what’s your excuse? Because your matrix indicated you were highly selective, highly

disinterested, low desire, *and* generally unsatisfied with each encounter when you could be bothered to fuck someone. Rainer was indicated as extremely selective, completely disinterested, very low desire, and increasingly unsatisfied and disgusted. Disgust typically mandates Counseling, as it's a red flag there's dysfunction. But Rainer complies with Counseling about as well as you'd expect. Most of the reason I even let Cleo convince me is I was very curious to see what two individuals with such outlier sexual, social, and intellectual matrixes would do when paired. I'm not surprised you failed Observation, I *am* surprised *how* you failed though. Very unexpected."

"Why do you care?"

"Because outliers are interesting and informative. Which makes me wonder... if you two *are* actually mates, your souls were presumably joined at birth. Was it impossible for you two to be sexually attracted to anyone?"

Keenan watched her for any little clues. Then she said, "Back to the topic at hand. Rainer is as much Cleo's experiment as her son. A surefire way to push Rainer into something is to frame it as *it's your duty to civilization*. Controlling his methods is an entirely different proposition. And like her son, the best way to get Cleo to do something is appeal to one of her experiments. When Cleo put forth Rainer marrying you, I was not sure which of that pair was manipulating the other, and frankly, it didn't matter to me."

"So why did you put me up for euth so quickly? Did you get cold feet?"

A chuckle. "My feet don't get cold. The instant I saw you *with* Rainer, his body language, how he spoke to you, hell, how he pursued you rather than letting you die in a vent to be fished out later, how he'd left *Ark* early to ensure you arrived *on time* and refused to let that bit of Io weather delay his third marriage by so much as ten hours? I realized it was Rainer who had set it all up, manipulated his mother, thought he was playing me, and was very pleased with himself. It was also extremely obvious he had *no* idea what to do with you now that he'd caught you."

Keenan permitted herself a smirk and little chuckle. “I figured since your file *was* exceptional and you were quite a unique little curiosity, I’d get years of entertainment if I sat back and let it happen. And maybe even some offspring. And don’t tell me you don’t get some perverse feral amusement out of watching Rainer be his own worst enemy.”

Granted, that *was* entertaining, but that wasn’t the point right now. “So you looked the other way.”

Keenan’s smile evaporated, and she shrugged, almost bored. “I trust Rainer to obey the First Law. Yes, yes, I know the wolf is a zealot. Cleo is a zealot. Cleo’s *mother* was a zealot, and of course, we know all about *her* parents. I have kept this fact out of Rainer’s files, but I know that Rainer, if properly pushed, would take over the ship. I’m certain he has at least one plan ready to go, and prior to your arrival, things were *extremely* tense between himself and Bennett and Tsu on the matter of *NightPiercer*’s remaining service life.

“I had every reason to believe *you* were the final piece of his plan. Rainer seemed attracted and enthralled with you, but pesky little details like that would never stop him from using you. I didn’t like the reports I got about your interactions, I had my concerns you were slipping into Exodus Syndrome and Rainer would use it to manipulate you. When you got into the flight computer—which I believe you did not intend to do, but Rainer set you up to see what would happen—and then you failed observation, I pulled the plug. You had proven to be *far* more competent and capable than *Ark* had led us to believe. Rainer was getting too dangerous and unpredictable. I had not anticipated Tsu creating a delay by trying to send you back, I had not expected *Ark* to refuse to take you back, and I was surprised when Rainer showed some of his hand by finding you and taking you back. When Tsu took over supervising the situation between you and Rainer, I slunk back into the bushes to observe.”

She fought the urge to chew on the inside of her cheek. So much for thinking Keenan had gotten cold feet. “So why clone Hade if not for the memories?”

Keenan sighed and dropped her head back against the chair. “Pure raw genetic potential, of course. Why else? Hade’s offspring, while not his peers, represented no meaningful regression to the mean. There was an aptitude running through that entire family over multiple generations and multiple branches going back to Hade’s grandparents. Hade was just the most outstanding example from a rather extraordinary lupine lineage.”

“You can’t possibly be suggesting it’s because Gaia knew what She was going to do a hundred years before She did it.” Lachesis nearly rolled her eyes straight out of her sockets.

“And you lot were genetically engineered by some divine hand to be the salvation of sentient life?” Keenan smirked. “Then you can’t object to my predecessor doing the same thing in a lab.”

“That’s disgusting. And insane.”

“We have no idea where epigenetic or ancestral memory ends and aptitude begins, just like we do not understand microchimerism or the ‘soul’ of transplants. Part of the problem with genetic engineering *is* mental and emotional instability and a general stress intolerance, so extracting Hade’s memories from his DNA was neither the plan nor desirable. If you remember your cloning basics, you’ll remember cytoplasm and mitochondrial influence do come from the donor egg, and that clones often show deviations towards their donor dams in areas where mitochondrial activity is higher. Most notably the brain, the heart, and the muscle.”

“That’s why his heart failed,” Lachesis whispered. “That’s why his heart transplant records are stored separately but it’s passed off as a Tech anomaly.”

Keenan’s smile was sharp. “Genetic sequencing of his failed heart revealed significant micro-cellular anomalies atypical of AGRS and radiation exposure. We passed it off as AGRS acute heart failure, but Cleo studied it as an unexpected opportunity to further our understanding, and there have been some advancements. And as for the possibility of Rainer siring



another generation of brilliance? Don't fault me there either. If I had my say, I'd have you inseminated with something Omega-esque I know will get you pregnant—"

"So *you* have a baby," she retorted.

"I'm not having a baby for the same reason I haven't had you implanted: there's no way for me to know how pregnancy would affect either of us, and the ship can't afford for either of us to not be at our best right now."

"You're disgusting."

"Am I? How quaint, you sound like Arden." Keenan shifted one knee over the other.

A metallic taste bloomed in the back of her throat.

"I don't think you were ever cut out for Civilization Management," Keenan told her frankly. "Civilization needs warm bodies like it needs food and water and shelter and breathable air. It takes twenty years to produce a fully fledged and productive adult. Every pregnancy typically takes three implantation attempts—that's three embryos used to get one successful implantation. Every forty embryos implanted or conceived, after accounting for various issues like miscarriages, terminations, stillbirths, and standard mortality, three adults result. When I give you numbers like that, am I a monster for insisting that *you* incubate a few children? Or make *every* effort to get offspring from Rainer? Be careful who you are calling a monster, and yes, I am aware that I might be producing children condemned to short and tragic lives. But if I don't, *and* we survive, we'll have a population gap. We'll suffer a lack of workers and young children to train in necessary skills during a fragile time where we will probably be suffering population losses due to the unknown dangers of re-colonizing a planet. Is it distasteful? Yes. Is it necessary to ensure the survival of civilization as a whole?"

Keenan pushed her index finger between Lachesis' breasts.

Lachesis hid a flinch.

Keenan picked up one of the patchwork pillows. "If he's experiencing memories of a mature Hade watching the world

die with the underlying anxiety of fearing for his own children's future and knowing he can't save them all, it explains a great deal about Rainer's personality. He has unconscious acquired trauma. Now. Go home and tell him you were right."

"After I warn you to stay out of our life. No implantation, no divorce, no separation, no remarriage, no embryos. If I get pregnant, I get pregnant, and you stay out of it. And no conniving with Bennett."

Keenan sharpened through her boredom. "So *that's* why you're actually here. I'll remind you, little wolf, that there are no records of Hade's DNA, no remaining Hade genetic material, and *no* records except the ones I want there to be. You will never prove Rainer is a clone."

"Want to waste time arguing it in front of the ship?"

"Not especially."

"Bennett is trying to build a consensus against Tsu," Lachesis said. "I suggest you become very bored with whatever he's trying to tell you."

"And throw in with you?"

Why was she the second person in as many weeks to even *breathe* she was in line to be Captain? "I would prefer to throw in with Tsu."

"Tsu might be a sunk cost. Losing Arden is a devastating blow to his prestige, to put it in wolf terms. Arden no longer standing by his husband after a decade of standing by his husband through all the other ugly times has pushed all the crew to the brink. Like Rainer, my goal is civilization continuing. That is my duty as Crèche Commander. That is what I'll do."

Ironic. She'd made the exact same argument to Arden: she might not agree with Rainer's methods, but they had the same goal. "You have to know Bennett will always find an excuse to never let anyone off this ship."

"I don't know that. And unless he's explicitly told you that, neither do you."

“Why isn’t the man married?”

“That’s not your business.”

“Did you know he wants to marry me and has accosted me repeatedly to leave Rainer, and he’ll work it out with you?”

Keenan’s perpetually schooled expression didn’t change, and her scent shifted to mild surprise. But hard to tell if that was because she hadn’t known, or hadn’t expected to be confronted. “You might have all those badges, and I very much respect your raw talent, instincts, and ability. But I also know that you wouldn’t be here unless you were desperate. It is a *profound* weakness to only have two levels of intensity: zero and full burn. You have shown limited skill and ability to manage *developing* situations, and command is primarily about day-to-day management of brewing chaos. Once the chaos has happened, the ladder has broken, and...”

Keenan paused for a response, didn’t get one, and carried on. “Other sections can deal with the day-to-day crisis, but the decisions I make today are intended for a decade or two or even three from now. I concern myself with things that have sweeping impacts and long-term cumulative effects. If it won’t impact tomorrow, next week, or five years from now, I do not care. You should know that, given you came from Livestock. The decisions I make today are intended for a decade or two from now. This entire conversation we’re having is because of decisions made by a Crèche Commander *thirty years ago*. Think about that. Think about where we may be if he had *not* made those choices.”

“Do not try to justify what was done,” Lachesis said sharply. “Rainer might be a success, but he’s suffered and endured for it, and even you admitted he was *born* with a lifetime of Final Day trauma.”

Keenan flicked a bit of lint off the leg of her uniform. “When you think to yourself *when I have a baby*, it’s some non-specific future date. But I *know* when you will be implanted or inseminated. I can tell you if it will be male or female. I can even tell you how many eggs I will retrieve, and how many I intend to use versus how many will be stored. In

fact, I could even tell you that *Ark* sent over all your eggs with you and you already have some genetic offspring incubating in wombs across this ship.”

Lachesis straightened, spine coiling upwards as a strange hot/cold chill brushed over her skin. She knew the variety of ways babies got made, she knew *Ark* had done egg retrieval on her, she'd always known there was the possibility she'd have genetic offspring even if she herself never was selected from the Pool.

Keenan cocked her head slightly. “Or did it not occur to you that any of those things may be true, or that is the lens through which I see civilization?”

Lachesis did not answer.

“Well, as it happens, *Ark* did not send your eggs, and you do not have genetic offspring. At the time, I said I didn't want your eggs. Foolish me. Because if I did have them...” Keenan gestured. “But, my point is, that if you haven't realized all this by the time you got to Sheep, you were never going to make Civilization Management.”

A strange, cracking feeling of devastation coated her inside as pieces of her flaked off and drifted away. She swallowed, throat suddenly dry and tight. “Fair enough. Then I'll counter with if I reveal what your predecessors did with Rainer, those decisions made thirty years ago might have very real consequences *right now* and today.”

Keenan hugged the pillow against her abdomen. Her expression remained calm even as her fingers pressed into the stuffing. “Point made. I won't allow any further meddling with you and Rainer. No one touches your marriage or your reproductive organs. But that's all I'll give you, and if you push me into having to choose what sort of inquiry or court martial I'd rather face, remember the old phrase *mutually assured destruction*. I'm much better at managing developing situations than you are, and I will make sure this situation never gets so desperate that I have to face you in your element.”

# FIFTEEN

*From: Forrest [CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER :: MEDICAL ]*

*To : Lachesis [WARRANT OFFICER :: NAVIGATION]*

*CC: Tsu [CAPTAIN :: ENGINEERING]*

*Subject: CC RE BIOME REQUEST*

*I've consulted with Orthopedics and your latest scans indicate bone ossification has begun. I've also consulted with Ang in Cardiology and your heart is doing well. I have submitted a request on your behalf to Biome Management.*

*Assuming the request is granted:*

- 1) You must take ONE other person with you*
- 2) You are limited to 30 minutes (due to screaming and howling disturbing the Biome)*
- 3) You are further limited to FIVE shifts*
- 4) You MUST promptly report to Medical for evaluation regardless of outcome. We'll be expecting you. If you are unable to drag yourself to Medical after these attempts, you must ping me immediately.*

on't get too excited." Rainer advised her as they walked down the long corridor to Biome #14. "It might not work."

“D “I know, I know.” Her stomach growled. She hadn't had anything to eat in preparation. “I suppose we've already had our quota of good news today as it is. *Not* that I'm complaining or begrudging anyone.”

Rainer nodded. “Sometimes the solutions are simple. Not elegant, but simple and effective. We don't need to worry about *Haven's* crew now.”

At some point between Rainer returning to *NightPiercer* and the solar emergency, Juan and Simone had come up with the brilliant idea to create a “safe room.” They'd used *Haven's* facilities to fabricate a number of (relatively) very small exterior tiles and paneled two rooms in *Haven* with them, one a large utility closet in Engineering, and one small closet close to the Bridge. For future solar events, the crew would have enough time to get to one of the safe rooms and ride out the storm.

It wasn't a perfect solution or total protection. The panels weren't fitted together perfectly, nor were they fitted perfectly around doors, and walking on the panels damaged them.

Rainer looked up at the ceiling. “I'm calculating if it's something that would be a significant net benefit for us on *NightPiercer*. We need every tile possible for the exterior, and I have no models for how the imperfect fit of the tiles as panelling within the ship works. Juan said you inspired him.”

“Me?” She blushed.

“Yes, they were trying to figure out some alternative that *didn't* involve flooding the belly of the ship with sewage.”

She would have laughed if her ribs would have allowed it. “I can't believe Biome is letting us be here after the solar event.”

“Forrest has probably leaned hard on Keenan to make it happen *because* of the solar event. You not being able to get to the bridge in a timely fashion due to pain hindering your recovery is a concern.”

“Oh, and we needed the Sun belching on us to do *that* math? I swear, if Forrest tries to tell me that, I’m telling Lily to bite him.”

Rainer’s scent suddenly became awkward. “... Forrest would probably like that.”

“Oh, you know from experience? Interesting.” Forrest didn’t seem like Rainer’s type for a playmate. But then again, maybe that was *precisely* why they’d have been good playmates.

“No, because Forrest giving me a hard time about—”

“Yes, go on.”

“*Not* like that.”

“You sure?” She couldn’t resist teasing him just a little bit. “You *have* wandered into that part of the proverbial conversation forest.”

He stopped walking and winced. She grinned.

“That was terrible,” he told her. “Absolutely *terrible*.”

“Hmmm.”

“I am not sure if teasing me this way counts as a good-luck incantation.”

“...can’t hurt to try.”

“What *will* hurt *is* trying. It’s all the pain you’d have experienced over eight months condensed into eight seconds.”

Another reason she hadn’t had anything to eat. There was a distinct chance that each attempt would come with the added bonus of vomiting. Or fainting. Or both.

Biome #14 was not the same biome he’d brought her to the first time she’d been in a *NightPiercer* biome, but it was extremely similar—more woodlands, though. The thirty-minute timer started when they checked in, and it was a hike to a secluded spot by trees and the river. Birds fluttered out of the trees as they approached, and in the thicket, something scampered.

*Soon.*

Not that they had paid for permission to take prey.

Rainer shed his uniform, then helped her with hers, including removing the damn corset. She breathed as her breasts no longer felt like bread loaves shoved against her rib cage.

“What form would you like me to be in?” Rainer asked.

“What do you think would be best? You’ve done this before.” Rainer had done exactly what she was about to attempt to do after his own heart transplant and assorted other surgeries and injuries.

Rainer gracefully dropped into his large wolf form. He was a gorgeous color—mostly silver, with bits of brown mixed in, and a silky silver tail and a distinct white underbelly.

He lifted his lips to reveal large, white fangs and wagged his tail. *Hurry up.*

Wolf it was, then.

They only had thirty minutes, and that time was already ticking away.

She gathered herself. The shiver moved *under* her skin, beautiful and refreshing. It had been so *long* since she’d been in her fur.

The pain sent her right to the ground. She blacked out completely, then came to more pain than she could process, and she howled, which only made the hammer-like pain in her chest even worse.

She panted and rolled one eye up to the ceiling of the Biome. Rainer moved into her field of view and licked her snout. His scent cut through the agony that consumed all of her awareness. Her heart raced and made it hard to breathe.

He waited to see if her pain abated, but it didn’t—not really. So he urged her, “*Again. We don’t have much time. The pain will fade quickly if successful. You weren’t successful.*”

No shit.



Forrest had put a limit of five shifts. Four remaining.

The shift back to human form left her panting in the grass. Every pant increased the pain, but her lungs didn't care that her ribs were screaming. Her brainstem demanded oxygen.

Rainer nuzzled her. His nose was damp and cold. He licked her spine. His tongue was hot and rough. "*Again. Unless you want to quit.*"

She grabbed a handful of his shoulder pelt and hauled herself to her knees. He placed himself in front of her and she leaned across his back, shuddering from the pain.

Once more. Even though her brain screamed at her *don't*.

Every breath was still going to hurt if she quit. Another fifteen minutes of agony would be worth it if she walked out of here pain-free.

She grabbed his pelt with both hands, grit her teeth, and summoned the shift.

She ended up with her lupine chin and paws across Rainer's back. Somewhere in the blackness of pain, he'd crouched onto his belly. Pain *shone* through all her bones. Like if she was nuclear fuel, all her control rods were out, and she was baking everything within thirty miles.

The glow of pain eased with each panting breath, leaving fiery, burning brands in her sternum and laced through the broken parts of her cracked ribs. The pain in the broken parts increased to searing, and she threw her head back and howled, then collapsed back onto his shoulders while the pain *seared* into her bones.

She closed her eyes and waited, head on Rainer's silvery pelt.

Notch by notch, the searing pain eased, and all that was left was a tired ache throughout her ribcage.

Rainer held perfectly still until she slumped off him and into the grass. Then he stood, twisted, and grabbed her ruff in his teeth. He gave her a gentle, playful shake.

She took a deep breath. Her ribcage ached, but the searing breath-catching pain didn't happen. Just the ache, not unlike once a muscle cramp had worked itself out, and getting better with each moment. Her tail wagged furiously, and she wrestled herself out of his grip and took a playful swipe at his snout.

He sneezed and ducked his head under her teeth, and took a few steps back, head high and tail arched and wagging. "*How do you feel?*"

"*Better. Much better.*"

His tail wagged faster and his tongue lolled out the side of his open maw.

"*We need to go. We're so late.*" She keened and tip-tapped with her hind legs. The forest scents made her dizzy and Rainer's scent filled her and her fur felt *amazing*, but they *surely* had exceeded their thirty-minute limit and the Biome Wardens were going to be looking for them to chase them out. She slicked her ears back. They did not need another black mark on their records right then. Success or no success.

Plus, she had to report back to Medical.

Biome cavorting was a privilege. If she wanted to come back (which she did), they had to play by the rules.

Rainer pushed his shoulder into hers and walked his body down the length of hers, fur on fur. His tail brushed her snout, then he bapped her with it. She sneezed and shook hair out of her snout while he made a chuffing noise and bounced off deeper into the woods.

"*We have to go.*" She barked after him, but his silvery form disappeared into the shadows.

Damit.

She trotted after him. Grass squished under her paws and dirt yielded under her claws, and something scampered nearby. She focused on it, ears forward, and caught the scent of some small rodent—*prey*—and crouched, then caught herself.

No hunting. Not even a single small rodent nobody would miss.

Rainer's scent trail led through the shadows to the large creek that cut through the woods. He headed up the creek to a shallow pool lined with flat rocks. He flopped down on one of the rocks and waited for her.

*"We have to go."* She trotted over and lowered his head to give him a swipe of her teeth, but he nipped her ear instead.

*"I have a gift for you."*

She sat down and cocked her head to the side. *"A gift?"*

*"Wait here and hold still."* He hopped up and headed to a higher point on the slope.

*"Are you fishing?"* She wagged her tail across the stones and craned her neck to get a better look. Her stomach growled.

He didn't reply as he moved a few steps one way, then the other, cocking his head this way and that while he eyed the residents of the pool. In the clear water, she could just make out the darting shadows of small fish.

Rainer circled the pond slowly, moving so his shadow hit the water a certain way. Then he held perfectly still while the fish settled, their fins frilling back and forth and mouths moving in *glug glug* motions.

He leaned forward, slowly, and breathed out on the surface of the water. Then another. A fish wandered closer. A third breath, and the fish shot forward towards the surface. Rainer plunged forward and snapped the fish up in his jaws.

She spun around and barked. Rainer twisted around as the fish flapped in his mouth. She got control of her excited yipping and bounced on her hind quarters while Rainer trotted back to her with the fish.

He deposited the fish in front of her and put a paw on it to hold it in place. His tail wagged bag and forth across his spine in a silvery plume. She whined and licked his snout, tail wagging furiously.

*"I remember how well I was rewarded last time."* He rolled the fish towards her with his snout.

She shot forward and bit the fish in two. She gulped down one half in three bites. Rainer didn't hesitate to gulp down his half before she decided his half was her half.

Fish was *delicious*. And she'd never expected to have it again.

She yipped and tapped her front feet with happiness, and rubbed her shoulder against his, enjoying his strength and how free she was to just enjoy him (and her fish) this time.

The lights above them flickered.

Rainer sighed. She made a ? noise.

It was time to go.

“DID YOU STEAL THAT FISH?” SHE PULLED HER TOP ON AND IT *didn't* hurt. Blissful.

“Of course not. I was able to secure an extra hour and a fish for us.”

“I didn't realize Biome was even selling hunts or fishing right now.” If there was a way to get a rabbit, she desperately wanted a rabbit. It had been almost two years since she'd last had a rabbit hunt. She didn't have many *NightPiercer* recreation credits, but if Biome would tell her the price, she could start saving and maybe try to win some in a poker game.

“They aren't. If you're not picky, have a Medical endorsement and pay an exorbitant premium in recreation credits, you can get something small and plentiful. Considering I have never used my recreation credits before I married you, I had plenty to spend.” He drew one finger down the outside of her arm, teasing the nerve that ran its length.

“*Had*. Just how many recreation credits did they charge?”

“All of them.”

She laughed. “It was delicious.”

“Gaia willing, you will have more.” He caressed the soft crook of her elbow with gentle swirls of his index finger. “And

also, Gaia willing, you and I won't need our credits much longer."

"Gaia's Will could go either way on that. Can't use your credits if you're dead." She slipped her arms around his neck, grateful that it didn't hurt to move. And it didn't send her heart into flutters or spasms or made her vision go dark around the edges. She wrapped her fingers tightly together.

He shifted his grip to run his palm along the underside of her arm and then splayed his hand across her back. "Your ribs are healed? You're sure."

"I'm sure. Time to go report to Medical." She reached between them and touched her scar.

"You would have done the same thing," Rainer told her quietly.

The familiar burr of emotions lodged in her throat. Had *she* ever enjoyed a fresh fish? Wandered around a Biome? Had a rabbit hunt? "I just hope we're doing the right thing."

## SIXTEEN

Rainer keyed in the command key to unlock the bunk door.

Tsu, stone-faced, said nothing.

Rainer had gone back and watched Arden's Command Aptitude to try to understand what they were up against, and it gave him no reassurance there was any hope at all. Or how Tsu was a match for such a mule. Arden seemed to have the tendency to emotionally back himself into a corner and be uncertain how to get out. It seemed Arden passing Aptitude had involved a little bit of convenient luck that his weaknesses had not been fully exploited.

Although there *was* the argument that Arden had successfully avoided having his weaknesses manipulated or exploited.

*He* would have designed a test to fully exploit and expose Arden.

Of course, he could just *kill* Bennett and remove that concern from this mess, but Bennett conveniently falling into the Core would be a little *too* convenient.

Rainer had never been able to reconcile his intense desire to get rid of Bennett with Bennett's actual behavior. A rivalry between two dominant wolves? That made sense, but it almost never resulted in *eliminating* the competition. Defeat didn't mean death. *Death* was a very different matter. Wolves preferred to leave their rivals alive.

Rainer had not hesitated the first time he had killed another sentient. It had unsettled him how natural it had felt, how familiar, how *simple*. He had known to offer no comment to that effect and had refused to discuss it, which Counseling had accepted.

His natural inclination for Security work had also been unsettling to everyone around him. His body seemed to know what to do in armed and unarmed combat. He had withdrawn from the work, concerned he would be marked *too* feral. Arguably, the damage had already been done by the time he had become aware that he was not “normal” even by feral standards.

But perhaps it had nothing to do with him being a monster, or a prodigy, and it all had a far more simple explanation: he was the late-life clone of a wolf well acquainted with violence and death.

One would think that he'd also know a thing or two about being a good partner and mate. He clearly bungled everything. Or perhaps he behaved in a way an old Earth she-wolf would appreciate and understand, but his behavior was of little use on *NightPiercer* when confronted with a she-wolf conditioned to reject the idea completely.

He *was* Hade. Lachesis misunderstood when he said anything to that effect, but he wasn't explaining what he meant well. Time being something of a non-linear shape and reality being layers instead of a flat plane, there were theories that echoes traveled between timelines and it was a rather fascinating thought that ancestral memories were not actually in DNA but some form of quantum entanglement and—

“Rainer,” Tsu stated under his breath.

Contemplation of the nature of time and reality and gravity and Gaia later. Negotiating his Alpha's shattered marriage now.

Together, they went to the last bed on the left, while the rest of the bunk—who were getting ready for various shifts—moved along with them. The plant owner finished pulling his shirt over his head—he stank of burned grease and something

metallic. Rainer mentally sorted through the scents. He'd probably been helping to move new pipe down on a bottom deck.

Tsu's tone matched his stoney expression. "We are here to deliver payment and collect my part of the arrangement."

The plant owner replied, "Not sure what quarters it's going to be living in now."

"Where the cutting would be dwelling was not part of the arrangement." Tsu's tone was glacial.

"I don't want the cutting to get damaged when it gets thrown at your head," the tech said.

Tsu's lips turned white around the edges as his jaw clenched. "How much do you have wagered on my marriage ultimately failing?"

Nobody answered or moved.

"Rainer." Tsu jerked his head towards him.

"Quite a bit, from the scent," Rainer said. "This entire bunk has wagered against you."

Tsu advanced towards the tech. "We had a deal, Tech. And you will not change the deal because you wagered a year's credits on me ending my career hanging from my own stripes."

"I'm betting on Bennett, not against you," the tech said.

Tsu's lips stretched in a pained grin. "Then you've made two mistakes. Never bet against Keenan, and never take your eye off Lachesis. Go back to the low-value pools before you wager the whole plant."

Rainer put his hand on the Captain's shoulder and pulled him back. Tsu wasn't here as Captain (technically), but mentioning Lachesis was too far. She was already at the center of this storm. He didn't get to spread her around like a debris field. Tsu shoved against his grip, Rainer yanked, the Captain reluctantly withdrew.



Rainer tucked his tablet against his side and forearm and pulled up the encrypted file. He tossed it to the Tech's own tablet. "It's encrypted. Use your thumbprint."

The Tech pressed his thumb to the screen to unencrypt the new file. He held the tablet with both hands and stared at the screen.

The rest of the bunk clustered around the Tech's shoulders to get a look at the painting.

Tsu straightened his uniform. "I presume the painting is acceptable."

Nobody replied right away. Rainer remained still. The effect his paintings had unsettled him—he painted for himself most of the time, and each painting felt personal and private. At the same time, the fact he could have such an emotional effect on people when he so often failed to convey anything but his existing reputation was disconcerting.

The tech clutched his tablet. For a split second, he seemed distraught, but then he said, "Yes. Yes."

"Excellent," Tsu said. "The cutting. Now."

The tech looked at his tablet. He touched the screen, fingers lingering over the little cat perched on a fencepost. "It's a fair trade."

"That has already been established. Stop delaying," Tsu demanded.

A cutting was taken with reverent care. Tsu had brought strips of cloth, which were used to swaddle the cutting with a small handful of dirt, and then the cutting was passed to Tsu.

Tsu carried the plant in both hands. Rainer fell into step beside him.

The cutting was a single vine with several green leaves, but no buds, and nothing to indicate how special it was.

"This is all we have left to try, Rainer," Tsu's said. "I hope you have a plan of your own."

Rainer did not reply. Instead, he nodded once.

Tsu kept his eyes straight ahead of them. “I have a plan to give you as much runway as possible. Make use of every shred. Do not try to save me once I’m lost. You’ll lose precious time and momentum.”

Runway? Plan? “Whatever happens, *NightPiercer* is our pack. Do what must be done. We are at your back.”

## SEVENTEEN

She finished tying off her braid as she stepped out of their quarters. Empty officer deck corridor, although Bennett had been through here recently, and the oily scent of his smug *victory is almost mine* scent, coupled with how fucking much he was enjoying closing in on the kill, made her stomach roil.

She cursed silently to herself. Rainer had only told her that the painting delivery had gone unexpectedly sour, and the situation with Tsu's place as Captain had deteriorated rapidly. He had smelled like a grave. Not that she had ever seen a grave, but he had smelled like a grave.

Time to go hit the gym and improve her cardio for whatever was coming next.

She stopped dead outside the Captain's quarters. Sitting on the floor in front of the door was a small green plant, barely four inches high, with a few leaves and nothing else, wrapped in a tiny container of dirt made from damp rag strips.

"Gaia," she whispered. It was *the* plant. Tsu's last chance with Arden. And it was just sitting there, out in the open?

Had it been rejected? Or had Arden not been home? Or was Arden behind those doors, thinking it over?

Fuck. Civilization was coming down to a goddamn *plant*. And not a whole plant. But a little itty bitty sad *cutting* of a plant. Wrapped in rags and bunk-mulch.

She headed for the lift, but not towards the gym.

RAINER CONTEMPLATED THE SWATCHES OF WIREMESH LAID OUT on the floor of the Engineering bay. Salvaging *Haven* had finally begun—somewhat—and an external team had pried off a couple of tiles, punted them into space, and excised three three meter by three meter chunks of mesh from three different places on the ship's hull.

*Haven's* mesh appeared to be uniform over the entire hull. He'd been concerned that there would be parts of the hull that had different mesh, given the ramshackle construction of the rest of the ship, but it seemed the mesh was uniform.

He crouched down and examined one of the cut edges of the hexagonal mesh. Graves had asked if there was a way to re-fab the mesh to increase its signal-carrying capacity and throughput.

Juan crouched down with him, along with his metallurgy and alloy expert, Shanine.

“Not happening,” Juan told Rainer grimly.

Rainer tilted his head towards Shanine. She picked up the edge of the other piece, gave it another look, then tossed it down. “If the problem was the mesh had been made with fewer strands and filaments, I'd say we could probably get it done. That's a manufacturing issue. But this is a materials issue. I've got some ideas where we can break down some of the mesh and enhance this mesh, but this isn't a drop in replacement for *NightPiercer* mesh. Never going to be.”

“Harvesting more mesh than we need means less mesh for *Ark*.” Rainer contemplated the filaments.

Shanine shrugged. “Your call, boss, just telling you what we're up against trying to re-mesh the hull and make it play proper with our existing mesh so that Telemetry and Tech get back to ninety percent.”

Juan grimaced. Rainer hid his own grim reaction. Ninety percent wasn't because Graves and Harkins had suddenly decided to settle for less than one hundred percent

functionality. But because more than ten percent of *NightPiercer* was now, in all practical terms, inaccessible.

There just wasn't a hundred percent of the ship left. Even ninety percent sounded optimistic. He hadn't sat down to do the analysis on what the new standard for *normal operations* was.

Rainer rubbed the cut edges of the mesh between his fingers. The timelines were extending from months into years because of this damn mesh. They did not have years to spend re-fabricating, re-purposing, and re-programming around its limitations.

"I'll include it in my report to Captain Tsu." Rainer set the mesh down. Juan and Shanine's scents told him they had the same thought he had—they may be redoing the report for a different Captain.

Juan lowered his voice. "How bad is it for Tsu?"

"We've heard bad things," Shanine muttered. "It's even here in Engineering down in the low-levels with the no-stripes and some of the Crew. They're all saying it's over for Tsu and Bennett should just take over."

"A marriage shouldn't make or break an officer," Juan said, annoyed. "Why does *Arden* get to decide who is Captain? Nobody let Lachesis decide Rainer is Lead Engineer. It wasn't even a conversation when she left him."

Shanine made a rude gesture. "Everyone's just using Arden as an excuse. If someone wants to give up their life to save someone else's, we all need to shut up and say *thank you*. What's happening is just gross."

"Agreed," Juan said. "Nobody thanked us for going to *LightBearer*. They just blame us for setting Ersu off."

"Who's blaming us for *LightBearer*?" Rainer asked.

"Stupid rumors going around the bunk that if we hadn't gone to *LightBearer*, we'd all still be back by Jupiter and it's our fault he thought he could head to Earth. Tsu still won't release our reports." Juan grimaced and glared at the mesh.

“Those are *really* stupid rumors and everyone knows it,” Shanine said. “Funny how they didn’t pop up until *after Haven* either. Someone’s got an agenda and a big spoon to stir the pot.”

Juan made a rude gesture of his own.

Rainer caught *her* scent.

He looked up, and Lachesis was coming across the bay, wearing her PT gear, but carrying her shoes. He got to his feet. She almost never came to Engineering.

Before he could ask what had brought her to Engineering in bare feet and PT gear, she gestured for him to follow her, and headed towards his office. Her scent brushed his way again...

She could *not* be coming down to Engineering for—

“Excuse me,” he told Juan and Shanine. He pulled off his heavy leather apron and headed after Lachesis.

He pushed open the door and before it had even closed behind him, she had seized the front of his uniform in both hands and was kissing him.

Her heady scent went straight to his cock. Lachesis never smelled of such *need*, and under it, lacings of anguish and stress. But *need*. Need for *him*.

He backed her up towards his desk. She bit his lower lip as he pushed his hands under her shirt, and he growled, his cock throbbing. He yanked off her shirt and chucked it over his shoulder, she shoved her shorts off and kicked them under his desk. Her hands went for his pants.

Intrigued, he watched as she freed his cock, using her fingernails to lightly scratch the soft skin of the base. Her scent was dizzying. She had never been so damn *aggressive*.

“*Slow*,” he growled to her.

“No,” she whispered back. “*Now*.”

He hefted her up onto the only uncluttered part of his desk. She squirmed to the edge, her calves clamped around his

thighs.

She arched and gasped, her pupils dilating and the tension seeming to leave her body all at once as he pushed into her. Her scent instantly turned into a rush of sweet submission and surrender. She raked her fingernails along his neck, drawing deep red lines, panting his name as he fucked her.

Her strewn across his desk, hair in a tumble, her thighs on his hips, watching her orgasm on his cock was more than he could stand.

Rainer panted and braced himself on his desk with one hand, while she held onto his neck with both arms, gulping for breath, their bodies still joined.

He inhaled, deeply, of the scent rising off her neck. His forest sprite, whole and well again, her scent autumn and gold and wind and sky and tree and forest. And the storm of emotions that had driven her to seek relief on his cock.

She whimpered softly when he tried to move, so he shifted closer, shuddering on a rictus of pain/pleasure but rewarded by her sigh, even as she held tighter to him.

He kissed her neck. Once. Twice. The third time, she tilted her head to the side, unconsciously exposing the long, elegant line of her throat, and the blood vessels under the delicate skin. He kissed softly where the blood pooled, feather-light, and her skin rewarded him with a sweet, soft scent that intoxicated him and echoed through his dreams, and his soul knew.

*Mate.*

*Beloved.*

*Soul.*

His mind knew, for a few minutes, only the lupine words. Deep. Primal. Like the fluid between them right now, his cock still rigid enough to be buried inside her, his seed—worthless as it had proven to be so far—filling her.

*Mine.*

She released his neck with one arm, but held on, shifting so her forehead pressed to his. Still breathing hard, she rasped,

“More. Again.”

“Perhaps you should tell me what this is about.”

“*More.*”

She couldn't possibly be going into heat—and on the off, horrifying chance she was, he was *not* going to play Gaia's game. He wanted a pup intensely. He wanted *her* to have that pup.

And he wanted it on a fucking planet. He was *not* going to sire a pup to drift in this cold dark hell with them.

She nipped his neck gently.

The base of his cock stung with a surge.

He pulled away and slipped from her. She made a soft, whining, feral sound and raked his neck with her fingernails as she looked at him, her autumn sky eyes wide, her pupils dilated so that only the hazel iris was visible as if a dark satellite cast its shadow on a planet.

“Tell me what this is about,” he said softly, aching to give her what she wanted. After he had a moment to recover and assess, of course.

She gulped down some more air, shaking her head.

He kissed her neck again, savoring her scent and taste. He nipped her skin gently and she whimpered for him. “I'll be off shift in a few hours. We'll talk or fuck then. Your choice.”

“Now,” she whispered.

She was *never* so exquisitely, wonderfully demanding, and that was the *only* thing that gave him even a shred of restraint. “And who was telling me to be a model officer?”

She growl-whined at him.

He gripped the edges of his desk. “*Go.*”

“Rainer,” she whined at him, softly, pleadingly, squirming closer with her thighs on either side of his hips and her soft bite on his neck.



She could smell he wanted to. Everything in him told him to give his mate precisely what she wanted—and only he could provide her.

He refused to bend and kept his spine straight, and growled at her, even as she pressed herself against him, every part of her—even her scent—pleading for his attention.

She whined back, very, very softly.

What male could resist his mate pleading with him like that? Especially *his*, who refused to surrender to her wants? Who was not with him because Gaia had ordained it, but because it suited her from moment to moment to even share her den with him? She had acknowledged she was his mate, and she loved him—but she had *chosen* to acknowledge it and be at his side. Gaia could make Lachesis do nothing.

He was an idiot for denying her *anything*. His cock was the most basic thing he could grant her—

*No.*

“Go,” he dared to whisper. Then he pulled her off his desk and delivered a swat to her rump before releasing her.

Her expression reminded him of the pictures he’d seen of a storm at sunset... somehow pouty and sensual at the same time, a human’s sense of responsibility but a dominant she-wolf’s want for what she wanted... and that she’d find a way to get it.

He handed her her clothes. “When we are on Earth,” he told her hoarsely, “I will take you out under the stars and fuck you so that everyone, but most especially these damned stars, will see.”

Her lower jaw loosened, showing him the flash of teeth, her expression a feral smile underlaid with a softness that begged him to give her what she wanted. She didn’t speak.

She didn’t need to.

“Get dressed,” he ordered, feeling like each syllable and his will to shape them was a fragile thing.

She did as he ordered, and she stepped back into her uniform. He saw her thighs were slick and glossy.

He almost surrendered. He counted instead, but only got to eight before having to restart. If he even got to eight through the haze.

She hooked one arm around his neck, pulled down, bending him to kiss her. She favored him with a long, slow kiss that made him push her against the wall and grab for her thighs.

*Naughty, she-wolf.*

“Go,” he ordered for what sounded like the millionth aching, painful time. “I have things to do.”

“So do I,” she whispered.

“I’ll make that an order, Lachesis.”

“Oh?” Her saucy inquiry crept up like a feral whine. “That sounds like a fun game. Order me, Commander. Let’s see what happens.”

He released her and backed away. “Run along, naughty little bitch. I’ve placated you for now.”

She gave him a look that sent his blood on fire as she waltzed out of his office, trailing the scent of sex after her.

## EIGHTEEN

The plant was gone from its place outside the Captain's old quarters. Rainer did not contemplate if that was a good sign or bad sign. Just because the plant was gone did not mean the plant had accomplished its mission.

Lachesis was not home. Instead, a hand-scrawled greeting waited for him on the big screen. She'd chosen a bright glowing orange color, and drawn a doodle of a paw.

His mate was not an artist.

*CPU Allocation cycle window. Maybe I'll have energy when I get back. Maybe I won't. Left you my panties.*

Her panties, as promised, waited for him on the couch.

What was he supposed to do with the panties?

*Ah.*

The panties weren't clean. They smelled of *her*.

Was sniffing her panties crude or intriguing?

More importantly: was the scent of the panties a trap or survival rations?

"Shower first," he told the panties, placing them carefully back on the couch. "I'm not sure you're not a trap."

A shower later, he concluded the panties being a trap or not didn't matter. The intrigue over this new toy and new game outweighed any possible risk of falling into a panty-trap.

*Ding.*

Rainer ran a hand through his wet hair. Nothing good could be knocking on his door. And anything significantly not-good to require his attention would ping his comm. Which meant that this was a particular sort of not-good, and he was trying to minimize his exposure to that sort of not-good these days.

Plus: panties.

*\*Ding\**

He pulled on pants and nothing else.

The scent of trembling anger and rage and tears hit him as the door slid open, then his brain processed Arden standing on the other side of it. The Captain's husband's eyes were bloodshot. He clutched a small pot made of stiffened rags containing a tiny amount of dirt and the plant in one hand, and his fingers in a fist in the next.

“Did *you* do this?! Did *you* give me this?!” Arden shoved his foot across the threshold, the plant-holding hand gentle and careful while the rest of him seethed with an anger Rainer knew too well from his wife. He'd not quite figured out how to avoid making *that* worse (and he usually was the cause), so he was not getting anywhere near Arden's rage.

Arden leaned into his foot. “I am talking to you.”

Rainer eyed the Crèche Specialist. “I don't know what game Bennett has baited you to play, but he's playing *you* for an idiot. I am not even humoring this conversation. Get out of my den before I remove you with as much force as you deem necessary.”

Arden's scent turned to furious rage with notes of helplessness, despair, anguish, hopelessness. He'd been harried into a corner, and was looking for an escape. “The XO has *nothing* to do with this, and *you* know it. So you're going to talk to me, or you *are* going to remove me and we'll just let Bennett sort *that* out.”

Time for the kill, and the prey had very conveniently come right to his den. All there was to do was let him in.

Arden stared a few extra seconds at the collection of Earth objects on the shelves by the door, but he yanked his shock together and turned back to the hunt that had chased him here. He set the plant cutting down on the coffee table before he did, though.

“You paid for that.” Arden pointed at the plant.

Rainer pulled up his family ledger. The only recent transaction was the Biome fishing expedition.

“You know what I meant. You took a custom commission.” Arden seethed with anger and hurt.

Rainer tossed his tablet down. “Tsu did not order me to do the commission.”

“And you just happened to accept it when it has always taken a specific order before now.”

Rainer curled his upper lip. “The *LightBearer* memorial showed me that my artwork is able to reach a common emotional ground I have with everyone else. Reminds the crew I am a sentient creature, possibly even with empathy and a soul. Hence why I have been posting private pieces on the public feed. A commission request was an organic opportunity to create an additional, completely authentic personal connection with a twelve-bunk I would otherwise have no direct connection to.”

Arden scowled. “And your debt to Tsu for putting up with you for years has nothing to do with it.”

“Alphas don’t collect debts from packmates. They collect debts from other Alphas. Tsu has my loyalty for as long as I consider it prudent.”

Arden snorted. “It’s not that simple with sections and the chain of command. This is a ship, with a crew, and an order of things.”

At least he hadn’t said *this isn’t a wolf pack*. “It is how I choose to lead, and it is also how your husband has chosen to lead. No one is *owed* loyalty. A leader *earns* it, then a leader must *maintain* it. Tsu has earned and maintained mine.”

Arden bit out, “Perhaps he took *my* loyalty for granted.”

“No, I think he had faith in his husband. I think you and everyone else on this ship don’t want to remember how these ships got built. Time isn’t linear. The past is the past, but it’s not *gone*, and you haven’t escaped it. The only reason *you* are alive is because people like your husband made horrifying choices and did horrifying things to save civilization. They didn’t argue about what was right or wrong, they argued about what was *necessary*. Gaia wasn’t negotiating. The price of civilization’s survival was the price. We are still fighting for survival. The price is still the price. Your husband, Forrest, my mate, and most of all, Evadne, paid it for all of us.”

Arden growled.

“She gave her life honestly and without coercion to save civilization. And instead of honoring her sacrifice and humbling yourself, you stand here on a ship that was built by people who *knew* they’d never board it, and *howl* about how dare I paint something so your husband can give you a token of how much he values his family. I suggest you walk to the forward exclusion zone with your daughter and *stay there*. Because that’s the only future you’re going to give her.”

Arden washed gray. “You’re a *monster*, Rainer.”

Was this man not *listening*? “Or take her to Bennett’s quarters and tell her she has a new daddy. A daddy who will tell her all the nice lies *you* want to hear. The end result will be the same. She will *die*. Slowly. Painfully. But not before she watches everyone else die around her.”

Arden backed up a step. Rainer advanced. “Get *out*, you selfish, miserable, *pathetic* excuse for a father. When you’re huddled up in some interior deck wondering *how did it come to this* while the Sun bakes this ship and the hull fails, remember this moment. Remember that *you* and everyone like you *let it happen*. Because you don’t like the taste of what survival costs and think you’re *entitled* to sleep well at night because you woke up that morning! You are *weak*, and you *choose to be weak* while convincing yourself you live in some bulwark of moral superiority. *Get out of my den!*”

Arden backed into the corridor.

Rainer shut the door.

He braced himself on the wall and clutched his head with his hand. He dug his fingers into his temples while his nightmares surged out of the back of his brain.

...back on *Haven's* bridge covered in blood, with his mate looking at him from across the void, while she *died*. She'd fought to stay alive, but she'd known she was dying. And she'd been so angry with him...

He dug his fingers deeper into his temple while his tattoo throbbed and his skin *burned*. Burned while the sky behind Lachesis burned and the wind tore at her red hair and her dress whipped around in the breeze, and her expression told him *we're not ready, it's already here*.

A tangle of nightmares wrapped themselves around his brain. The horrifying ones where he went out to a chain-link fence where thousands, *millions*, of desperate people plastered themselves against it, howling to be let in, and he ordered his wolves to...

He'd returned to her covered in gore and blood and she looked at him, the hem of her white and blue dress soaked in blood, her autumn-sky eyes the only thing left...

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THE SCENT IN THEIR QUARTERS STRUCK THE UNEASE BURIED IN her bones. Rainer, blood, *nightmare*. She dropped her bag and swung around the corner into the living room. No Rainer.

"Rainer?" She ducked into the bedroom. No Rainer. Spun, ran across the living room to the second bedroom.

Rainer sat on the pedestal he used for models and clutched his large tablet in one arm while he scrawled with his stylus in the other. He only had on pants, and they were soaked with sweat. His entire body was soaked, his hair plastered, blood trickled from his hairline down his jaw and across the network of scars. Pale silver hair sprouted up along the back of his

hand and line of his enlarged spine where his partially shifted vertebrae stretched his still-human skin. His fingers were elongated, the joints larger and the skin more hide than skin, his jaw slightly different to accommodate fangs, his features partially twisted.

The tablet's screen was awash in reds and golds and deep umber. It reflected those colors across his face.

*This* was not the scene she'd expected (or hoped) to come home to. "Rainer?"

His stylus kept moving. His voice was metallic and charred. "I'm here."

She approached carefully, angling herself so she stayed within his field of vision. "Why are you bleeding?"

She got a look at the screen.

She wished she hadn't.

She touched his hair. He flinched, but she stuck her fingers back into his hairline. Blood, flaky and dried, came away on her fingertips. "Is this... your blood?"

Rainer's hands weren't bloody. No blood spray or stains on the wall or floor, no smears.

"Yes."

"Should I get Forrest for some stitches?" Forrest would probably help out by doing a few stitches on the sly, although perhaps not if the needles and suture material were heavily rationed. Which they probably were.

"It's already closed over."

She brushed her fingertips along his jaw. As she did so, the soft down of hair withdrew, leaving just the rough skin she knew better. "I'm here. It was only a nightmare."

A coarse half-laugh. "This *is* a nightmare."

"Please don't disrupt my awkward attempts at comforting you with facts."



Another ghoulish half-laugh. He set his stylus down with a click and straightened, shoulder stiff and tense, while his fingers twitched like his brain couldn't let the painting go. His scent twisted into *resolve* mingled with *nightmare*.

“Have you been in the Earth archives again?” she asked.

“No. I am just in *no* mood to deal with weaklings who do not realize *this* is our reality!” He thumped his knuckles against the screen.

She'd seen some of the videos and pictures of the desperate hordes trying to get into the shipyards. They were taken from the vantage point of the people trying to get *in*, and were heavily edited.

Rainer's painting was from the inside of the facility. A moment of the flip side of the desperation. What they'd done to survive had not been civilized.

She swiped again—another painting. This one featured her on a suspended walkway of the facility, looking to the side—presumably to the fence line below. She had on the dress he had painted for her, her hair unbound (neither fashion choice being practical), and in her left hand she carried old-fashioned tools of navigation: a sextant, a gyroscope, a compass, a pocket watch all on wiremesh attached to platinum rings around each of her four fingers, and those rings were attached to more wiremesh that traveled up her wrist and encased her entire arm.

Her hair was red, like the sky and dry red dust that seemed to pervade everything in the image. But it was a different shade of red. The way Rainer had painted it made it seem like part of the twisted sky had broken free before being consumed.

“What happened?” Something had to have triggered this.

“Arden.” Rainer clenched his hand into a fist as it started to shift into a claw. Silvery hair sprouted on his jaw again. He stopped and counted, stumbled over twenty-one as his voice slurred through lupine vocal cords.

“Twenty-two,” she prompted.

“Twenty-two,” he growled, the violence easing. He got to forty. “Bennett gives them all something to focus on. Makes them think they have some *ally* in Command. They did this a hundred years ago. The evidence was *right there in front of them for twenty years*, and even up until the Last Days there were deniers!”

Was that Rainer or Hade talking? Did it matter?

“So I have been thinking.” He placed his tablet on the pedestal and got to his feet. He gripped her hips in his hands. “We trust Tsu, and Tsu is planning something to give *NightPiercer* runway on a future that doesn’t include him. But Bennett is still a threat, and he is a vampire that uses people like Arden as his cattle.”

“So we’re back to *this* conversation.” Even with the spousal privilege AI scrubbing algorithm baked into the firmware, she wasn’t about to say *mutiny*.

Rainer’s eyes took on a dark, predatory gleam she had never seen before. His voice became edged with a silky snarl. “Arden gave me the idea with how he squirms against the pin of his own cowardice. If we can’t erode the crew’s faith in Bennett, we erode Bennett’s faith in himself.”

## NINETEEN

Their morning tea and showers were interrupted by a meeting appearing on their schedules. Tsu had summoned them to the officer's conference room. Not negotiable, mandatory, *be there*.

"I guess the plant didn't have the desired effect," Lachesis said, toothbrush tucked into her cheek. She tapped the request. It wasn't just the command staff. Senior staff from *every section* had been summoned.

Her chest felt hollow, except for the heart beating under her ribs, like a guilty clock ticking away the hours until judgement.

Rainer handed her her tea.

"He's going to resign, isn't he." She cupped the mug. It burned her palms. "This is what he meant by runway. He's going to resign before Bennett can drive him out."

"That's probably what everyone thinks." His voice reminded her of steel cables, and his scent was a deep anger. "But that's not what's going to happen. There's no runway in that."

"But it gives him a chance to name Keenan as Captain if he exits on his terms. Keenan leapfrogging Bennett *and* Graves might be what he meant by runway. That we need to be prepared to support her, even if we've had a very contentious relationship so far."

Rainer finished securing his collar and cuffs. "No, it's too obvious. It's what everyone else is expecting. It's an ambush."

Tsu's games were very deft. So deft they barely seemed to exist, and it was only *after* the game had concluded that anyone realized what the game had really been. Tsu spun control like a spider spun a web: ephemeral, suspiciously strong, and difficult to escape.

People who hadn't arrived early enough to the officer's conference room to grab one of the chairs or a spot on the wall crammed into the doorway and peered over shoulders. The room was packed and smelled of bodies in various states of washing (many people were coming off shift) and a thousand different emotions.

Rainer nudged his way through the press of bodies. They squished back to make room. Lachesis tried to ignore the looks as she made her way to her usual chair, where someone from Telemetry already sat. The person in Rainer's seat yielded it instantly, but Tsu had to point at the person in her chair and gesture for him to get lost.

She was never going to get used to sitting at Tsu's table. Seemed nobody else would either.

Bennett, under his arranged facade of concern, looked like he'd caught a very fat rabbit, and he just *waited* for it to be done roasting.

Arden stood in the first row of people, right up against the foot of the table, arms crossed, and watching his husband with undisguised intensity. Tsu didn't seem aware of it, and if he was, he didn't acknowledge Arden's presence.

Keenan settled into the corner of her chair in the usual way and folded her hands in her lap.

Harkins, Graves, and two final staff arrived, and everyone crammed into the room as much as possible. Tsu waited for everyone to settle into place, then tapped the table with the edge of his tablet. A pained hush fell over the room.

Bennett's neck twitched, and his fingers twitched against the table before he caught the motion and shoved them onto his lap.

Tsu folded his hands and rested his chin on his laced fingers. He looked at each of them in turn, then the rest of the room at large. “This ship’s remaining service life, *with repairs*, is estimated to be three to five years. At the moment, our service life is however long until the next major solar flare plus sixteen minutes. In conversations with Commander Rainer and Commander Harkins, it is apparent there is no way to extend the warning time, and there is no way to extend our service life in any meaningful way.

“Our current projected repair timeline is eighteen months to three years, assuming no further delays due to *Ark* or the Sun, or any other unforeseen situations. Transit time to Earth from our current position—which is dependent upon our repairs—is four months to two years. We haven’t even started and we’re already out of time.”

Rainer had been right: ambush.

She and Rainer had already realized how dire the timeline was. Everyone else, though, seemed to be hearing it for the first time. Bennett wasn’t able to hide how bewildered he was, but he didn’t seem somber or horrified and concerned like everyone else as the gravity of their situation sank into them.

Rainer watched Bennett, tapping a slow, silent rhythm on the arm of his chair. *One, two, three...*

“That timeline,” Tsu added, “does not include the three to twelve months of planetary observation we need to do, at a minimum, before any teams go to the surface. Weather patterns must be observed, atmosphere analyzed, seasons measured, appropriate settlement sites scouted. *Arriving* is only the end of one phase and the start of another.”

The scanning for where to settle was particularly important, and particularly difficult given *NightPiercer* was blind. Pre-Exodus estimates suggested there’d be some remodeling of the Earth’s surface. Coastlines and coastal areas would be underwater, but interior sections of the continents were likely to have survived, with the remains of roads, possibly even old powerplants or factories, maybe even some rudimentary plumbing or wiring still salvageable.

The intention wasn't to try to rebuild or repair, but to scavenge and re-purpose.

There was hope (based on other cataclysms Earth had survived) that some plants and smaller animal life like rodents, bugs, aquatic life, and perhaps birds had survived. There was no hope anything larger than a house cat would have survived. And no humans. Not from the scorching heat, the ash-filled sky, and the toxic atmosphere.

The Earth they were expected to return to would probably be a hot, wet world due to the vulcanism, small polar ice caps, with daytime auroras caused by a massively altered magnetic field that would also wreak havoc with existing technology. There were also alternative models that suggested Earth would be dry, with highly saline oceans devoid of life and currents, and subterranean water supplies necessitating living underground.

For a second, Tsu's gaze lingered over Arden. "It has occurred to me that I have laid out an obvious expectation: *repair the ship*. It's why we came to *Haven*. It's why we are defending *Haven* against our own. But, after various discussions, and reading reports, and observing the crew and our progress, it's obvious that *repair the ship* is a goal with no real meaning. Repair it for what purpose? To wait in space for another decade? To fly to Earth? To Pluto? To another star system? Those are all four different goals, with four different repair timelines, with four different sets of requirements."

Bennett was arranged in his chair in an imitation of relaxed listening, but under that, his spine seemed tense and articulated, his jaw clenched, and his fingers unmoving and stiff while his gaze rested on Tsu like burning coals.

"We will not be *repairing* the ship," Tsu told them all. "That makes it sound as though we can fix everything and return to how it was. We can't fix what's been broken, we can't undo what we've done to survive, and we can't replace what we've lost."

The aching in her rib cage matched her heartbeat.

Tsu said, almost gently, “We are going to shift our thinking. We are not *repairing* the ship. We are going to *prepare* the ship.”

The little hairs along her arms rose.

Keenan inquired, “Prepare it for what?”

Tsu leaned forward on his arms. “Earth. We are going to *prepare* it to return to Earth.”

FOR A FEW SECONDS, IT WAS NOTHING BUT STUNNED SILENCE. Even Rainer—who had championed to hear those words for years—was gobsmacked into saying nothing at all. Bennett’s soul shriveled away from his body, while Keenan’s jaw went slack.

*Earth?*

Watching her fellow command staff try to maintain a visage of calm composure when they’d just been smacked with this news was mildly hilarious, or would have been, if she hadn’t felt like she’d just been spun around. She’d been expecting hours, maybe days or weeks, of discussions and debate and repeatedly fighting the urge to smash Bennett’s face into the table.

Bennett, stiffly, half-rose out of his chair, his legs standing but bent at the hips and braced on the table. “We don’t even know if Earth is habitable. All readings from pre-*LightBearer* indicate it’s not. We could burn resources and fuel to go there just to find *nothing*, and we won’t be able to return to *Haven*. We need to make the *fullest* repairs possible while it’s possible, *then* decide our options based on the ship’s condition.”

“The ship’s condition is going to continue to deteriorate,” Rainer countered.

Keenan asked, “Was Pluto or another system even considered?”

Graves rolled his neck towards her. “The Pluto plan was fringe at best. We’re not even sure *NightPiercer* can achieve

FTL without an exploding ship drive core to kick-start us.”

“It can,” Rainer said flatly. “Or I can just detonate *Haven’s* core.”

“We are *not* blowing up *Haven*,” Lachesis snapped at him. “Leave it for *Ark*.”

Bennett said through gritted teeth, “We don’t even know if Earth is *habitable*. We don’t know *anything!*”

“And at this point, the only way we’re really going to know Earth’s status is to go over and have a look,” Harkins told him. “Haven’t you been paying attention? You have a deaf and blind spot when it comes to Earth, Commander. My section has been discussing repairs to the arrays ad nauseam, and the Earth systems were always problematic, even pre-*LightBearer*. Earth’s readings *have* changed over the last decade, but have always been very suspect. Pre-*LightBearer*, the other two Telemetry Leads and myself compared notes, and we all had similar issues. Three ships, built at the same time, from the same basic design and materials, existing in the same basic harsh environment they were never designed for all suffering general failures at the same time is not statistically improbable.”

Bennett focused on him. “But we also have *Haven*. That was the whole point of the buoy.”

“No, the whole point of the buoy was mostly solar flare detection and *some* instrument calibration. *Haven’s* array is bare minimum equipment list to keep the ship safe from incoming objects and solar flares. Nothing extra, not even the XPB-Nav system that we’re using right now.”

“Then how do you propose *they* were going to know when to return to Earth?” Bennett bit out.

Watching Bennett scramble to try to climb to the top of the argument hill made her gums tingle, and she found herself running her tongue over her teeth, expecting to feel the sweet nip of fangs extending.

*Settle down, Lachesis.*



She shoved the desire to sink those teeth into Bennett's clavicle somewhere else.

"Watch if any of the bigger ships passed by. It's how I'd save on resources." Harkins tucked his hands behind his head. "If I could just ask another ship a simple question with a yes/no answer, I wouldn't bother kitting a ship with those systems. *Haven* had to make compromises to get that hulk flying, and that's where I'd start."

"So you aren't going to fix those at all?" Bennett snapped.

"If we're going to Earth, I won't bother. We'll just go with Lachesis' method of looking out a window." Harkins looked at Rainer. "That will free up quite a few of the more difficult to fab materials you use for tiles, and," he looked now at Graves, "it also means the wiremesh transplant won't have to support those instruments. I can focus on the instruments we need for short-range planetary analysis and local neighborhood threat detection, which frees up considerable bandwidth for Tech."

The room's attentive quiet got even quieter.

Rainer nodded, eyes narrowing to a predatory gleam. Lachesis resisted glancing at him. Deciding the ship's fate, and galvanizing the crew towards *preparation*, spun the entire situation on its head.

Tsu steepled his fingers. "Graves, your thoughts?"

The Tech Lead didn't reply right away. He flicked his stylus across his fingers. "It would allow us to focus our energies on a single mission. And that's exactly the problem. It's putting us into a corner."

"We're already in a corner," Rainer said.

"How are we going to overcome the tile issue? Forrest did state that the closer we are to the Sun, the more essential the tiles become. In the spirit of being blunt, I think the crew will see this for what it is: a distraction."

"You call it a distraction, I think it sounds like choosing a course of action," Lachesis said.

“I am not surprised you feel that way, given you are one of the distractions.”

No backing down now. “I’ve been a distraction since the moment I got to this ship.”

“That,” Forrest said, “is true.”

“I agree that we should have been consulted,” Bennett told Tsu. “This is too big a decision for you to make by yourself. Especially now.”

“I have made my decision, Commander.”

Bennett did not break eye contact. “There are no contingencies if Earth is a molten fireball. This order will fly us into a corner with no escape.”

“There weren’t any contingencies when these ships were built either,” Tsu said coolly.

Bennett looked around the room, then yanked back to Tsu, practically vibrating with a wretched rage. He snapped to Keenan, “You have nothing to say about this?”

Keenan shrugged. “Not yet. I’ll have an opinion after I have a chance to contemplate it further with my staff.”

Rainer set down his tablet. “I will also need to discuss it with my staff to come up with a timeline, in addition to returning briefly to *Haven* to evaluate the salvage plans based on this new guidance.”

“This may also free up resources for *Ark*,” Lachesis added. “It may give us a chance to negotiate peaceful terms with them and increase the ship’s survival odds.”

Tsu stood. “Dismissed.”

Bennett stood immediately. “*Sir*.”

“Carry out my orders, Commander.”

Bennett’s fingers twitched. Lachesis gathered up her chimera tablets as Rainer tucked his own tablets into his bag. Time to get out of here so that if Bennett started shouting, it’d be at the walls and her departing backside.

“Excuse me, Commander.”

Lachesis twisted—Arden had moved from his place at the back of the room up the side of the table, and now squeezed behind Rainer, but Bennett was blocking his path. Bennett yanked around and his face twisted in confusion.

“Excuse me,” Arden repeated.

Bennett jerked out of the way and caught himself on the back of his chair when Arden *squished* himself around the Commander (since Bennett wasn’t really moving enough) and approached Tsu.

Tsu visibly tensed. “Arden.”

His tone sounded like he expected to be struck.

Arden seized him by the face and kissed him.

Keenan dropped her stylus.

Arden kissed his husband, hard, for a long moment. Then an extra few seconds, before he yanked back, still holding Tsu’s face clutched between his palms. His fingers traced the gray hairs at Tsu’s temples. “I think you should come home.”

Tsu didn’t *move*. Not even a breath. Even his face was perfectly still. Arden didn’t move either, the man’s face somewhere between smiling and tears, it was hard to say. Tsu finally said, “What about—”

“Come home,” Arden said. “We’re a family, and all three of us still want that.”

Bennett gathered up his tablets and left the conference room without a word.

“I’m not sure,” Rainer said as they stepped onto the lift, “who just ambushed who.”

“But I know Bennett doesn’t appreciate being in the cold,” Lachesis said with satisfaction.

Rainer’s hand crept over the small of her back. “Now it’s our turn.”

## TWENTY

She picked over her calculations as Rainer came into their quarters. He was sweaty and in his PT gear, which clung to his body as though he'd just gone for a swim in the algae vats.

He smelled like he'd gone for a swim in the vats too.

“Still awake?” he asked.

“Planning so I get the most from my CPU allocation window tomorrow. And maybe I was waiting for you to get home.”

“Oh?”

“Maybe.”

“*Maybe.*” He set his satchel on the couch. “Just maybe. Perhaps. By chance.”

“All those things.”

“Chance under such conditions is not pure entropy and actually is your—”

“Shhh.” She held a finger to her lips.

“I am saying that you summoned me home.” He bent over and braced himself on the arms of the chair.

The heat-haze of humid, hot male skin from the gym was like the heat emanating from the Biomes in their summer wet season phase. “If I'd wanted to do that, I'd have pinged you, not counted on quantum entanglement or whatever you were about to say. The cosmos does not bend to my will.”

“It does, in a way.”

Of course it did. A few trickles of sweat slid down his temple along his jaw and one droplet hit the chair. She looked at it, then back at him. His eyes were still mis-matched. Forrest had said the new one would darken over the next year, but he’d always have two distinctly different eyes.

“And that,” he told her in a low tone, “is what I want to discuss. I have a plan, my love. To keep someone quite cold.”

*Love.* It sent nervous tingles along her skin more than the promise of a *plan*. “Go shower first. You’re dripping on my chair.”

“This is *my* chair.”

“It *was* your chair. But this is *my* den, therefore, it is now *my* chair.” She ended the sentence with a little growl.

His mis-matched eyes sparkled, and he ducked forward as if to kiss her, but she coiled back. “Dear Gaia, you reek like an algae vat.”

He peeled his shirt away from his chest and sniffed it. “I was down doing some repairs on the vat level. Some of the vats overflowed.”

So he *had* been swimming through the vats. He headed off to go shower while she finished her calculations, logged out of the sandbox and gathered up all their tablets. She put them on the bed and covered them with some blankets. Then she folded down the other blankets and stacked the pillows on top of them.

“Turning down the bed?” Rainer inquired.

“Just making sure our tablets—” Her brain/tongue connection briefly failed confronted with her husband—*mate*—standing in the door to the bathroom, leaning against the doorframe, completely naked. Veins and sinew, still taunt from his workout, pushed against his skin. Water slid along the grooves created by his muscled physique, highlighting his body with light-catching droplets, and inviting her to use her tongue to chase them.

Rainer pushed off the doorframe. “Tablets?”

“Can’t hear about our plans. Because while I’m sure Tsu told you to make sure of the runway, I’m sure whatever we’re about to do isn’t anything he’d approve of either.” She recovered. His scent had returned, not that she had really *mind*ed the scent of him post-workout, post-algae vat. But the scent rising off him now was a mingle of soap, steam, and the thick pelt of scent that was distinctly Rainer—*male, prowess, intensity, feral, ferocity, intention, readiness, the hunt, sex, capacity.*

And one that had to be *intelligence*. Rainer *smelled* smart. Or maybe he just smelled arrogant. Either way, she especially liked that aspect of his scent, like she enjoyed the faint tang of apples in her tea.

She brushed her cheek along his bare, damp chest and inhaled the scent from along his breastbone. He had a thick, tangled scar like she did, although faded with years. She brushed her fingertips over it and inhaled again, indulging in his scent. A soft whine vibrated in her throat, and he answered with a brush of his own cheek against her hair.

“Shall I tell you my thoughts?” he murmured.

“I can *see* your thoughts.” And she was of a mind to slide her hand down his abdomen and take firm hold of his... *thoughts*.

He cupped her chin in his hand and tilted her to look up at him. She softened into his grip, and a delicate sensation poured through her veins to replace the tensile animation of every other moment of her life. It felt like being made of honey and sunlight. The good kind of sunlight—the sunlight people on Earth had felt, and the sunlight in Rainer’s paintings, shining through leaves. She poured in his hands like falls of her hair or a cascade of honey caught in his palms.

“Those thoughts have to wait.” He tilted her chin up higher and pushed her neck to the side. He bent and kissed her tattoo softly. Her skin begged for the sharp nip of his teeth, but there was only the brush of his lips, and then, even that was gone when he backed away.

She shivered as the honey and sunlight feeling slid away, and she reformed into a creature of flesh trapped in the coldness of space. A strange shiver moved over the back of her arms and shoulders. Not quite nervousness, not quite anticipation, not quite longing.

Rainer waited until her own spine was carrying her awareness and she was no longer a creature of honey and autumn sunlight.

“Are you ready to go hunting, my love?” He pulled off his comm and tossed it onto the bed, then bothered to step into a pair of shorts but nothing else.

Rainer poured them both a drink from the last of his stash, and set down the mismatched cups on the coffee table. She twisted so that her elbow rested on his shoulder, and her knee over his thigh. “So Bennett has built his entire life around his goal of being Captain. He’s taken pains to make sure *nothing* gets in the way, including himself. I like this idea of breaking his confidence in himself, but how do we inject him with enough doubt he actually starts to hesitate?”

Rainer’s lips spread and thinned with a cruel smile. “We take him to *Haven*.”

Interesting. “So you take him to *Haven*, show him the sights and hope it changes his thinking? First obstacle is going to be convincing him to go to *Haven*.”

Nobody *wanted* to get onto a shuttle and go anywhere. Shuttles, in the best of times, were dangerous and unpleasant and not even the pilots liked them. Gaia knew *she* didn’t like flying shuttles. They were just the way she’d been able to afford to keep her hair and the occasional Biome hunt.

“Who said I was going to ask nicely?” Rainer said.

“You mean toss him into the shuttle?” She didn’t say *abduct*, just in case the AI was listening in and that firmware still allowed certain words like *mutiny* and *sedition* and *violently abduct the XO and force him onto a shuttle* through the spousal privilege filters.

Rainer nodded. “I blindfold him, drag him into the lower decks, and abandon him there. Tell the AI to track his comm and keep life support and environmental going so he doesn’t die.”

“To what end?” This was all getting very close to a checklist of how to get yourself tossed into the brig for sedition and mutiny.

“He’ll end up on the bridge or Engineering, eventually.” Rainer clicked his teeth.

“I don’t want to involve anyone else in this.” Tsu had given the ship a purpose and mission: prepare for Earth. He’d very, very publicly reconciled with Arden. At no point had he specifically instructed Rainer to “deal” with Bennett—just to ensure the survival of the ship.

Bennett was back to being the old familiar threat. Time to pull a few more teeth. But Tsu wouldn’t be able to protect her or Rainer if they got caught performing unauthorized dental procedures.

“I’ll have to involve my co-pilot, but I agree. No one else. But the question is how do I find approximately twelve hours where no one will miss him until he’s already back? His schedule has variations, but is ultimately predictable. He’s a social creature. Interacts only superficially, but is present and visible. Short of abducting him straight from his cabin while he’s asleep, I have been stymied by how to buy enough time where everyone will assume he is somewhere else.”

She shoved her fist into her cheek and wriggled her toes. “I have an idea, but it’s a dangerous one. Not that this entire thing isn’t dangerous.”

“You love a dangerous hunt, and do not tell me you don’t.”

“I don’t.”

He slid his hand along her thigh. “I can smell that you do, and you can see my thoughts.”

“So is that why we’ve lost our war-forms? We’re the monsters now?”



“You and I still have our war-forms. Tell me your exquisitely dangerous idea.”

He did not move his hand and instead slid it higher, pushing his fingers between her thighs and flicking his pinky against the apex. She squirmed, and he retreated a millimeter, so there'd be at least a *shred* of decency to this entire sordid plan. “Take him during his bridge shift. That will get you a chunk of six, seven hours where only half a dozen people know he's not where he's supposed to be.”

“Abducting him off the bridge is the opposite of what I'm attempting to accomplish. There's a fine line between dangerous and foolish. Are you trying to wither my cock?” He glanced down at himself.

“No, I mean take him *before* his shift and he doesn't show up. Unless someone specifically comes looking for him, good odds no one realizes he's *missing*.”

“Except we're concerned Bennett and Keenan are in cahoots.”

“Good Gaia, Rainer. *Cahoots*?” She winced while he smirked, pleased with his choice of absurd words. “Keenan also is eager to get off the bridge and back to Crèche. I'll replace Bennett on first watch and play dumb.”

Rainer didn't hide his skepticism. First watch was the busiest start-of-the-day rise-and-shine shift of the morning. *She* had no business taking first shift. She usually took part of second under Tsu or third under Harkins or Graves in the XO spot or a few reps in the big chair under close supervision.

Rainer said, “If she digs into the audit trail, she'll see I swapped you with Bennett. *And* you're going to have to convince her to give you the bridge.”

And if it was any other officer, there was no chance she was getting past them. “Leave Keenan to me. Are you sure you can make Bennett follow you into the trap?”

Rainer's eyes narrowed to feral slits. “I know exactly how to lure him down into Engineering once I have the window of

opportunity. That's the easy part. Even throwing him on the shuttle will be easy."

"You're gambling he won't shout for help."

"I went back to watch his Command Aptitude, and I realized Bennett avoids speaking anytime he would have to speak from a position of weakness or submission. He *will* if forced, but he would prefer to ride out a situation and wait for an opportunity to regain control than submit to his circumstances."

Tsu *had* said that Bennett always seemed to be in proximity to a fire—but never scorched by it. And he'd left the conference room without a word at the Earth meeting. She nodded slowly. "Go on."

"You will need to reposition the ship at the exact same time I am throwing him on the shuttle. Between his shock, confusion, natural tendencies, and the noise and motion of an abrupt ship repositioning, I estimate I will have two minutes to ambush, toss, strip his comm, and strap him into his seat. From there, he can scream all the way to *Haven*, although I don't think he will."

"You want me to reposition the ship as well?" No one had said anything about her repositioning *NightPiercer*.

"Yes. As cover."

"Except *NightPiercer* is fragile and you have the skills to make the flight to *Haven* without me adjusting the ship. The bridge crew *will* question my decision to move the ship. Hell, I'm questioning *your* decision to order it."

He caressed her cheek with the tips of her own hair. "I need the cover, and the startle effect will disarm Bennett. Right now it's nearly a three-hour transit each way. You changing the ship's position even slightly will cut the transit by forty minutes. Perhaps more."

Forty minutes wasn't inconsequential—shuttle trips were *dangerous*, and the less time spent in the shuttle, the better. Especially for a mission where getting Bennett back before anyone had realized he was gone was key.

Still, as Chief Pilot, she was in a position of trust. Nobody checked her work. Nobody questioned her when she said she had to move the ship. Nobody had coordinated with her during the last solar event. Everyone had trusted she'd do her job, and do it properly. They also trusted she wouldn't do stupid shit and scare the crew.

She pressed the fabric between her breasts but didn't touch the thick scar under it.

Rainer stroked the lock of her hair and waited while she turned it all around in her mind.

“Who is going to be your copilot?” she asked.

“I'll ask Juan.”

“Juan.” She liked Juan, but his judgement of her on *LightBearer* still stung.

“He may not be cut out for command, but he isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. He can be relied on until the bitter end.”

“This is a short trip to a court martial for us, but we can claim spousal privilege. *They* have to answer. I don't want to put them in this position.”

“I don't plan on concealing Bennett went to *Haven*, I just want it to not be public knowledge until we return. I'll act like it was his idea, and I obliged. If Bennett wants to correct the record, that's on him, but I already know he won't. Juan will be the only one who will know the truth.”

She chewed so hard on the inside of her cheek she tasted blood. Then she chewed a bit more. “I will take the bridge shift, *and* I will evaluate moving *NightPiercer*. Our timing will have to be exact.”

“Yes.”

“If I can move the ship, I will. If I can't, you'll have to figure it out. *NightPiercer* is positioned to keep it as safe as possible from the Sun, *and* relative to three other vessels in close proximity.”

Rainer's fingers slid over his forearm as his hip slid against her, and he dipped his head to eye her just before

nuzzling her. “You will have the more challenging side of the hunt, but I have no doubt you will succeed.”

And she wasn't even going to be able to see a video feed of Rainer tossing Bennett around and strapping him down like cargo.

“My main concern is Keenan accepting you on first watch,” Rainer said.

Lachesis lifted her lips to expose her teeth. “Keenan won't be a factor. She's wary when I snarl, and she only gets entangled in fights when obligated. Her aloofness will do the rest. She'll walk away.”

## TWENTY-ONE

Lachesis stepped onto the bridge, tablets tucked under her hands. The bridge crew glanced at her, expecting Bennett, then gave her a double-take when noticing she wasn't Bennett.

Keenan twisted in the big chair. "Where's the XO?"

Oh, being abducted and tossed into a shuttlecraft, but as to where he *was* at that *exact* moment? "No idea. You can stay if you want. Won't fight you for the chair."

"*You* have first shift?" Keenan asked with a hint of skepticism and disapproval.

"Apparently, yes."

Keenan pulled out her tablet and quickly checked the OIC schedule.

Lachesis resisted the urge to shift her weight and tried to paint her expression as *fine by me if you send me home* boredom. Keenan wasn't an idiot, nor was she a sloppy officer. Just a *don't bother me with this*, which was hilarious, given that Belle had failed Aptitude for exactly the same attitude. Although, granted, Keenan *had* voted for Belle.

Keenan confirmed the change, but didn't check the audit trail, which would have revealed Rainer had moved her to the slot. "You don't have an XO."

Lachesis shrugged slightly in a *I know, don't ask me* sort of way.

Keenan's fingers moved over the screen, drumming slightly while the tension in the bridge ratcheted up a notch.

Time to growl, so Keenan knew to find somewhere else to be. "I have two-hundred and thirty-eight supervised or semi-supervised hours as OIC, and that *doesn't* include my *Haven* hours as Captain, XO hours, or general bridge duty. I think I've spent more time on this bridge than you've spent in your entire career."

The bridge crew exchanged *oh hell* looks, while the words bounced off Keenan's flinty exterior. "The only hours that matter for OIC are OIC hours, especially for *this* shift. Your OIC performance during mundane operations is still shaky."

"Is there something unusual happening this shift, or more of the mundane task-pushing I need practice with?"

Keenan stood and tucked her tablet under her arm. "All yours. Not a chair I'm interested in fighting for, even if I never expected *you* would growl at me for it. And don't make me eat my words. I'm not as forgiving as Tsu."

Keenan brushed her shoulder against Lachesis as she passed, just hard enough for it to be deliberate. Lachesis snapped her eyes to the side and met Keenan's gaze.

"Must be very interesting," Lachesis said under her breath, "not really caring what happens day to day."

"I imagine I am a lot like your Gaia," Keenan whispered back, "sometimes I sit back and let the nonsense happen."

Keenan swept out of the bridge.

She claimed the chair and tossed her Navigation overlays onto half of the big screen while bringing up the OIC ticket queue in the other. There wasn't anything requiring her immediate attention. Keenan may have hated her OIC shifts, but Keenan didn't leave loose threads.

Eight minutes.

"Most recent Telemetry data from the buoy, please." She unfolded the tablets in the arm of the Captain's chair and synced up her chimera tablet to the ship's navigation system.

The three Telemetry crew on staff—because there was a lot of manual calculation and conversions happening with their current configuration—hesitated long enough. Lachesis twisted around to look right at them, which spooked them into obedience.

Six minutes.

Telemetry data not quite as expected. *Ark* had shifted positions since she'd run her last set of calculations, bringing its bow around a few degrees and down relative to *Haven*.

The ship might be doing repairs or run-ups or slightly changed position to swing out of the way of a passing object large enough to be detected by *Ark*, but not *NightPiercer* or *Haven*.

An unforeseen complication, but it didn't seem like repositioning *NightPiercer* would cause any local issues, and she'd be able to give Rainer an ideal flight path that would have him at *Haven* in two hours and twenty minutes. Plus, it was an excellent way to justify repositioning *NightPiercer*. She'd planned on playing her *I'm the pilot, because I said so* card, but now she got to play the *Because Ark, that's why* card.

"Tech, free up CPU cycles." Her chimera tablet couldn't do the calculations fast enough. Would have to steal some CPU resources from someone.

No response from the person at Tech. She asked again—still no response. And no free CPU cycles.

She looked over her shoulder. "Lieutenant Leona."

The Lieutenant's name hung in the air for four seconds, which was three seconds longer than it should have had to before Leona, slowly, turned towards her. "Yes?"

"Free up some CPU cycles, please."

"I'll need to clear that with Commander Graves," Leona replied, placing a *slight* emphasis on "Commander."

*Clear* it with Graves? Leona really had no practice being surly if she thought *that* would work. "We all know you do not need to clear *my* request with Graves. Now, pause some low

priority processes so that I can run calculations because *Ark*,” she pointed at the big screen, “has decided to wriggle around in very close quarters.”

“Ma’am, I’m not authorized to pause processes.”

What sort of low-grade resistance was this? It was like when her little sister would claim she *hadn’t* eaten the snacks when there were crumbs all over her shirt and she still had the food in her mouth. “Your symbolic resistance is noted, but for Graves’ sake, be smarter about how you do it. Being a pain in your superiors’ thighs and getting away with it is an art that requires practice and good judgement, of which you appear to have neither. Now, those CPU cycles, please, unless you’d like to try being problematic again.”

A mortified flush crept from Leona’s collar up her neck towards her ears and cheeks. She looked to the rest of the crew for some sort of support, but half of the crew were already ignoring her, and the other half turned back to their stations, except for two who simply stared at her with undisguised annoyance.

“Lieutenant.” She was down to two minutes and would need at least four to run the calculations. Bennett couldn’t start howling until *NightPiercer* started moving, and if she delayed much longer, Rainer would think she couldn’t move the ship and the danger level would increase substantially.

Leona unfroze and spun back to her station. Her fingers moved and her voice sounded strained. “Pausing processes.”

Minor challenge to authority and crisis averted.

Lachesis sent the calculations to the queue while load-splitting it with her tablet and then started the engine warm-up procedure. No need to spool the disc, but she needed the engines to be at about five percent to pivot *NightPiercer* relative to *Ark* to prevent drive-field overlapping and give the shuttle an ideal shot to *Haven*. It wasn’t ideal, but considering half the port thrusters no longer existed, and with all the damage to the wiremesh and control surfaces, using the thrusters beyond very tiny relative position changes the



computer could handle, it was best to *not* trust the thrusters for anything unless absolutely required.

Which meant using the engines and straining the hull.

A slight shudder went through *NightPiercer* as the engines spun up from idle. She overlaid more screens, monitoring the ship as much as could be done with its missing wire mesh. Several warnings came up, and a shudder and shiver rattled through her feet as the ship groaned.

“Ma’am,” Lieutenant Brandon at Telemetry said.

“We’re fine, Lieutenant.” She did *not*, in fact, know they were fine. “The superstructure is heated unevenly due to tile loss, so this is expected. I’m being very gentle with it.”

Could the crew sense she was questioning just how stupid this entire plan was? Because this felt stupid. Intensely stupid.

Brandon didn’t seem to be the same sort of resistant that Leona was. He swung around in his own chair to say, “Yes, ma’am, but usually a ping is sent out, stating this is a standard and intended maneuver. People are still very jittery. And with good reason.”

Yes, and that was the desired startle effect to help Rainer.

Three minutes late. This was falling apart.

Rainer might no longer be able to spring the trap. “I’ll fly. You handle comms.”

Now to hope Rainer was still in position....

**RAINER SHOVED BENNETT. BENNETT SHOVED BACK, BUT Rainer tossed him up the ramp into the shuttle.**

“This is going to get you tossed in the *brig*, Commander,” Bennett snarled.

Rainer paced up the ramp. Bennett backed up, matching him step for step.

Luring Bennett down into Engineering had been just as easy as expected. Even luring him *over* to the shuttle had been

easy. Lachesis had been slightly delayed in getting *NightPiercer* moving, and he'd had to make up some bullshit about the shuttle to distract Bennett for an extra ninety seconds, but with the ship's abrupt shudder, shiver, and groan, everyone had been too startled to notice or hear the XO's surprised yelp when Rainer had grabbed him.

His own comm pinged in his ear with alerts, none with the distinctive chime indicating a serious problem. There might be a serious problem somewhere that there were no sensors, but the sounds and sensations were within previous tolerances for similar maneuvers.

His mother would have told him *make what you have work*, which was old advice passed on from his grandmother, and had that advice come from him, in a round about way?

Because time wasn't a straight line. It also wasn't circular. He had a theory it was more like a funnel. And if he was a clone of Hade, potentially he *was* also Hade, just a version of Hade at a different position—

*Focus.*

Rainer ripped the comm off Bennett's ear, tossed it onto the floor of the shuttle, and slammed Bennett into the bench. The XO made an *oof* sound but wasn't quite as rattled as anticipated. No matter. A bit of extra force was perfectly within his skill set. Rainer told Juan, "Ramp up."

Rainer had only told him *we have a mission, it involves someone we don't like, and they don't know it involves them.*

Juan raised the ramp.

Bennett tried to stand. Rainer slammed him back down. The XO really was *not* understanding this was not for show. Time to offer absolute clarity. "Don't want to visit *Haven* and have a little tour? Seems like something our dutiful and moral XO would want to do so he could appreciate the dangerous work of *NightPiercer* crew and pay homage to the dead and how we're robbing their tomb."

"Fucking *zealot*," Bennett hissed. Then he snapped to Juan in the right-hand seat. "Lower the ramp."

Juan twisted around to acknowledge the XO. “Commander Bennett, nice to see you. I’m sure you’ll enjoy your tour of *Haven*. We’re proud of the work we’ve been doing.”

Bennett’s expression twisted into utter fury. “This is a *crime*.”

“As I said, we’re proud of the work we’ve been doing. *All* of it.”

Rainer grinned.

Bennet straightened his uniform. “I’m sure you are. I hope you’re *sufficiently* proud to make this worth it.”

“I wouldn’t expect Operations to understand, sir.”

“You learned *nothing* from your time on *LightBearer*, did you,” Bennett growled.

“I learned enough, sir. And I’m putting it to use.”

Rainer pulled off his boots and secured them, then buckled into the pilot’s seat. He keyed in the start sequence and the shuttle began its little rattle. “Bridge, we’re ready to depart, start sequence engaged.”

“Understood.” Lachesis’ voice dripped in his ear. “Be advised *Ark* has changed positions. Sending you an updated flight path now. You have a straight shot into *Haven*, but no detours. This is a narrow flight corridor.”

“Understood. Any idea why *Ark* has changed position?” He pushed the engines to spool as fast as possible. They were behind. *Ark* shifting was not part of the plan. Blasted rotten timing, complicating things.

“No. There is some minor drive field and EM field interference. Absent additional evidence, I’m assuming they’re up to something. Or are losing helm control. Encrypted comms once you launch.”

The klaxon blared as the cargo doors unsealed and ground open. The dark void waited for them—in the distance, the lights of *Haven*, and off behind *Haven* and to the side, the much larger blot of *Ark*. “Boots off and watch wound.”

“Safe journey.”

He paused just before he launched, fingers hovering over the console, waiting for some joke or jest, but none came. His mate’s attention was elsewhere, and he, for the life of him, couldn’t think of anything witty to say.

This might be very bad luck...

## TWENTY-TWO

The telemetry data from the shuttle still suffered a relay delay, then another delay while it was passed through conversion equations and then passed back to *Haven*. The intermingling of the various drive and EM fields generated by the three ships in such close proximity was not helping.

Lachesis resettled herself in the Captain's chair. The feeds from *Haven* were increasingly distorted, obscuring *NightPiercer's* own awareness of *Ark's* actual position. But she still had her eyeballs and forward camera feeds.

She checked her hand-drawn grids and lines and the timer running on her screen.

No doubt about it: *Ark* was moving.

Slowly. Barely above a drift.

She also would not have noticed it if she'd been doing nav scenarios or working the queue. Or if another officer had been here and not realized the small change warranted large amounts of vigilance.

The lights visible on *Ark's* facing side clicked off like dominos falling.

She sat up straighter. "*Ark* is on the move."

Her tone must have startled the crew—she hadn't meant to sound like the smack of old leather—and the Lieutenant at Tech asked, nonplussed, "And?"

She pulled up her scenarios. “Tech, start killing processes to have CPU cycles in reserve.”

“Navigator—”

“That was not a request.” *Ark* continued slithering through the dark. The sunlight slid off its belly and spine, giving her the only real clues to its motion given the delays and poor connection with *Haven*.

She accessed the encrypted packet stream that flowed between *Haven* and *NightPiercer*.

>> [NIGHTPIERCER] ARK on move and has gone dark.

>> [HAVEN] Undes37dsd

>> **59.5894% packet loss** <<

>> **Umbilical tether integrity: DEGRADED** <<

*Ark*'s drift bent towards them, a ghostly, increasingly shadowy silhouette in the endless dark.

*Fuck this shit.* “Graceful CPU process dump. I need everything available in ninety seconds.”

“This is an overreaction,” Lieutenant Leona told her.

“Ships do not crowd each other like this. Telemetry, ping *Ark*.”

No response from *Ark*.

Lachesis growled. “Tomely, this silent treatment is getting old. Add a priority flag and ping again.”

Still no response.

“If that’s how you want it, Captain.” So much for a nice, quiet abduction to *Haven*. The timing was suspect as hell. Perhaps *Gaia* was real, and She was just playing with them for Her entertainment.

*Watch me scramble through your maze, then.*

She tapped in the engine start sequence command. A shiver went through the ship, followed by a single throb.

>> **73.5894% packet loss** <<

>> *Umbilical tether integrity: DEGRADED* <<

*Ark*'s form slid even closer.

*NightPiercer*'s exterior lights did very little in the all-consuming darkness, but right then, they revealed barely visible shadowy movement along *Ark*'s belly.

She barred her teeth as her fingers trembled over the flight controls. "Captain to the bridge."

Tsu arrived eight minutes later, as she was running scenarios on if *Ark* was going to collide with anything important or blow up. She didn't immediately get out of the chair as her fingers moved over her tablets. "*Ark* has gone dark and silent, and is on the move, but I think it's intentional and decelerating into position. It's cast *Haven* in shadow and affected the umbilical link, and launched three, perhaps more, shuttles I estimate are on trajectory to the buoy shuttle. My guess is Tomely is either trying to poke out our eyes or push us off the carcass or both."

"Where's Bennett?" Tsu demanded.

Lachesis continued her math while watching *Ark* move through her hand-drawn grid overlay. "Well, that's the thing."

"What thing would *that* be?"

"He's on *Haven*. Sir." Rainer had arrived at *Haven* about two hours earlier, so safe to say Bennett was, in fact, on *Haven*.

The entire bridge froze to look at her.

Tsu's voice took on bite. "What is Bennett doing on *Haven*?"

Hopefully screaming inside his own skull and having a nice Come-To-Gaia moment. She gathered up her tablets to stand. "Getting a tour."

Tsu stopped her with an abrupt gesture. "Since Commander Rainer isn't here and you're already maneuvering the ship, continue. I'll take Engineering."

“Sir—” she started to say, but Tsu moved to the Engineering station to argue with the engines.

“Who is flying *Haven*?” Tsu asked instead of explaining himself further, but his scent wasn’t exactly reassuring. This would be a hell of a time to teach her a “lesson.”

She was *so* fried when this was over. Rainer too.

Fuck.

But first, they had to survive. So... “I presume Rainer is on *Haven*’s bridge.”

Tsu skillfully keyed in commands on his console. “Returning engines to idle. Let’s let Tomely see we’re not impressed. I presume you’ve attempted to make contact and are being ignored?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tech, hold those CPU cycles on our end and see if we can process the umbilical data to something useable. I do not like being limited to what we can make out through the windows.”

*NightPiercer*’s thrum eased as the engines spiraled back to idle power. The OIC queue continued to scroll at a rapid pace off to the side of the screen, while she watched the lights of *Ark* slip through the darkness and eventually come to a halt.

“They’re pinging us.” Telemetry said.

Lachesis twisted around. “*Ark* or *Haven*?”

“*Ark*.”

“Oh, *now* they want to talk,” she said dryly.

Tsu pointed at her. “Lachesis, I’m going to stay out of sight. Let’s see how Tomely reacts to seeing you.”

“Sir, we know how Tomely reacts to me. Last time he threatened to smear me across the side of *NightPiercer*.”

“Precisely. He’s *expecting* to see anyone but you.” Tsu stepped over to the far side of the bridge to the Engineering station and mostly out of range of the cameras. “We’re going to do *good cop*, *bad cop*, and you’re the bad cop.”



“What is a ‘cop’?”

“Old Earth slang for security officer. You be unreasonable, angry, arrogant, and giddy on forcing your old Captain to meet you on these terms. Drain his emotional reserves. Then I’ll swoop in as the calm voice of reason, and he will be much more willing to de-escalate. Everyone.” Tsu pointed at the rest of the crew. “Do *not* look at me. I am not here. She’s Officer In Command.”

The doubt could not have been thicker than an unwashed sixteen-bunk of adolescents.

Well, if she was the one in command of this brewing disaster, she was going to have a little something in her pocket. Inspired by every School kid’s favorite rude gesture to authority. “Then start spooling the generator disc.”

“I just ordered to *not* spool.”

“And my back-up plan involves having the disk spooling. But windmilling, not actually attempting to accelerate.”

“It’s fragile,” Tsu advised her.

“So go slowly with it. You *do* know how to spool it, don’t you?”

Tsu raised a brow. “Warrant Officer. Mind yourself.”

“I’m getting warmed up,” she told him. “Rainer’s not here, so I can’t perform the usual incantations to invoke good luck.”

“Consider that all the incantations and invocations you’re going to get. Now that you’re sufficiently warmed up and in the bridle, Tomely is waiting.”

She yanked the tie off her braid and shoved it into a pocket, then rapidly raked her hand through her hair and shook it out into a red tumble of wild coils and messy, unbrushed waves. She quickly looped it as best she could over one shoulder, then settled herself into the big chair, fingers resting lightly on the tablets extended from the left arm.

The screen squished her data to the left and split-screen the comm feed with *Ark*.

Captain Tomely didn't lunge out of his seat, but he definitely sat up very straight.

An uncomfortable silence spread between the stars.

Tomely wasn't going to speak first, so she'd have to do it. "Captain Tomely. I am Warrant Officer Lachesis, *NightPiercer's* Navigator, Chief Pilot, and current OIC."

"I know who you are," Tomely growled. "I also see your condition wasn't as grave as we were led to believe."

She shifted to her hip, slouching slightly in the big chair, and rested her head in her hand. It pissed Tomely off, while giving her a better view of her trio of tablets. "My survival is on account of you, Captain. If not for you trying to take *Haven* by force, I wouldn't have been so angry, and I would have died on a pedestrian shuttle ride back to *NightPiercer*."

"How lovely. Where is Tsu?"

"Hmmm. Not sure, actually. Engineering, I think." She twisted around to look at the crew behind her. "Engineering? Yes?"

Everyone nodded and made *hmm-mm, yes* noises.

Lachesis swung back to her old captain. "Captain Tsu is in Engineering. Commander Rainer is on *Haven*. Commander Bennett is also on *Haven*. Keenan, Graves, and Harkins are all off duty. So you'll be dealing with me."

"More's the pity for your ship then."

"More like your bad luck I was the one on duty, because I spotted *Ark's* groping about despite how you tried to obfuscate your 'drafting' to precisely within the margin of error of our buoy." She didn't hide her little grin. "Those shuttles aren't going to *Haven*, they're going to the buoy. I suspect you're going to attempt to board the buoy and inject malware into the datastream, while using all those other shuttles just to add to field-crowding and an old-fashioned siege line to render *NightPiercer* blind, deaf, crippled, and infected. Then you will attempt to take control of *Haven*."

Tomely did not respond, but his jaw looked carved of stone.

“I think you should move back into position and forget this little attempt,” Lachesis said. “And I’ll forget it happened and things don’t have to get uglier than they already are. And believe me, they can get uglier. Mainly because I don’t believe those guns on your ship are real, and even if they were, you can’t fire them. You see, your little boarding party to *Haven*? They were *very* forthcoming with the extent of your ship’s damage.”

Tomely smirked. “Empty threats, she-wolf. Go find your captain and get to your station like the good dog he’s turned you into.”

“I guess if you insist on playing Radiation Bath, we can play Radiation Bath. It’s not my favorite game, but I am very good at it.” She typed out a text command to Telemetry, telling them to relay to *Haven* via encrypted packets a new set of coordinates and a countdown for when to get moving. She caught Tsu’s eye. He nodded.

Tsu had brought the disc up in test mode, which meant just enough to get it spinning in its housing so that Engineering could test it for vibrations or other peculiarities.

“Packets received,” Telemetry told her. “They’re green.”

Excellent. The buoy had managed to get the little scraps of data through what was left of the umbilical. She nodded to Tsu. “Ten seconds, Engineering.”

Tsu brushed his comm. “All decks: evasive maneuver incoming. Ten seconds until full engine burn.”

*Three...*

*Two...*

*One.*

She hit the initiate button on her tablets.

*NightPiercer* groaned. The ship began to swing around on its center as the starboard engines ignited. At the same time,

*Haven's* forward thrusters fired, backing the clunky old ship straight back (more or less) out of the little cuddle puddle.

The burn on the engines automatically cut off at precisely 3.2 seconds. The ship continued to swing around, bobbing and groaning slightly, while the half-functional maneuvering thrusters did their best.

The port engines fired, slowing the ship just as its engine-end was pointed straight at the buoy and *Ark*.

The feed with *Ark* frizzled to nothing.

**>> 100% packet loss <<**

**>> Umbilical tether : lost<<**

**>> Umbilical tether integrity: SIGNAL LOST <<**

## TWENTY-THREE

She leaned back in the chair. The view now was nothing but a field of stars, but from a side-facing camera, she could see *Haven's* little silhouette chugging backwards—indicated by the burn of forward thrusters in the darkness.

*Haven's* forward lights flickered in a pattern.

“Morse code,” Brandon said. “That’s Morse code. Well, using lights.”

“Morse code?” Lachesis asked.

“It’s an old Earth way of communicating using dashes and dots. Or light flashes. Harkins makes all of us learn it. Figures there’s a decent chance we’ll have to use it on Earth.”

Interesting.

“So what did they say?” Tsu asked, his voice warm with approval.

“I think it was *CK*, which is an old way of saying everything’s fine and they don’t need assistance.”

Time to mop up. She typed out a message to the on-duty Crew Chief to send teams out to look for damage, and Tsu had already sent out orders to the necessary Engineering techs to split off to their assigned Crew inspection teams. Some minor damage reports already rolled in, looked like mostly some panels had come loose, Medical had had some glass breakage, and Biome had had a ceiling light fall and was currently dangling from its backup harness above a field of beans.

Tsu gestured for her to move.

The next hour was a waiting game—there were no comms with so much interference, and Tsu decided to let Tomely stew in his own juices while they assessed if *NightPiercer* took any noteworthy damage.

Harkins arrived early for his watch. Tsu cocked his head towards the Telemetry lead. “Good. We’re just about to swing back around. Lachesis, take the XO spot for now so we can continue our little game with Tomely. Harkins, take the Engineering spot and stay out of sight for right now. We’re draining Tomely’s emotional reserves.”

Harkins moved out of sight of the main cameras. “In what way?”

“He’s rattled having to deal with a crew member he culled from his own ship now being the adversary across from him. Bennett is on *Haven*, by the way. Were you aware he was going with Rainer?”

Lachesis put the most innocent expression possible on her face. It probably wasn’t convincing.

Harkins settled into his place. “I’ve heard, and I had no idea. Bennett doesn’t miss bridge shifts, but on the other hand, Rainer had room on this shuttle and was making a quick trip instead of a multi-week mission. He may have taken the opportunity.”

She couldn’t tell if he honestly believed that’s what happened, or if he didn’t care. It wasn’t like Harkins was especially cozy with Bennett. Harkins also wasn’t very cozy with Rainer.

Tsu pondered Harkins’ statement just long enough she felt a few beads of sweat form at the small of her back. Then he told her, “Stand there and do your best glowering Rainer impression.”

Harkins snickered at her and watched the show. She arranged her face and posture to imitate her husband as if he was listening to two low-grade techs try to impress him with technobabble.

*Ark* pinged exactly six minutes and twenty-three seconds after they finished their pivot.

Tomely looked like he'd been chewing on rocks. "Tsu. At what point did you take the bridge back from your Warrant Officer? Before the war started or after?"

"Don't be dramatic, Tomely. We aren't at war, unless you've declared it and no one could hear it over all the field interference you caused." Tsu twisted his lips in an unpleasant smile. "Lachesis, by the way, is an exceptional talent. A little unpredictable at times, prone to aggression, but all told, if she's the one you were willing to part with, my compliments on your embarrassment of riches."

"You can remove your lips from my ass, Tsu."

Tsu's smile slid more into a smirk. "My lips prefer to be firmly on my husband's ass."

Lachesis managed to not cough.

Tsu folded his hands in his lap. "As *I* told you when you first arrived, send us a list of what you require and we'll see if compromises can be made. You have three choices: wait, cooperate, or escalate hostilities. There are no other options."

"Interfering with your harvesting and repairs is also an option," Tomely said darkly.

"I would file that under *escalation*. So let me tell you what we will do, should you do that: we will have no other option but to leave this system. I will direct *Haven's* crew to dump its powercore and all fabrication supplies before they disembark. Then we will use our FTL capability to go somewhere else. Perhaps we will arrive. Perhaps we will not." Tsu shifted forward. "But as for you and *Ark*? I will make certain we leave you with *nothing* except this damned void. And when your crew turns to you wanting answers, *that* will be your answer, Captain. Take my scraps or you will have nothing, not even *hope*."

Tomely growled back, "We make our own hope out here. We manufacture and cling to it, and I am not going to go back

to my crew and tell them they have to *wait* until you are done.”

Tomely gestured towards someone out of view. Tsu brushed his hand, palm flat, over the arm of his chair—the signal for her to stay composed through whatever Tomely had coming next.

There was some faint scuffling, although that might have been the compromised comm signal. A moment later, her father stepped up to the Captain’s side.

He was *alive*.

She gasped, mentally scrambled to keep composure, froze, mentally stumbled, froze again. “*Dad*.”

Tsu tensed but did not otherwise move, his body clenching under his uniform.

Even through the feed, it was obvious her father had lost weight, and was incredibly unwell—sunken cheeks, eyes, a lingering pallor, his strong body diminished under a uniform that he no longer filled out. The empty left sleeve was pinned up against his shoulder.

He looked right at her, coherent, but bewildered and lost, like he saw her from over light years or dimensions. “Lachesis?”

Her throat refused to work.

*Ark* had saved his life? An aging Crew Chief and Artisan musician with one arm?

Joy warred with grief, and transformed into denial, confusion, paralysis.

Dear Gaia... *why* had Tomely ordered his life saved?

Not that she wasn’t grateful, but—

What was Tomely *doing*?

Tsu settled back in his chair. “Crew Chief. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, one father of a daughter to another. You should be very proud of your daughter. In the short time with us, she has proven to be an outstanding officer in every



regard. I value her voice at my table, and her skills on my bridge.”

Her father stared at her, expression lacking any understanding.

What had Tomely *done* to her father? Her scar throbbed with the beat of her heart, and her skin felt that clammy death against the small of her spine, smelled it all again, the blood droplets floating in the air, the glow of instruments against darkness, and the little voice in the back of her head howling *what are you doing, what are you doing*.

Tsu’s eyes narrowed. “Tomely, if both ships survive, what we do here will set the tone for what happens on planet. I’ve outlined your options, and I have outlined the consequences. I am fully prepared to follow through.

“Your bridge, Warrant Officer. Mop up this situation as required.”

Muscle memory kicked in and put her ass into the Captain’s chair. She clasped the arms to hide how her hands shook.

Her father, across the darkness, watched her. She re-focused on Tomely, aware of the weight of the crew behind her, especially Harkins watching in the corner, his neck craned to get a view of the awful scene in front of them.

Her brain buzzed and her ears rang. “If there’s nothing else, Captain Tomely, I’m certain we both have standard ship matters to return to.” She hesitated, then kicked her hesitation to the side. This was another chance to say a *proper* goodbye to her father. Not rushed in a bay, as they were both dying and out of their minds. “Dad. I can’t believe you’re still alive. I’m so glad. Tell Mom and Clotho I’m fine, and if we ever are able to exchange mail between ships again, I have a very long letter to write.”

His lost look melted and then warmed, like a thousand weights holding the lines of his face down had suddenly lifted. “Pup, I expect the details. I thought everything I remembered was a dream.”

*Pup.* Bittersweet taste washed over her tongue. “Not a dream, just a very odd story. I think about all of you every day. I’m still so glad we aren’t alone out here. I’d rather argue than howl into the void—”

*Ark* cut the feed.

Harkins stood. “That didn’t go as Tomely expected.”

“What did he expect?” one of the Telemetry crew asked.

“I’m not sure, but he didn’t get it, and that’s enough.”

Lachesis bowed her head and breathed out, ragged, raw. Slumped over her waist, fingers still curled into the arms of the chair. Resolve flowed out of her limbs and evaporated into the air around her.

She counted out five breaths. In. Out. In. Out. In.

Lifted her head. The screen had gone back to trajectories and the OIC task list, and a little window over which an assortment of officer pings and messages scrolled.

She gathered herself. “Tomely ordered my father’s life saved for a reason, and it sure as hell wasn’t munificence or Crèche calculations that dictated a fifty-one-year-old Crew Chief and Artisan Musician down an arm be saved. And Tomely...paraded... him out like...” she gestured to the screen in unmitigated, fearful disgust.

Harkins looked at the screen, arms folded. “Agreed. It was disgusting and ghoulish.”

“I feel like a ghoul for even questioning his survival,” she told Harkins.

He swung his attention to her. “You shouldn’t. Your watch is over. Relieved.”

Thank Gaia. Time to go find something Rainer had brewed in a vat somewhere and fall into it. The drink, not the vat. Unless she could find the vat. And then she was definitely going to drink it dry...

## TWENTY-FOUR

Rainer twisted on his hip as the bridge door slid open. Bennett stood on the other side with one of his Engineering crew. His uniform was dirty and covered in musty gray dust that smelled of the collected, withered dust that summed up *Haven's* ghostly passages.

The XO hadn't had to be rescued from the bowels of the ship, and his minor success at finding his way out of the maze would make this all the more sweet. Let Bennett think, for a few moments, he had scratched victory from the situation.

Bennett certainly smelled of whiffs of defiance and gloating and victory, to be mingled with the pitch-blackness of hatred, resentment, and buried even deeper under that, the cocktail of scents summarized as *trauma*.

The scent stirred half-memories. Perhaps a sensation like nostalgia, but not quite. Familiar. Very familiar.

He re-focused on Bennett and adjusted his posture and expression to the most benign thing he could mimic. "Bennett. Welcome to *Haven's* bridge."

Bennett stepped over the threshold. His boots clattered under the heaviness of his stride, rattling the open metal grate that passed for the floor. His attention moved to the screen and focused on the maps and video feed before them. "What's happening?"

Rainer followed the XO's gaze. "What *was* happening. Tomely's move now."

Bennett jerked his head towards Rainer. “What are you talking about?”

The XO had missed the entire incident and the aftermath. They had not been able to pick up what transpired between *Ark* and *NightPiercer* in real time, but encrypted packets sent and re-compiled by Belle over the past six hours had included a new position for *Haven*, and a brief summary: Tsu had given Tomely an ultimatum and Rainer was to prepare to destroy *Haven*.

He had little intention of destroying *Haven*, but whatever had occurred on *NightPiercer* must have been extremely grave to have that order given. So he'd decided to make it *look* like he was preparing to destroy *Haven* as much as *Ark* might be able to detect such preparations.

*Ark* had remained in position, with *NightPiercer* remaining too close to *Ark*, and *Haven* instructed to hang back out of the worst of the fields given the hull shielding was not in good condition and the Core could not take very much disruption due to primitive field containment.

That had been an unexpected side effect of the field crowding: *Haven's* Core had had a very primitive type of stabilization. It had been an intriguing challenge, albeit one he would have preferred not to ever address again.

If this went on much longer, he would have to move the ship to a completely different position. That position being anywhere but their current one.

Rainer did not share any of that with Bennett. The XO could enjoy the feeling of being helpless and useless. “*Ark* attempted to take *Haven*. They failed. Right now, we are attempting to communicate that *Haven* will turn into a very large and dangerous bomb if crowded, so perhaps *Ark* should consider a different sort of menacing behavior.”

Bennett's expression burned, while his scent blazed with an exquisite mix of hatred and trauma and rage and helplessness.

Rainer surged out of the chair, spun, and seized Bennett's uniform. He yanked the stunned XO forward. Bennett *oof'd* as he impacted the unforgiving chair.

Rainer swept behind Bennett and slammed the XO into the chair with hands on both shoulders. "Did you enjoy seeing how a ship dies, Commander? Did you enjoy seeing the *futility* of what it is to try to survive out here, and how the void will *always* take us? How some of us die quietly, and some of us cling to life in those gyms while the bodies pile around us?"

"Let me up, you mutt," Bennett growled.

"No. I want you to *sit* here, on this cold, damp bridge, commanding a ship full of *death* and barely functioning systems and the last remaining crew even vaguely qualified to staff the bridge. *This* will be *NightPiercer* in five years. *This* is all that waits for you and your ambitions."

Bennett's neck throbbed with his pulse. Beads of sweat emerged from his skin. His muscles corded, and the scent of rage and defiance permeated the air. Rainer leaned closer, *hearing* the pounding of the man's blood, smelling the blood in the soft, vulnerable flesh between the jaw and throat.

He whispered, "Enjoy it. Absorb it. Understand what Tomely and Tsu already know: that we are *dying*, and *this* is our fate if we do not get to a planet, and that is why we are fighting over this ship. We are fighting over *life*, and it is happening *now* because this is our *last* chance."

Bennett's eyes slid to the side.

"Once you're done, I will let you shower, I will assign you a bunk, you can eat the rations, and then you can sleep in the only warm, safe space left on this ship, with the only living people left on this ship. It's a glimpse of the future, just like my great-grandmother had a century ago. Except." Rainer grabbed the back of Bennett's neck and yanked his head *back*, exposing the man's throat completely and forcing him to look at the unfinished ceiling and the werewolf looming over him. "I am not Gaia, and I am not giving you twenty years to accept reality and engineer the necessary solution. The humans, *your ancestors*, argued about the inevitable until Gaia ripped their

arguments from them. She has *done it again*, and you will not get in my way. *This* is what waits for *NightPiercer*.” Bennett didn’t flinch or make a sound, and his expression and scent burned with nothing but pitch-dark hatred. Rainer bared his elongated front teeth. “No one who has served on this ship is going to do *anything* that will help you delay *NightPiercer*’s repairs or departure to a planet. They know you and everyone like you will only lead them to death. A death they have seen and lived with and know is very, very real and very, very present.”

“And you won’t lead them to death?” Bennett hissed through clenched teeth.

Rainer bent very low, so low, close enough he felt Bennett’s pulsing breath against his face and could see the amber and umber flecks spearing the loam of his irises. The man’s pulse thundered against his ears, and in the scalp clutched under his fingers.

He inhaled, so he’d remember it. “There may be death, but there will also be hope.”

“Once we are back on *NightPiercer*, you will be in silver chains for this,” Bennett hissed.

Rainer stretched his lips back over his teeth. “And what will you tell them? The truth? Tell them about the darkness, the cold, the silence, the dead bodies piled in the gyms while the survivors, deranged and mangled from lack of gravity, kept lifting weights. Tell them about the blood, the corpse dust, the AI trained by death, the way they fought to keep everything normal and perfect like it wasn’t all happening. Tell *NightPiercer* you’ve seen how when the ship dies, we die. Tell them how the ship is our heart, and we are the blood, and when it stops beating, we stop flowing. Tell them all the things I forced you to experience. Tell them *everything*.”

Bennet bucked and broke free. He ducked, spun, and darted out of the chair. Rainer grinned. “Then, after you tell them what you’ve seen, they will turn to you and plead *what do we do so that it isn’t us*, and they will expect an answer. Tsu

has given them an answer: we're going to Earth. What answer will *you* give them?"

Bennett's entire body moved with pent-up rage and deep breathing.

"Because if you lie, you know how you die. Assuming they even believe your assurances there is nothing to worry about, which they won't. Not when I tell them that any single one of them is welcome to come to *Haven*, and I will show them what I showed you, and they can decide for themselves what the truth is. I will win. And If you tell the truth, I also win." Rainer matched Bennett step for step. "But you won't lie, and you won't tell the truth. You will choose silence."

Bennett quaked with anger, and under that, something else. Something like tears. Angry, ugly tears. Disbelief. *Hatred*.

It was a scent he remembered. A very particular cocktail. The memory of a scent burned and scalded into his DNA.

Rainer ground it deeper, with relish and viciousness. "I will see you muzzled, silenced, powerless. Every time you try to tell people that there is a future on *NightPiercer*, I will offer them the chance to see the future here on *Haven*. So I know you will say nothing. You will be obedient and useful to my purpose. Now, enjoy your time on *Haven's* bridge. I'll let you have the chair."

## TWENTY-FIVE

The ramp to the shuttle clanked against the bay floor. First off were Xav and Cheshire. She smiled as they passed her. “Good flight?”

Cheshire gave her a grin. “The Commander had Belle fly the first part of the approach. Was a bit bumpy. But nothing *we* aren’t used to.”

She winked at him and compressed her lips so she didn’t grin. “Glad to hear it.”

Another few people unloaded from the shuttle, then Belle came down the ramp, followed closely by Rainer and Bennett. Bennett was unshaven and had two days of shadow along his jaw. He looked ragged and rumped, and, beyond the initial impression, grey and hollowed out.

Rainer came down the ramp in bare feet, his boots strung over his flight bag.

Her heart leapt at seeing him, but she kept her feet firmly on the bay floor.

Belle bolted for her. “Lachesis! Shit, *shit!* Look at you, fucking *alive*. I mean, I knew you were alive but...”

They hadn’t seen each other since, well, *Haven*. Her throat barely worked as she choked with raw emotion. She grabbed Belle’s hands anyway. “Are you coming back for a while?”

Belle squeezed back. “Oh, some bullshit about Medical, gravity, yadda yadda, blah blah.”



Lachesis lowered her voice. “I’m sorry. I understand why you don’t want to come back.”

Belle laughed without any humor. “I told you, as long as we make sure no one else ends up in that box again, I can do this for the rest of my life. And from what I hear, we’re getting off this bucket. Date’s been set, plan’s in motion.”

Lachesis smiled. “It’s true. Tsu ordered us to *prepare*, not *repair*.”

“Fucking *genius*. Everyone on *Haven* is cheering. Can you hear them from here?”

“Amazing what one word will do. Wish I could tell you I knew the magic word to get you a bunk change, but I don’t have a lot of influence over who decides that.”

“Oh, you do, and now, so do I.” Belle’s eyes danced with wicked mischief. “The wrong sort of influence. So I guess my request is getting influenced right into the overflow buffer.”

Rainer hadn’t kept the other *Haven* crew clear of the Bennett abduction? Lachesis gave Belle’s arms a gentle tug. “Made a new friend?”

“We’re *real* friendly now. Friends for life.” Belle freed herself from Lachesis’ grip. After a split-second awkward pause, Belle said, “How about some gym time later?”

A half-second mental calculation on if it would be appropriate came up with *who cares*. “Yes. Ping me when you get your schedule.”

Belle’s scent became a mixture of relief and genuine happiness. She stepped aside and tilted her head towards Rainer, who waited patiently off with some of the other crew. Bennett stood even a little beyond that, watching.

She tugged the front of Rainer’s uniform. Emotions tightened around her throat like a choke chain.

There were too many emotions to match to too few words. Basic honesty would have to do. “Welcome home. I missed you.”

He dipped his head. “I thought about you every day.”

“But not every moment.” She managed to tease him a bit, although everything felt strangled and breathless.

“I *am* capable of focus. Even when you are the distraction.” He shifted closer, compressing her forearms and hands between his chest and hers even though his hands remained at his sides.

“Under certain conditions.”

He finally brushed his fingertips along her cheeks and down her jaw to the very soft spot of her neck. She lifted her head to expose the vulnerable spot to his fingertip touch, and the curve of her throat. His fingertips found precise spots with featherlight ease.

He drew her up for a soft, gentle kiss.

Bennett walked around them, but close enough he brushed shoulders with Rainer and the breeze of his passing tugged at the fine hairs by her ear. He didn’t greet her and he didn’t pause on his way out, but he did say, “I find it very interesting that my presence on *Haven* so perfectly coincided with *Ark*’s actions.”

LACHESIS SET DOWN TWO CUPS OF HOT TEA IN FRONT OF Rainer. One of his favorite blend, a basic concoction of various types of dried mint, that was still very easy to source from the tea-makers. Many varieties of mint were grown down in the Biomes for Medical, and whatever Medical didn’t use ended up as artisan teas, and most tea-makers trained on mint and other common herb surplus. Her favorite was the red tea flavored with bits of apple peelings. The only reason the rooibos plant was given any spot in the Biomes beyond the seeds being frozen was because the plants, once germinated, were easy to grow, tolerated poor soil, and needed very little water. They were a good way to keep a plot of dirt in use that needed to rest from more demanding crops, and tea-makers could preserve the craft of red teas.

The tea had been in very limited supply before *LightBearer* and impossible to find since. She had been

carefully rationing her supply to make it last. She might never have it again once she drank the last cup.

She sipped it, savored it. “Bennett is *angry*.”

Rainer leaned back against the couch and stretched his arm across it. The joint popped, and he cricked his neck, stretching the scarred skin on that side. His lips curled in a cruel, feral smile. “Yes. Very.”

Overall, this mission could be counted as a success. Tsu suspected something had happened under his snout, but the Captain hadn’t asked her any questions, Keenan hadn’t ratted her out, no one had pointed out the audit change trail, and Bennett hadn’t said anything.

And Bennett wouldn’t—he was humiliated, furious, and every other dark, painful emotion he’d ever compelled anyone else to feel. He’d thought he’d always be able to evade the fire, and surprise: someone had tossed him right in.

But the victory was marred.

“You exposed the *Haven* crew to this,” she told him darkly. “That wasn’t the arrangement. Only Juan was supposed to be involved.”

“That became impossible once *Ark* became involved. Juan only knows what he witnessed on the shuttle, while Belle and Dietrich witnessed our exchange on the bridge. None of what Belle or Dietrich saw is anything Bennett would want to put on public record. The rest of the *Haven* crew knows nothing specific. He wandered ten hours before he found his way to Engineering, and they brought him to the bridge. He said nothing to them and they asked no questions.”

“You’re sure he won’t howl,” she said.

“This is Bennett we’re dealing with. I am certain of nothing.”

“He didn’t strike me as having a change of heart.”

“But the Bennett that came back from *Haven* is not the one who left *NightPiercer*.”

“He’s already scheming, suggesting collusion between *NightPiercer* and *Ark*.”

Rainer brushed this concern away with a gesture of his teacup. “Sowing disinformation and conflict and *but what if*, then let people set up their own intellectual camps is a classic tactic, especially on Earth in the century or so leading up to Exodus when information was easy to come by, but authenticity difficult to verify. Although... the timing *is* suspect.”

“And here I was brushing it off to Gaia pouncing on an opportunity to toy with us and turn us against each other since Her most recent attempt failed.”

Rainer slid his gaze towards her and a slow smile lifted his lips. “Oh? *You* contemplating Gaia?”

She slid back on the couch and tucked her feet up against her rump. “I contemplate Gaia occasionally. I *was* raised in the faith.”

“You contemplate Her either as some philosophical and historical construct, *or* hoping that She doesn’t exist.”

“I *prefer* not to think of Her at all.” Gaia’s purpose for them wasn’t exactly comforting, and it suited her fine if Gaia wasn’t real at all.

Rainer set his cup down and shifted towards her. He reached for her cup, and she relinquished it, but avoided holding his questing hands. He settled for placing his palms on her thigh. He watched her with those mis-matched Jupiter-like eyes, dangerous and turbulent like the planet, but also unmoving and ever-present.

Laying in bed between AG therapy sessions with another wolf’s heart sustaining her life had given her a lot of time to think, while the increasing organ rejection fever had made her thoughts muddled and jumbled and undisciplined. She felt between her breasts along the scar that sat there, but didn’t push down on the fabric to make contact with the raised ridge of skin.

“Maybe Tsu was right when he told you we scratch and claw at the darkness, thinking we’re entitled to survive. As if the cosmos *owes* us survival. And Gaia just laughs at our conceit and She pits us against each other. I can’t think how anyone on this ship would have colluded with *Ark*. Perhaps I just want a better explanation than *bad luck*.”

“I could perhaps calculate some cosmic entropy that—”

“Shush.”

“So you would prefer to believe it’s divine meddling rather than betrayal. Intriguing.” His tone remained serious, but laughter danced in his gaze like shocks of lightning across Jupiter’s cloud top.

Would she ever see the planet again? She had grown up with Jupiter ever-present in her field of view. And for thousands of years the civilization of Earth had only seen it as a bright point in the sky, or perhaps a distant disc of rotating, banded colors through telescopes, or the images taken by the handful of probes that had passed it. None of it had ever *really* captured the churning danger and sheer *presence* of Jupiter. Jupiter had been inevitable.

She touched his scarred jaw. On a planet, she would tell the pups and children about the time up here in the darkness, and she’d have to tell them about Jupiter, and she could show them pictures, but it might be hundreds of years before anyone ever saw Jupiter again.

“Still don’t believe we’re supposed to go back?” Rainer asked. “I can smell the doubt on you. How you wrestle with Gaia Herself.”

“My paws are not cold, thank you. I’m just not sure Gaia isn’t actively trying to kill us.”

“Then all we have to do is not kill each other.”

“That appears to be more difficult than you would think.”

“I have so far managed to not kill Bennett.” He slipped a few of the fine strands by her ear. “All I had to do was realize the reason your scent lingered with me was you were my mate, then stop at nothing to have you. I see myself in this as the

catalyst. Perhaps I am, as I am Hade's clone. He was sent away, I was called home."

"You can't honestly think Gaia is *happy* about *that* level of sentient hubris."

"I exist as a result of intense sentient hubris."

"To be fair, we all do." Submitting oneself to the Crèche Pool *was* probably the greatest display of hubris she could think of. Aside from whatever process had created Rainer.

Rainer pushed her down into the couch. "Then there's nothing to worry about, my love. We're doing exactly what we're supposed to."

"Oh, is this part of that?" she inquired mischievously.

He kissed under her jaw. "This is most *definitely* part of that..."

## TWENTY-SIX

**L**achesis frowned at her tablet.

“What?” Rainer swung his attention to her while sipping his morning tea.

“Um.” She tapped her lower lip. “Um.”

“Um?”

*TO: Lachesis [Warrant Officer :: Navigation ]*

*From: MEDICAL [GYNECOLOGICAL ->  
OBSTETRICS]*

*>> THIS IS AN AUTOMATED MESSAGE, DO  
NOT REPLY <<*

*Report to Primary Medical at the date and time noted  
below for a routine pregnancy test.*

*This appointment is an **official and direct order from  
the Chief Medical Officer.***

*Arrangements have been made should this order  
conflict with your duty shifts. You must make  
arrangements for any personal conflicts that may  
arise. Again: **this is an official and direct order.  
Failure to comply will result in disciplinary action.***

*>> THIS IS AN AUTOMATED MESSAGE, DO NOT  
REPLY <<*

She'd gotten similar messages on *Ark* for things like exams and her birth control implant going in or egg retrieval procedures. But this was a new one. "I've been ordered to Medical for a pregnancy test."

Rainer almost dropped his tablet. "Why?"

"I imagine because we have sex?"

"Yes, but you couldn't possibly be pregnant so soon after your surgeries."

"Says who?"

"Says *common sense*."

"Wasn't aware that was all that common."

"This is absurd," Rainer growled. "The chances of *me* getting *you* pregnant are nearly zero."

"Zero isn't zero, though."

"Zero is *rarely* zero and—"

"Shh. It'll be quick, and I guess this is how things will be for us. Automated message. Means I'm on Crèche and Medical's pregnancy clearing house list. I'm just not on an implantation or regular insemination cycle. And *don't* make a joke."

He smirked.

"*Rainer*. Don't. *Don't*." She pointed at him, trying not to snicker.

"...because you seem to be."

"You couldn't resist, could you."

"And who was it who came down to Engineering and crawled on my cock?" Rainer tossed his tablets to the side and moved towards the chair. "And begged for more? That could become a regular occurrence."

She growled at him and pushed him back with both hands. "You told me not to make it regular and chided me like a bad wolf."

"And since when have you done what I've told you to do?"



“Exactly. And my getting pregnant *would* be the natural conclusion of our antics.”

“Are you *trying* to get pregnant?”

“No, of course not! But we also aren’t being very good about *not* trying either. We’re being incredibly stupid, actually.”

“How? You shifted recently.”

“It’s also not foolproof. *Or* Gaia-proof.” They were idiots. Even the birth control implants weren’t infallible, it was just incredibly rare to end up with a breakthrough pregnancy because everyone got an implant except males who were undergoing semen preservation, and females who were doing egg retrieval or doing pregnancy cycles.

And what were she and Rainer doing? Merrily having completely unprotected sex counting on his sub-fertility and her recent medical traumas and a birth control method straight out of antiquity. Hell, they hadn’t even counted on that much. They hadn’t even discussed it. Because who discussed getting pregnant? It was discussed for you. By Crèche.

Rainer shook his head once. “Shifting to reset ovulation was all she-wolves had until right before the ships launched. We were allergic to most options and the physical devices weren’t safe. It wasn’t until when the wolves finally revealed themselves and could partner openly with humans in researching it were the implants refined for she-wolf use. Shifting *is* very reliable.”

She glared at him. “It’s not idiot proof, and we’re idiots.”

“We are not idiots.”

She sighed. “Fuck. Part of the deal with Keenan was she doesn’t meddle anymore, but I don’t trust Gaia to not meddle. Not that Gaia could be stopped by an implant, I suppose.”

“I told you when we met that I had no intention of siring a generation to drift in the cold dark. We aren’t going to drift here long. And I don’t want you pregnant or nursing while we’re fighting for survival here or on a planet.”

“Then there’s only one option if they won’t give me my implant back. Abstinence.”

They’d be *extremely* bad at abstinence. Nobody even had to tell her that. She knew it. He knew it.

“At the same time,” Rainer ventured carefully, “we can’t wait ten years either. How long is it going to take for us to feel safe on a planet? Five years? Ten? Twenty?”

“Are you seriously saying to let nature take its course?”

“So far, nature hasn’t taken much of anything from me. I am saying we don’t waste time worrying about something we weren’t worried about before.”

“I suppose.”

“I’ll come with you to the appointment.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Why would you want to?”

“Because you’re my *mate*?”

“Nobody does that.”

Rainer said darkly, “That’s because everyone always has children by the time they’re married.”

True. But... Rainer would just be underfoot. She hadn’t even liked him at most of her *other* appointments. Although sometimes the moral support had been nice, when she wasn’t actively fretting he was going to do or say something that would expose both of them.

“Rainer, *if* I get pregnant, I’m going to have a *lot* of appointments,” she said. “You can’t be there for all of them.”

“Why not? And are you trying to work up to I won’t be at the birth either?”

“Ah... why would I try to work up to that? Of course you wouldn’t be.”

“Oh, yes, yes I would be. Through the whole thing.”

“*Why?*”

Rainer leveled her with a cool, almost distant stare. “Because that is how it was done on Earth. I can feel it carved into me with grooves as deep as our mating bond. The idea of *not* being with you is repugnant.”

He meant Hade’s epigenetic memories. And his voice and scent warned her there was *no* arguing with him on this.

All the other young women her age that had had appropriate biopsy scores had been rounded up on *Ark* and given a basic overview of the process if chosen to carry a pregnancy, and the various processes depending on if they’d be inseminated and gestate their own biological offspring, or implanted with an embryo, and the first one hundred and twenty days—up to the first anatomy scan—and all the various things that could (and frequently did) go wrong. It had all sounded very perfunctory, mechanical, and devoid of emotion.

Removing as much of the emotion from the process as possible, and standardizing it, made sense given the entire reason the process had been developed at all. She’d tried to ask her mother questions—she hadn’t been old enough to remember much about her mother’s second pregnancy—but her mother had told her she couldn’t discuss it. Crèche banned discussions of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting between those who had been chosen from the Pool, and those who hadn’t been. The curiosity was simply not to be entertained.

Her mother had promised if she was chosen, then she would tell her everything she wanted to know. But before then, Crèche had very, *very* strict rules.

She’d been chosen. And now her mother was too far away to tell her anything.

“Fine,” she said, “but try not to get *too* underfoot.”

His expression told her that he was going to be *extremely* underfoot.

THE WEREWOLF NURSE WHO CAME TO GET HER OUT OF THE waiting room looked at Rainer like she was confused why her husband was there. Which she probably was. “Someone will be by to get you, Commander.”

“No, I’m coming with her,” Rainer said.

“You’re not required, sir. It’s a simple blood test.”

“The blood test is simple. The results are not.” Rainer nodded for her to carry on down the hallway.

“The results are quite simple, sir. Yes or no.” The nurse smelled totally nonplussed and increasingly confused about what was happening.

“He wants to be there to hear the results,” Lachesis said, consciously aware of the other eyeballs in the waiting room staring at their backs. Those eyeballs all being women.

“Crèche decided that they wanted to do things the old-fashioned way,” Rainer told the nurse, “and this *is* the old-fashioned way. I won’t get underfoot.”

Famous last words.

The nurse said, “Sir, Crèche might do things the old-fashioned way, but those of us here in Medical don’t, and our patients are generally glad for it. We engage in modern practices, like washing our hands. You will wait here.”

Lachesis barely caught a snicker. The nurse cocked her head to the side and twitched her nose to indicate she could smell the Commander’s reaction to her bite. Rainer’s expression pulled between authority, confusion, and amusement, and the nurse looked at him with an *anytime, anywhere, try me* expression and scent. Lachesis tried not to snicker, but she was losing it and making noises like a sputtering faucet.

Before Rainer could pick a fight with a she-wolf, Forrest appeared out of another hallway. “Humor the Commander, Millicent. His expression if we can get a positive result from her one of these days will be priceless.”

“I am in the *fainting* pool, sir,” Millicent said dryly.

“I’ve wagered you’ll just need to sit down,” Forrest told Rainer with a smirk.

“I will *not* need to sit down.”

“So there’s a betting pool on his reaction?” Lachesis asked.

“There is. Want in?”

“Hell yes, I want in. I’ll also take sitting.”

“He’s going to faint,” Millicent said.

“Does fainting mean he just hits the ground, or has to brace himself on a wall?” Lachesis asked.

“Catching himself counts as fainting.”

“Hmmm. I’ll take fainting, then.”

“Lachesis,” Rainer said in protest.

Forrest chuckled and gestured for them to go down the hall.

The room for the blood draw was too small for all of them. Rainer waited out in the hallway with Forrest and watched from the doorway.

Nerves coiled in her hips.

“There isn’t a chance, is there?” Rainer asked Forrest while Millicent slid the needle into Lachesis’ skin.

“This is standard procedure, Commander. She doesn’t have an implant in. That automatically puts her in the Pool clearinghouse for monitoring. I pulled her manually right after surgery, but now it’s every four weeks for the next oh, however many years, I suppose. Are *you* going to be a regular feature?”

“Yes,” Rainer said flatly.

Nurse Millicent finished, gathered up the vial of blood, and squeezed past the two males at the doorway to head back to the lab. Forrest gave Rainer a pat on the arm. “I’ll be back with the results in five minutes.”

She twisted her fingers together in her lap and tried not to be nervous. She knew it was going to be negative. It *should* be

negative. They *needed* it to be negative.

So why did some part of her want it to be positive?

That part of her needed to go crawl into a corner and not come out until summoned.

Rainer stepped sideways into the little room. He tucked himself into the small space by her chair and, after a moment of hesitation, placed his hand on her head, lightly. His scent echoed the strange tangle in her own soul. She let him pull her the few degrees towards him so that her head rested against his hip, and his fingers slowly moved through the hair at the base of her skull.

Five minutes felt like an eternity before Forrest returned, minus Millicent. He had one of his ever-present tablets tucked under his arm. “Negative.”

A strange twinge of disappointment went through her. Rainer smoothed her hair, and his fingertips traced down the back of her neck.

Forrest gave them a knowing look and small smile. “It’s normal to have mixed feelings regardless of how the test comes out and whatever answer you were hoping for. I had a ton of mixed feelings when I got the message from Pool that I’d been married off and was now a father. I needed Counseling to talk me down off my panicked ledge, even though I’d been informed months earlier I was very high on the lists and was *thrilled* I was going to be a father. Thrilled. Couldn’t wait. Have your feelings. They’re normal, whatever they are.”

He slapped the wall twice and headed down the hallway.

“I’m not sure I can do this every four weeks,” Lachesis said under her breath. “I think my hair will go gray.”

“This is emotionally draining in a way I find unpleasantly familiar,” Rainer muttered back.

“I imagine that it *is* a formative experience that would leave an epigenetic mark. You don’t have to be here. I can do this on my own. Women have been doing this alone for thousands of years.”

“Absolutely not. I will always be with you. Always.” He offered her his hand. He drew her up and then drew her close. “The truth about what I am bothers you far more than it bothers me. I find it fascinating and the implications of it—”

“Rainer.”

“Hmm?”

“Shh. Let’s go home.”

They’d be back soon enough.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

“**Y**ou are *slow*,” Belle said.

“I’m still alive,” Lachesis shot back. She braced herself on her knees and panted deep, gulping breaths. Sweat dripped off the back of her neck and down her hairline along her cheeks. Her hair was soaking. This was gross. And utterly pathetic.

“I mean, okay, *fair*. You *are* alive. But they weren’t kidding about this new heart of yours being squishy.”

“Would you believe this is an improvement? A *big* improvement?” She had successfully jogged three miles. At a sodden pace, but she’d done it. Belle had literally run circles around her.

Belle jogged in place. “Considering I’ve seen you pretty much dead and carried up stairs, sure. I believe it. But I’m still giving you shit for being slow.”

Lachesis laughed as she gulped for breath. “Thanks for the motivation.”

“Anytime.”

Lachesis raised her eyes to Belle. “I guess you’re not going back to *Haven* anytime soon.”

Belle stopped jogging and ran her hand across her short hair. She’d let her normal shave grow out to short spikes. “Graves tells me he needs me on the team training the AI to compensate for the mesh. We’ve got to re-train it to a new baseline and teach it how to filter data. That *Haven* mesh is



completely different. Commander Rainer's team has figured out how to get it to work with our mesh, but the AI is convinced it's two different ships now."

"None of the *Haven* core was brought over though." Graves had been absolutely clear that the only way even a text file crew manifest of *Haven* would get on *NightPiercer* was if they literally found an old printer that still had paper and ink and printed it out.

"No, no, I mean the AI recognizes the transplant and is going *the hell is this*. It's triggering all kinds of security protocols, gray-boxing, black-holing, thrown exceptions, and general crashes. We need to train the AI and write some middleware, like what we did with the buoy relay."

Lachesis straightened. She tightened her braid. "Is it going to take a long time?"

"Nah. Will free up CPU cycles too. Bet *someone* will like that." Belle half-grinned.

"Oh really. Nobody's told me that. Better go file my request."

"How many damn cycles you need?"

"All of them. I'm calculating courses to Earth, and Tsu also wants back-up plans to Pluto or another galaxy, *just* in case." Rainer had said it wasn't *entirely* impossible for the ship to toddle off to some other location if Earth proved unviable, so she may as well plan the alternate routes so that she wouldn't be hogging the CPU cycles *if* he needed to do major additional repairs. She rubbed her sweaty temples. Keenan was still somewhat a fan of the Pluto Protocol.

"Hard work?" Belle asked.

"All-consuming, honestly." When she wasn't on the bridge, she was in the gym playing catch-up conditioning so she wouldn't be squishy when they got to Earth, and when she wasn't doing those things, she was figuring out how to take *NightPiercer* on a tour of the galaxy.

Luckily, a quick glance at the near-Earth protocols had revealed the ship had an assortment of very detailed approach

protocols that should get it high, medium, or low Earth orbits. Someone else had already done all that heavy lifting, and all she needed to do was *get* the ship to within the Moon's orbit, and *NightPiercer* could do the rest. Hell, the ship could even de-orbit itself, and she *fully* intended on just pressing that button, because she had no training on atmospheric flight, and the system had been designed by people who literally *did* have experience with planet-side space missions and flight.

It wasn't that *NightPiercer's* flight computer or systems were bad. They weren't. They were excellent. They were the foundation for every other system that had ever been in the sad little fleet. But they hadn't been designed to work with the significant upgrades Rainer had done and the designers had also always assumed there'd be a sentient sitting at the controls as the final failsafe for when the automation hit the limits of its authority.

The matter of near-Earth had been figured out for her, but *getting* there was a miserably complex task she had to build from zero. They were out of position, the ship was badly damaged, and there were a thousand things to consider, like fuel burn, speed, what happened if there was another solar event or a passing object, how close to pass to Mars, how she wanted to approach Earth, and even the timing of their arrival on Earth to coincide with the winter season if at all possible. That was so they could spend winter observing the planet and making plans, then de-orbit at the very end of winter or start of spring.

An unpleasant percentage of her simulations resulted in *NightPiercer* being destroyed. She kicked those over to Rainer for analysis.

It should not have been complicated. But *everything* was complicated and delicate with the damaged ship.

Belle put her hands on her hips. "Yeah. But hey. When we're on Earth, you and I get to retire from this."

Lachesis felt herself smile again. She got to retire to a life of wandering through wilderness and drawing maps, and no more civilization-toting responsibilities. "We do, and we get to

live in *towns*. So does that mean you're looking forward to conversations with sentients?"

"Shit. I hadn't considered that." Belle said, then she grinned. "Seriously, though, like I told you on *Haven*. I am fine with taking the hit, so nobody has to be in that fucking box ever again."

"What *is* your Dying Art?"

Belle ran her hand over her hair again. She muttered something.

"Didn't catch that."

"Ballet."

"*Ballet*."

"Ballet. Pointe shoes and everything."

"... Can I have your worn-out ribbons? Those are the shoes with the ribbon laces, right?"

"You scavenger." Belle gave her a shove and Lachesis laughed. "I re-use the ribbons. You know how hard ribbons are to get? The ship replaces my shoes, but I've got to re-use ribbons. Actually, I haven't gotten a new pair of shoes in a while, so I'm back in flats. Teaching the little kids anyway."

"That's adorable."

"They just run around and jump and stuff." Belle twisted her feet into position and made a graceful, quick little motion down and up at the knee. "But they're cute, I guess, yeah. Maybe one day I'll teach your little kid."

"Ack, don't say that. Already been down in Medical for a pregnancy test and *that* was a thing."

"Not pregnant, right?"

"Not pregnant. I think you'd have heard me screaming back on Earth if I had come up positive. Apparently there's a betting pool on if Rainer will faint or not?"

"I need in on this. Who do I talk to?"

"Millicent. She's a nurse down on the OB/GYN floor."

“Come on, let’s do another two miles and then we can lift some weights, because Medical is harping on me I’ve lost bone density because *Haven* and all. Then I’m finding Millicent and placing my bet.”

It was so much easier to get through a hard workout with a partner, especially one as compassionately ruthless as Belle.

They headed out of the gym drenched in sweat when a ping came through. Lachesis pulled her tablet out of her bag—she didn’t go anywhere without a tablet, not even the gym or mess hall—and checked it.

“What’s up?” Belle asked.

“It’s from *Ark*.” Lachesis scrolled through the notice from Captain Tsu. “*Ark* actually sent over the supply list that Tsu told Tomely to send.”

“You’re kidding,” Belle said. “So Tomely *caved*? And he’s asking nicely now?”

“It seems so.” The requisition request from *Ark* had nothing to do with her section. Tsu had ordered Bennett, Forrest, Keenan, and Rainer to analyze the request and to figure out if any of it could be fulfilled. She rubbed her thumb over her lips. “And it looks like *Ark* wants to start mail exchanges again. He’s inclined to agree.”

Belle folded her arms across her breasts. “Huh. Restarting mail shuttles. That sounds like either an olive branch or a trap.”

“It does.” Lachesis frowned.

“But you could also talk to your family. For real, this time, I mean. Tell them what happened to you. That you’re doing just fine.”

“Say goodbye, I suppose,” she said softly.

Tsu’s notice asked for input and feedback from the officers regarding resuming mail exchanges. The notice had gone out not just to the command crew, but the senior staff as well.

There was also another notice regarding Belle. “I think your request for a bunk re-assignment will be granted.”

Belle brightened. “Really?”

“Just not in the way you’re expecting. I’ve got to go. I need to respond to all this. And *you* need to retrain that AI.”

“Fuck. I *better* not be getting pregnant...”

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LACHESIS TOOK HER SEAT NEXT TO HARKINS AND GAVE THE folds of her long dress coat a flick so they didn’t bunch under her leg or fall into Harkins’ lap.

“Where is your husband?” Harkins leaned over to her.

“You say that like you hope he won’t show up,” Lachesis muttered back.

“Just saying I think it’s amusing you two *try* to present you don’t come as a pair when you’re a set.” He looked over the collected crowds. “Attracts attention when you’re apart.”

“So would it attract more or less attention if we went off into that alcove there and had sex?”

“Less.”

“I might take your advice but not the bait.”

Harkins’ interest shifted to Bennett. His gaze tracked the XO. Bennett seemed the peak of physical health, and Lachesis had seen him in the gym punishing his body like he was trying to out-gravity gravity, but the gray of his dress uniform seemed reflected in his face, and gave him a gaunt, pallid look.

“He hasn’t been the same since he went to *Haven*,” Harkins said under his breath.

It was a comment and tone that expected an answer. Lachesis chose a neutral one. “*Haven* changes everyone who sees it.”

This was true and *not* a lie. Every single crew member who had gone to *Haven* over the past few months had expressed the same sentiment. Even the crew that hadn’t seen the gym or market level or the crew quarter corridors were

humbled by the eerie ship. Rainer insisted that everyone who participated in the *Haven* salvage had to set foot on the ship and spend at least one night sleeping in the “bunk” down in Engineering.

They were robbing a tomb. No one got to forget that.

Harkins said, “It still strikes me as unlike him to even suggest going.”

She shrugged in her best *I agree, no idea* way.

Harkins let it drop. Was that a good sign or bad sign? From his scent, a good sign. Harkins still bristled that Bennett had tried to implicate Telemetry in doctoring the data from her medical armband to support her transplant. He held that grudge close.

Didn’t make him someone she could trust, but it was someone Bennett couldn’t rely on either.

Rainer strode down the aisle. Her heartbeat picked up a bit, and good thing Harkins wasn’t human, or he’d smell her reaction. Rainer wore the green silk sash across his chest, carried his white officer gloves clenched in his hand, his boots polished to an utterly impeccable sign. Even Bennett had to notice him walking in.

Rainer took his seat next to her.

Tsu arrived next with Arden and his daughter, who took chairs in the front row, and as usual, Forrest arrived last. Lily and their son took their place next to Tsu’s family.

Belle, who was at the edge of that front row, gave her a gaunt but filthy look.

“Did you tell her why she’s in the front row?” Rainer whispered in her ear.

“Of course I didn’t disobey a hush order. Not that I got a vote.” It had been hard to keep the news from Belle, and she wasn’t sure how her friend would take it. And Tsu hadn’t gathered the entire ship here for a single brief bit of ceremony.

But Tsu had largely stopped consulting his command staff with what was on his mind, or the factors he was weighing.

Small things that might have previously been discussed as a courtesy no longer merited time on the agenda. Everyone was extremely busy with the repairs and preparation to return to Earth. Tsu took in information and then issued orders, leaving his leads to stay focused on the other essential tasks. Historically, the command staff knew what Tsu would do before anyone else, but not recently.

Bennett was not doing well on this information and privilege diet.

Tsu stood and waited for the gallery to quiet and turn attention to him. He folded his gloved hands in front of himself, looked over the gallery, then gestured for Belle to come forward.

Belle's cheeks blazed red as she obeyed, coming up onto the stage.

“Belle.” Tsu turned to her, his hands folded once more. “A year ago you failed Command Aptitude. Three of the officers on this stage—Commander Rainer, Commander Keenan, and myself—voted for you to pass, with Rainer and Keenan voting to give you honors. Four officers did not—Commander Bennett, Chief Medical Officer Forrest, Lieutenant Commander Graves, and Lieutenant Commander Harkins—gave you a failing mark, even though all agreed your performance was exceptional, and they came to that conclusion reluctantly. Your service on *Haven* has been exemplary, not the least of which was your insistence that you accompany Navigator Lachesis in the shuttle to *Ark*, where your quick thinking made not just saving her father's life possible, but you saved her life, and by extension, this ship by developing the technique we now use for the buoy shuttle link.”

Belle burned crimson, smelled just as mortified, and nodded.

“I was also impressed with your service on *Haven* as acting XO and, when Rainer was not present, acting Captain. The *Haven* crew has praised your steadiness and your resourcefulness. The traits that worked against you in

Aptitude, and were seen as a liability then, have proven to be of great value in real-world scenarios. Forrest and Harkins both suggested that we revisit the outcome of your Aptitude instead of awarding you a medal for heroism, given the *extraordinary* circumstances.”

Belle snapped towards her. “You *knew* about this?”

“Well, yes, but I didn’t get a vote.”

Tsu cleared his throat. “Graves and Bennett declined to reconsider their vote, but Forrest and Harkins did. I have changed my vote to yes, with honors, and Harkins has also changed your vote to honors. So.”

Tsu produced the small gold pin with the ruby center. He extended his hand towards Lachesis.

Rainer nudged her with his knee.

*Fuck.* Nobody had told her about this part.

Lachesis stood and took the pin from Tsu.

“I fucking hate you,” Belle whispered as Lachesis tried to overcome her shaking, gloved hands to put the pin over Belle’s breast.

“I didn’t get a vote,” Lachesis whispered back.

“Fuck you, you could have told Rainer to derail it.”

“You think Rainer told me until after the fact?”

They both looked at a very smug Rainer.

“Fucker,” Belle muttered.

Lachesis finished muddling with the pin and retreated to sit back down next to her husband.

“Congratulations,” Tsu told Belle. “And thank you. I know Clint would be very happy.”

“I still miss him,” Belle told Tsu, tone shaking and fierce. “I miss him *every* day. I want this pin to be the *last* pin that ever gets stuck on anyone’s chest. I didn’t even want to take Aptitude. But I did want to go to *Haven*.”



“You and I are in agreement then, because I never want to put another group through Aptitude either. The next major test we are going to face will be Earth.” Tsu gestured for her to return to her seat. Once Belle—still flushing with mortification—was seated, Tsu turned back to the gallery. “*Ark* has sent us its requisition list. There is reason to be optimistic that with our change in priorities and intention to return to Earth, there will be enough left for *Ark* to make repairs and join us.”

Lachesis breathed out in relief. Rainer put a hand over her thigh and squeezed.

It wasn't a guarantee, but it was better than the promise of built-in warfare. Or just leaving *Ark* to die.

“Additionally, Captain Tomely has requested that we resume a mail exchange between *Ark* and *NightPiercer*. I have told him that we cannot spare shuttles to make the run, but he is willing for *Ark* to take up that burden. There will be one more mail exchange between the ships before we depart for Earth.”

Excited chatter through the crowd. Many people had penpals on *Ark*, and the chance to say final goodbyes was probably welcome. She had a very long letter to write to her family. She closed her eyes against the rush of emotion.

“And finally,” Tsu said, his voice warming, “there is a date for our departure to Earth. Repairs are on schedule, and Navigator Lachesis has submitted four final transit options for us to Earth. We will leave in ten weeks.”

Rainer squeezed her hand in his, then captured her cheek in his other, turned her to him, and pressed his cheek to hers. She shook with emotion.

They'd known the announcement was coming—Tsu had asked them to submit the timelines, there had been some meetings, but the final departure date had not been announced.

“It's happening,” she whispered. Beyond Rainer's shoulder, she saw Bennett at the other end of the stage, sitting up perfectly straight, hands on his knees, like he hadn't understood anything.

“It’s happening. We did it, sprite, we did it.” Rainer kissed her cheek. She didn’t fend him off. People were cheering, weeping, sitting quietly in stunned silence.

Tsu gestured for everyone to settle. “It will take, approximately, five months to make the transit to Earth from this position. We will enter Earth orbit, and there will be several more months of studying the planet. We are almost home, *NightPiercer*, we are almost home.”

## TWENTY-EIGHT

“Sir,” Lachesis said as everyone filed out of the gallery. The emotions were high. People were bouncing and hugging and cheering and weeping and stunned. Except for Bennett, who had slipped away into the crowd as soon as the announcement had been made.

It was a lot to take in. Belle had had her moment, and everyone would promptly forget about it—which was exactly how Belle would have wanted it. Rainer had gone down off the platform to offer his congratulations to her and she seemed to be cursing him out while Rainer just laughed.

“Lachesis.” Tsu canted his head towards her.

“Sir, I... I have something to ask. I’m not sure if it’s a favor or outlandish. But.” She wasn’t going to get another chance.

“You, asking for a favor? That’s a new one. What is it?”

“My sister, sir. Clotho.”

“What about her?”

“Keenan talks about how we need everyone for Repopulation. She’s my sister.” Lachesis swallowed. “Can we bring her with us?”

*NightPiercer* would never take her parents, especially not her father down an arm, but her sister. She might be able to get her sister off *Ark*.

Tsu’s expression transformed into several variations of contemplative, shocked surprise. “I imagine your sister is

almost an adult by now, if she isn't already. Do you happen to know her biopsy scores?"

"No, sir, I don't. But she's an Artisan Musician. Not feral, no tattoo, no trouble at all, gets along with everyone. Maybe she'll even have good biopsy scores. *Ark* might not survive, it might not make it to Earth, and I can't just... leave my sister behind without saying anything. Please. *Please*, will you at least ask Keenan and Tomely?"

Tsu's lips twisted, and under his composed expression there was something gentle. He started to say no, then caught himself. "I will ask. I can't promise, Lachesis. Your sister is probably as valuable to Tomely as you are to me."

"Not if she's my sister, considering how much Tomely despises me." Another reason she wanted to get Clotho out of Tomely's grip, although Clotho was *probably* fine. Her sister had a knack for making people love her, and if all else failed, she just picked up the nearest instrument and began to play.

Tsu put a hand on her arm. "I'll consider it. But don't get your hopes up. Ship transfers are very, very rare."

"I know, sir." She had been the first person to transfer ships in her Generation. "But what good are these stripes if I don't push my luck occasionally?"

Tsu half-laughed. "Been taking advice from Rainer again."

"Who was it told me it was better to be smacked on the snout than shoved into the corner?" Because it hadn't been her husband who had told her that, although Rainer had demonstrated it often enough.

Tsu dismissed her with a flit of the hand. "Go write your letter to your family. You have a lot to tell them."

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WRITING THE LETTER TO HER FAMILY TOOK LONGER THAN SHE expected. It might be the last exchange she ever had with them. What was she *supposed* to tell them? Did she edit out

the part about her heart transplant? Bennett? Her near-divorce? Nearly being euthanized?

Or did she limit it all to the good things? Like passing Aptitude, going to *LightBearer*, tell them about Rainer?

The *good* things about Rainer.

And that there was no baby? And there probably never would be?

All personal letters that were exchanged between ships were transported on data chips. Her letter, which would be sent on one of her own chips and not a communal chip carrying many letters—and she'd never get it back, and that was fine—might very well be fed to *Ark's* AI and analyzed and possibly censored.

“Do you have anyone to send a letter to on *Ark*?” she asked Rainer.

He peered up at her from his pillow.

Of course he didn't. She had had penpals on *LightBearer*.

They were dead now.

“You should sleep.” Rainer slid his foot across the sheets to nudge her ankle with his toes.

“I need to finish this before the mail shuttle arrives.” She'd been plunking away at the letter for ten days. She'd decided to go with the reasons she was married to Rainer, that when her marriage had fallen apart and she'd lost her Dying Art, Tsu had offered her another career path. She'd included the heart transplant, and Evadne's sacrifice, and that she had recovered fully and everyone was training to prepare for life on Earth's surface.

She told them a little about *LightBearer*, and then the mission to *Haven*—but focused on what those ships had been like. She told them what *NightPiercer* was like on the inside. The food, the gyms, the recreation, the way things worked and were done. That Rainer knew how to fish and she'd eaten fresh fish, and that she had her first real friend-friend in Belle.

Oh, and that her hair was now well past her shoulder blades because she was shamelessly vain like that.

Rainer nudged her calf again.

“Am I keeping you awake?” she asked.

“No. But I have a gift for them. Since you’re sending your own data chip.” He told her what directory to look under on his public drive.

Inside the directory were three dozen paintings—some she had seen before. The original sketches of the tree triptych that she had spent so much time admiring (Rainer had included a note to that effect), the moon painting, the paintings he’d done of her for the *LightBearer* memorial, a self-portrait of himself, and then others of her. Like photographs, except portraits. Her in the pilot’s seat of a shuttle, her in wolf-form gleefully eating a fish in the biome, her sitting at her station on the bridge, her in command of the ship, her consulting her tablet while wearing skivvies and sitting in the big chair, her being silly rolling around on the rug out front, her at the gym with Belle, and a copy of *Civilization*.

Rainer stretched his shoulders by hugging his pillow. “You are my favorite thing to paint. Unless Gaia grants us a pup, and then they will be my favorite thing to paint.”

“As it should be.” She traced her fingers down the strong line of his spine.

Rainer watched her. She smiled to hide the bittersweet taste in her mouth. This wasn’t the time to discuss pups, although every month coming up not pregnant was equal parts a huge relief and a huge, strangely shaped disappointment. They’d come to accept the strange two-sided set of emotions. Forrest had given them shit that if she *did* come up pregnant, they’d be equal parts thrilled and panicked, so there was no winning that emotional tug of war.

He nudged her calf again.

She attached Rainer’s files, which also included a brief note introducing himself (while acknowledging and apologizing for ripping her father’s arm off) and assuring her

family that whatever she was telling them was overly humble, and she was a decorated and very successful officer.

She stared at the opposite wall. There was a screen on that wall, but they never used it, and her ghostly reflection stared back at her.

Rainer moved closer, extended his arm, and pulled her down into the covers with him.

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LACHESIS STEPPED INTO TSU'S OFFICE.

“Navigator,” Tsu said, “you’re ready to put us on course for Earth?”

“Yes, sir.” She had checked and re-checked and used every CPU cycle she’d been allocated, and she’d finalized plans to send them to Earth. There hadn’t been anyone to compare notes with. Her letters to her Navigator counterparts on *Ark*—her teachers and previous peers—had gone unanswered.

What was important was her family had written her. Her father was fine, and had recovered amazingly well, and while he could no longer play the violin, he *could* play the piano and they’d included a recording of him masterfully playing her favorite piece on a concert piano with one hand.

There had been a letter for Rainer as well. That while he was angry about losing his arm, he and Rainer had both been doing their jobs. Rainer had been defending his kill, and her father had been trying to take it. That her father had pulled strings and thrown around his seniority to get the *Haven* assignment, because he’d feared the situation would escalate out of control, and he *was* an old Crew Chief, his daughters were grown, and if he died, it wouldn’t exactly have been premature.

Tsu drew her out of her thoughts. “You’re sure the flight plan is ready.”

“I am sure in the way that I will press the button, complete my shift, and go have a few drinks,” she admitted. “I’ll need to

finish the Pluto and Intergalactic transit on the way there, but assuming Rainer can keep the ship holding together, we'll make it to Earth. And I hope we're leaving enough of *Haven* behind for *Ark*."

"Same," Tsu said. "Tomely has been cagey with his ship's condition up until the end but..."

She nodded.

"I know you wanted to take a *Haven* manifest with us to Earth," Tsu added. "You're right, it doesn't seem right that we're taking *LightBearer*, but not *Haven*."

"I know it's not possible because of concerns over *Haven*'s AI, metadata, low-level formatting and everything else Belle tried to explain to me."

"But we are going to be able to take *Ark*," Tsu said. "I requested a crew manifest for that purpose. Just in case. Tomely has sent it. I've tasked Bennett with processing it, in addition to the rest of the mail and some other things."

She smiled through the bittersweetness that stung her lips.

"And not just an active crew manifest. But everyone. No matter what happens to *Ark*, we *will* remember it alongside *LightBearer*. Where they belong."

She nodded.

"Which brings me to your sister," Tsu said.

She steeled herself. "Sir."

"She's not joining us."

It wasn't a shock or surprise, but it still felt bitter. Deeply, deeply bitter and painful. Lachesis nodded. "Thank you for asking, sir."

"I want you to know, Lachesis, that it wasn't Tomely who refused. It was your sister."

"Clotho refused?" No surprise. Clotho was even more stubborn than she was.



“According to Tomely, before he even contemplated the request—which he *was* willing to entertain—he asked your sister if it was something she wanted. She apparently refused, stating *Ark* was her pack, and she wasn’t leaving them behind to save herself. And that fuck her sister for even suggesting it. Which makes me think the story is legitimate and not something Tomely made up.”

Lachesis smiled, but the tears burned. “I had to try, sir.”

“Keenan did greenlight it as soon as I suggested it. Apparently, you and Keenan have some sort of arrangement and you’re off-limits to her.”

Lachesis played innocent.

“I would *very* much like to know how you scared *Keenan* off,” Tsu said wryly.

“I threatened to rat out her collection of illegal plants.” That wasn’t true, but close enough. “Be careful, might rat out Arden next.”

Tsu chuckled. “I offered Tomely a number of trades. But his Crèche Commander refused to give Clotho up, and Clotho herself refused to leave, so that is how it ends.”

Her sister had had a choice, and she didn’t blame her sister for choosing *Ark*. “They won’t be far behind us though, hopefully.”

“Hopefully.” Tsu nodded towards the door. “We’ve done what we can. Now we focus on what we must do.”

## TWENTY-NINE

“I don’t know how you talk me into this.” She felt ridiculous walking around in her sleeping/lounging around shorts and t-shirt. Everyone owned the thin, skimpy, unquestionably comfortable items. Hers were only unusual because they were new, and typically only newly-minted School graduates and children got new things. Adults wore theirs until they literally fell apart in the wash, and even then the scraps got returned to the owner to be put to other use. Usually as patches, but she’d repurposed hers over the years as hair ties. Other people made hangers for pots, used it to stuff pillows, braided scraps into extra blankets, wraps for hands for the gym, or to shove in new boots on a blister-prone spot. Since scraps tended to come in a variety of colors, people would even make unique patches to sew onto their clothes.

Scraps could even be put into poker pots.

“I explained how it was the next opportunity offered to advance my charm offensive.”

“Yes, I k— never mind. I do not particularly enjoy modeling.”

“You enjoyed it the previous time.”

“It wasn’t the modeling I enjoyed.”

“It was the reward?” Rainer pressed the pad for the next lift down to the main market level. “A reward will be offered for successful completion of the mission.”

The previous time she had modeled for him, she had been wearing quite a lot of layers. “You did not tell me it would

involve being in my skivvies in public.”

“Considering you have walked *naked* through the ship, I didn’t think it bore mentioning. And those are not skivvies. Skivvies are your bra and panties. Or would be, but you’re not wearing a bra.”

She could not be assed to wear a bra except when she was working out (because comfort), flying a shuttle (because hair, breasts, scrotums, and penises drifted about in zero G, so they needed to be tied up, lashed down, or strapped in), or on the bridge. She gave him a dirty look. *He* had on his regular uniform, with the tablet bag he used for his artist’s tablet over his shoulder. “I look like a child.”

“I assure you, you do not.”

“I meant they’re *new*.” She gestured to her barely-broken-in *NightPiercer* issue underthings. Not a threadbare patch or stretched seam, loose thread, or stain of questionable origin on them. She’d also been given dark gray shorts and pale green shirts which had not yet faded from their thousandth washing.

“Models generally wear the minimal amount of clothing unless the clothing is part of what’s being modeled,” Rainer said by way of explanation, justification, and apology.

One of Keenan’s direct reports in Counseling had suggested that, as a way to distract everyone from the recent spate of horrors and stresses, that there be demonstrations of Dying Arts in the market, and for students of those Arts to have public lessons. Historically, people had been able to go into the small shops of Artisans and sometimes watch the Artisans working, but a number of Artisan crafts involved supplies with extremely limited availability. And other Arts weren’t exactly spectator-friendly, like the writers.

Rainer had gotten roped into it—Rainer actually *did* occasionally teach workshops, but his obligations to Engineering (and generally being antisocial about his artwork) had always limited how much he did, and he typically limited himself to very specific techniques with more advanced students rather than classes on much broader topics.

“Do you enjoy teaching?” she asked as they walked through the market level and she tried to ignore how everyone looked at her without trying to be obvious about it.

“When the students are willing to learn. *You* are going to have to start teaching soon.”

Tsu had mentioned that to her, and asked if she wanted School students or if she wanted adults looking to change their Dying Art. “It’s not something you can simply *choose* to do, and my teachers once told me that being a Navigator is like being a Doctor: good enough isn’t. I can’t just put out a sign-up sheet and take whoever shows up.”

Rainer nodded to the stairs to a platform that had been set up in the market center. Already half a dozen people sat in chairs with their tablets waiting for them, while a small crowd had started to amass. “You could make the argument that it shouldn’t be an Art but a Section and you should be able to select candidates from School and other Sections. Perhaps five that you think have potential.”

“*Five?*” she hissed under her breath. “How about I start with *one?*”

“Because wash-outs and we need more than one person with your skills on Earth. You’re going to need to teach all of us how to read a basic map. Hell, that was a skill that was lost even before Exodus because GPS was so ubiquitous. Besides, I would like for you to train at least one person on space navigation.”

“Gaia willing, I won’t need to train the next generation of Jovian Hopscotch champions.”

“It would be a shame for that knowledge to be lost entirely and have to be re-discovered. I don’t believe we aren’t supposed to go to other worlds, just not now. And perhaps not on ships.”

“Oh no. Please no more discussion about falling through reality.”

“Aside from the fact it *is* possible to create a—”

“Rainer. Stop.”

“I stand by my belief you might enjoy two Rainers.”

“I stand by my statement that my counterpart would neither want to share nor be shared.” She grabbed his arm and hissed, “and behave, Commander. Isn’t getting aroused by the model a significant faux pas?”

Rainer kept a straight, serious face as he whispered in her ear, “I prepared myself.”

“So *that’s* what you were doing. And here I thought you were just gathering your thoughts.”

“More like *scattering*.”

“*Sowing?*” she muttered back, then mentally slapped herself for encouraging him.

“That would involve you and a Crèche-approved activity.”

She sighed to the ceiling while he, somehow, kept an absolutely straight face. She sat on the stool at the center of the slightly raised platform. Rainer stayed below to claim one of the chairs, and busied himself casting his screen to the three larger screens set up around the platform so the audience could watch.

She focused on the trees that lined the center of the market lane. They still fluttered with the tags that bore the name of the lost *LightBearer* crew.

Rainer came up onto the platform, gently pushed her so she sat mostly with her back to the students, and untied her loose braid. He followed her gaze to the trees, his hands stilling against her shoulders. His body brushed against hers, tensing and tightening.

“We’ll take them with us,” she said softly. “Like we’ll take her. In me.”

Rainer’s scent of anger intensified.

She reached up and put a hand over his corded wrist. “It won’t be us. We won’t let it be us.”

“No. We won’t.” Rainer wrested his attention back to her hair.

He counted under his breath while he unbraided her hair, separating it into falls, then shaking it out. He raked his hands through it, then ran a wide-toothed comb through it, and let it fall naturally around her shoulders and down her back. He carefully placed the forward waves and coils around her breasts and fiddled with the small, stray hairs at her hairline and around her ear. He brought a few small strands forward to drift next to her cheeks.

“Didn’t know you did hair,” she said, amused.

“I watched a number of videos on the basics from old Earth,” he said, distracted by whatever he was attempting to do. “Hold still.”

“Rainer, it’s hair.”

“Exactly, and I want your hair to fall a certain way to practice certain techniques and concepts. This is everyone’s opportunity to do a study of real hair. Learning from wigs is not the same.”

The downside to sitting up there—aside from the obvious—was she got to watch the screens. Best seat in the house, actually, and it would have been interesting, if not for the fact they were painting or drawing *her*.

Once he was satisfied with her hair, Rainer started his lecture cataloging the fundamental differences between painting hair off reference images or videos, wigs, and having actual hair to study. His lecture was for established artists who understood what he was talking about, and she understood about every sixth word and only the mainstream dictionary definition. When he said “cangiante” she gave up trying to follow along and extract anything useful from the lecture.

Instead, she amused herself watching the blank workspace cast from his tablet. The upper bar of the UI pinged with a constant stream of new alerts. He had well over a thousand in the *Not Urgent* bin. None in the *P0* (his icon being a small trash can on fire), and an ever-ticking number in the other two bins, which were represented by icons of analog clock faces, one reading three o’clock and one reading nine o’clock. The

ticker representing tickets he'd closed in the past seven days was over two thousand.

Rainer directed everyone to get started on their first twenty-five minute study.

Her profile quickly took shape from some quick lines and circles, then outlines and swaths of colors, then colors on top of colors, the lines becoming finer and more delicate, the shading more precise. He didn't finish her face, and at the end of twenty-five minutes he hadn't finished her hair, although it was better than she could have ever done with twenty-five years of practice.

Rainer called time, and there was a polite pat-pat of applause from the assembled crowd. The half-dozen students, in turn, cast their versions of her hair to the screen. A light round of critiques for each one, with Rainer pointing out suggestions for improvements—never corrections—or offering praise, but mostly letting the other students comment and discuss. Everyone had their own unique style, and favored different aspects. Everyone had found different challenges or details to focus on.

No one on *Ark* would ever have believed her hair had contributed to civilization's artistic catalog. Pure vanity? Not anymore.

"You're smiling," Rainer commented as he stepped back up on the stage.

"I've been told over and over my hair is nothing but pure vanity, and here it is, being useful," she told him, trying not to smile too much, or break into laughter. "Are we done?"

"Oh, no. Not done. Now that they've done a basic study. This one is going to involve both of us."

"Um..." she leaned away from his hand, and stood up. Her rump had gone numb and her calves were sore from perching on the stool. Quite a crowd had gathered.

"Yes, both of us," he said with a hint of impatience. "It's going to be a study of different textures, shadows, and how your hair holds shapes and coils and how it moves."

Reluctantly, she sat back down. Rainer arranged her in the angle he wanted for the class, then gathered up her hair in both his hands. She startled and gasped, then caught herself. Her scalp rushed with his touch like it always did with that strange shiver of relief and intimate pleasure as his rough hands moved through the strands.

No, she would *not* enjoy it. Or at least not let everyone see her enjoying it.

Rainer twisted her hair and clutched it on top of her head with one hand in an arrangement it would never hold on its own. He pulled a few more strands free so they cascaded around her neck and shoulders, and then shifted his own hand down more to the side of her head, fingers buried in her hair and pressed against her scalp.

He'd held her hair like this *quite* a few times for *far* less chaste purposes, and her body remembered. And if a whole bunch of people were watching? Her body apparently did not care.

She stared at some point off between the two screens in her immediate field of view and thought about Jovian Hopscotch.

Rainer held her hair for twenty-five very awkward minutes. During that time, more people gathered.

Bennett moved into her narrow range of view, standing half a dozen rows of people back, watching. With him was Graves and Jeremy, the Operations officer who had broken his leg in her Aptitude.

She fixed her gaze at some point over Bennett's head. This was an ideal excuse to not acknowledge or react to Bennett in any way.

She breathed a sigh of relief when Rainer released her head. Bennett was still waiting with Graves and Jeremy, and another Operations lackey she didn't know the name of had sidled up to the little gravity well of authority.

Rainer offered her his hand.

She took it, and he turned her towards the students as if presenting her. They gave her polite applause.



“It’s customary to show appreciation to a model,” Rainer told her while she blushed from utter mortification.

Note to self: she was not modeling again. At least not out in public with a measurable percentage of the ship watching.

She took up a seat in the student row while they did the critique round of the set of paintings. Within sixty seconds, Bennett had slid through the crowds and sat down in the empty seat on her left. He leaned forward slightly, his hands entwined into a ball, and his wrist tucked between his knees in a farce of casual conversation.

Rainer noted him with a split-second flick of his gaze, but remained focused on offering commentary on a student’s work.

“He looks for any excuse to grind the ship’s snout in this, doesn’t he,” Bennett’s scent was a tangle of deep anger and *nightmare*.

“In a matter of months, you will cease to be a factor in my life,” she whispered back. “And *I* will gladly grind your snout into that as required.”

“We aren’t to Earth yet. You may want to remember your manners.”

“I’m feral. I have no manners.”

“You are making your future needlessly difficult.” He ended *difficult* with a slight lilt and a softness, evoking everything he had offered her, and that that option was still on the table.

Repulsive *and* hilarious. She managed to not laugh at him, although the temptation to shove him onto the floor was almost too much. “If things play out the way *you’re* praying for, none of us have much of a future. I’ll take my advice from Keenan and play the long game.”

Bennett’s scent swirled. Before he could say whatever it was he was about to say, the next student’s piece came up on the screens for review, and Bennet paused to focus on it.

This drawing—not painting—was different from the others. It had her head slightly tilted towards the viewer and looking *slightly* up, although it was hard to say where her eye was directed. The hand holding her hair clearly had a tight grip. Too tight, it wasn't a casual touch, and her hair was more askew and almost tangled. It was hard to tell if the hand was holding her steady, or forcing her to turn her head. There were sketches of gears, wires, and mechanisms inlaid into her skin, and wires sticking into her skin, with bruises and abrasions, and there was along her upper arm a split incision that had been folded back to reveal muscle and tissue with metal clamps still in place in preparation for another brutal procedure.

A hush stole over the market as everyone craned to get a look at it. Rainer right along with them as he pondered the quick sketch.

The artist sat straight and tense and almost defiant.

“One of Gribbons,” Bennett whispered to her. “Security staff. Interesting take on your continued existence, isn't it.”

“Is that a threat, Commander?”

“It's commentary that if you think the crew has made peace with you still being alive, you're wrong. They remember. And many of them don't like thinking that they're spare parts.”

Spare parts! *Spare parts!* “She *volunteered*. Do *not* sully her memory by letting your thralls believe she was *ordered* or taken down to Medical by Security like I was.”

Bennett's scent shifted and twisted. “People believe what they believe, and I was in that room. If there hadn't been volunteers, there *would* have been an order given.”

Her soul twisted and screams bubbled up in her throat and the urge to stand up and kick the XO in the face and shake him and—

She coiled her anger hand over hand and pushed it deep down inside herself. Soon, she'd be able to do the worst thing she could do to Bennett: walk away from him.

And his face and scent when she just... *walked away*... would be glorious.

“But there *were* volunteers, Commander. There were *multiple* volunteers.” It didn’t make it hurt any less, it didn’t make the taste in the back of her throat any better, but it *did* make it bearable. “If you’re going to pass judgement on history, get your facts correct.”

Rainer didn’t seem to notice any of this, and went right into discussion. After some exchanges, he asked, “This is a commentary on *Civilization*?”

“Meditation,” the artist replied, steel in his tone.

Rainer nodded and turned back to the work and offered suggestions on the overall work, and something about balance and triangulation of focal points to create tension according to what the artist wanted to emphasize and so on and so forth, and it eventually concluded with Rainer sharing he’d like to see the finished work. That seemed to surprise the artist and the crowd as a whole.

He moved on to the next piece, which was softer, and emotional, and captured the intimacy of the touch with her being uncomfortable with the situation a little more than she’d have liked. Rainer’s discussion of capturing the intimacy was equally uncomfortable, especially when he offered suggestions on how to better communicate the emotions the artist had been conveying, be that tenderness, submission, resistance, tension, and how the placement of her hair could do all those things, especially when the hairs fell in line with the shape of her neck and jaw, and how the artist could add ambiguity by the treatment of her eyes.

So awkward that she forgot that Bennett was sitting next to her at all, and barely noticed when he got up and walked away without another word.

“WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMMENTARY AND meditation?”

“Commentary is they have an opinion and sharing it with you, meditation means they’re pondering their own thoughts and come to no firm conclusions.”

“Would your feedback have been different if he’d said it was an opinion?”

Rainer nodded once.

“It’s far more technical than I thought it would be,” she said thoughtfully.

Rainer changed the subject. “What did you and Bennett discuss?”

“It wasn’t much of a discussion. The usual from him, but since *Haven*, he has no teeth left. He knows it. I think he hasn’t figured out what to do about it. He did warn me that just because the crew has been too busy to think about the heart doesn’t mean they haven’t forgotten. Intimated he has allies and this isn’t over yet.”

“No need to intimate that. I’m sure it’s true. The painting was intended to be a provocation.”

She chewed on her fingernail and glanced sideways at him.

“Art has a *long* history of being used for provocation, even on this ship, and even by myself. Not new, and the thing about it is that it’s out in the open for all to see—that painting will tell us where sympathies lie. A mistake on Bennett’s part if he thought that painting is anything I’ll regard as a warning. The cognitive dissonance must be crippling him.”

If they arrived to a ruined Earth, the pendulum would swing the other way in Bennett’s favor.

Then again, if they arrived to a ruined Earth, it was all over for them anyway.

*EARTH*

# THIRTY

She stepped onto the bridge. Tsu glanced at her. “Today is the day, Navigator.”

“Yes, sir, it is.” At least she *hoped* it was the day. If she’d done the math correctly, they should be coming up on visualizing Earth for the first time.

Earth had been visible the entire time in the star field—an unremarkable, faint, tiny dot even from Mars’ orbit. A week earlier, Harkins had been able to catch some distant photographs of Earth that showed more than a starry dot, but now a fuzzy blob that appeared mostly blue and white.

The images had sent ripples of excitement through the ship. A *blue* Earth was similar to the one civilization had left almost a century before. There had been the chance it would be a ruined wasteland, but an Earth with oceans meant hope.

Tsu had directed Harkins to stop attempting to get visual on Earth to keep the speculation and pre-conceived notions to a minimum. He’d trusted her course to Earth would deliver them for a big reveal.

Well, that and the strong magnetic field coming from Earth. Harkins had locked onto that and they were following it in.

Lachesis watched line drawings of *NightPiercer*’s progress towards Earth. Earth wasn’t where she’d expected to find it. It was a little farther away from the Sun than old Earth information said to expect. The magnetic fields and her course seemed to agree: it wasn’t an error of hers, it was Earth had

slid outwards from the Sun about a hundred thousand miles, or five percent farther away.

But it seemed the *Moon* was *closer* to Earth—initial readings suggested instead of roughly a quarter million miles, it was now closer to two hundred thousand. Which made no sense. Their readings had to be incorrect.

“Is it time?” Tsu inquired.

“Yes, sir,” Harkins said.

Tsu shifted in the big chair while Bennett’s spine looked like someone had shoved a steel rod right down the nerve channel. His pulse ticked in his neck and his temple.

“Commander Keenan, Commander Rainer, Chief Medical Officer Forrest,” Tsu said, “report to the bridge immediately.”

Then, to the bridge crew, he said, “We will all see it together for the first time.”

*NightPiercer* limped into position. A groan went through the ship as Earth’s gravity gave it a tug, and the lighting flickered.

“Magnetic field,” Harkins said. “*Extremely* strong.”

“Dangerous?” Bennett asked harshly.

“Everything is dangerous at this point,” Harkins replied in an icy tone as *NightPiercer* creaked again.

“Earth also isn’t where we expected to find it.” Lachesis ventured. “It’s farther out from the Sun.”

“It’s also possible our readings or old Earth measurements are less accurate,” Harkins commented.

Lachesis gave him a dour look. “*Ancient* Earth was able to calculate the Sun’s distance from Earth. Modern Earth landed people on the Moon and sent probes to the Sun and all the planets. We know how far modern Earth was from the Sun. Earth has moved from its original orbit. Not by much, but it has.”

Tsu calmly interjected. “Understood. No one should have any expectations about what we’re going to see. Prepare

yourself for anything.”

She looked at Bennett, then back to the Captain, while she and Harkins exchanged knowing looks. How had an entire planet shifted its orbit *out* in seventy-five years without a cataclysmic impact or passing large body to tug it?

“Earth?” Keenan took up a position on Tsu’s left-hand side, the traditional place of the Second Officer. There were shadows in the gauntness of her cheeks, and her scent a tense, fearful anticipation. The scent of being called up for the specific duty that defined her entire existence.

Everything that Crèche stood for and worked for, and *had* been working for since before even Exodus, was about to come to bear. Civilization’s ultimate long-term survival now rested on Keenan.

Rainer strode onto the bridge next. He immediately moved to stand next to her. He caressed her shoulder, and she reached up to brush her fingers along his.

He gripped her hand. His scent was tense anticipation. Something fierce, feral, almost dark.

Forrest arrived last, wearing his white coat and smelling of Medical.

Tsu noted all of them, then rested his hands on each arm of the big chair. “All crew: we are approaching Earth. I am not certain what we’ll see, but we’ll see it together, and we’re prepared to face it. Five minutes.”

Rainer contemplated the trajectory tracking across the big screen. “Where is the Moon?”

“We’re passing within its orbit now, but it’s on the Sun-facing side at the moment,” Lachesis said. The flight computer faithfully maneuvered the ship for entering Earth orbit. She hadn’t had to reprogram this part at all—the ship’s flight computer was still perfectly useful for handling Earth-related activities.

The major issue they’d have would be now they had *eight* minutes to get out of the way of any solar flares, plus a more intense solar wind.



Tsu said, “It’s time. Officers, prepare yourselves for this. No matter what it is, we’re going to have to provide strong leadership. I want a projection of calm control. We’ll be met with a mixture of fear, terror, and eagerness to get to the surface. Don’t lose focus.”

She entwined her fingers with Rainer.

“Harkins,” Tsu said.

The screen wiped clean of the data feeds and OIC queue and trajectory projections.

The Sun burned bright and huge in the darkness. And drifting below them, like Jupiter once had, only much smaller, was a deep blue marble covered in swirls of white.

Her emotions shattered, reformed, and shattered again.

*Earth.*

Rainer’s hand clenched hers.

Was this awe? Gratitude? Three generations of shock and strain echoing across time to smash right into her?

*Earth.*

**HOME.**

Something ran over her nerves, through her mind, down her spine, right into her core, through every fiber.

**HOME.**

It was there. It was *blue*. It was so, so, so *blue*.

And beautiful multi-colored lights danced around it, swirling and churning. Aurora, or the northern lights. Except they weren’t so northern now and swirled over the entire surface and reached up into the darkness like tattered silk ribbons.

Weather systems swirled and curled across the *blue* surface. So, so, so *gloriously* blue. Darkness wrapped part of it, while light the other side. The cloud cover was too thick on the part of the globe they could see to make out what the

landmasses were. What ocean was this? Pacific? Indian? Atlantic?

She'd learned all the names on the way to Earth. Studied the maps of old Earth. The geography. The topography. Knew it all like she could run her finger over it and recognize it.

Jupiter's churning mass of marled reds and browns and umbers and tinges of green and purple and constant lightening dancing through the clouds below had been her entire life—until it hadn't been—and now there was this bright *blue* and *white* planet encased in dancing rainbow ribbons of light. So little and tiny, so small and humble, so steady and calm.

So *bright*.

The image flickered and fritzed periodically from the interference of Earth's strong magnetic field—stronger than they had been told to expect, but not the destructive force that had driven Generation Zero to Jupiter to survive.

Keenan finally spoke. "That's not what we're supposed to see."

"I don't think *supposed* is the correct word." Graves' tone was so hushed it was almost a whisper.

"It's supposed to be hot," Keenan said. "All the projections were for a warm, volcanic world. They couldn't decide if it would be wet or dry. Not... blue."

*NightPiercer* tracked Earth's motion. There were large, white curls of storms that seemed similar to what had been in pre-Exodus pictures of Earth, but even through the weather, no large landmasses appeared. They should have seen North America or Asia by now.

"Some remodeling was expected, but not this," Harkins said.

"If there was remodeling this extensive, is it even possible the world is this cool in seventy-five years?" Graves asked him.

"According to established theories? No. Unless the global sea levels rose a thousand meters. But that wouldn't be

remodeling more than it'd be drowning. Earth had ice for an estimated maximum of eighty meters.”

“It’s not polar melt,” Rainer said. “Look. Snowcaps at the poles. Extensive icecaps. It’s a cold planet.”

“That’s not possible,” Keenan snapped.

“It *is* possible all the simulations were incorrect,” Tsu interjected calmly. “There was never a concrete theory on what caused the Earth changes, therefore all simulations were merely speculation.”

Bennett fixed Rainer with a cold, unsettling stare. “Or you could ask Rainer what his theory is.”

Rainer slid an equally cold stare at Bennett.

“Everyone knows what Rainer’s theory is,” Harkins said.

“The important question is, is it inhabitable?” Keenan directed this at Harkins.

“It has an atmosphere we’d find breathable, and is a temperature we can survive in, but no idea about if there is wide contamination,” Harkins answered. “And obviously, there’s a strong magnetic field. That’s what those auras are from. The solar wind hitting the magnetosphere.”

“There aren’t any satellites,” Graves said suddenly. “No space junk.”

“What?” Bennett asked Graves.

Graves approached the screen. “There’s no space junk. Earth had a ton of satellites and space trash in orbit around it.”

Tsu cleared his throat. “Enough. I want calm, composed leadership. Speculate in private amongst yourselves, but not where the crew can see. Present a front of *we’re analyzing it*, which is exactly what we’re going to be doing.”

“No,” Graves said while Harkins stood, his face washing pale. “No, Captain. There are no satellites.”

Bennett focused on Graves, something slithering under his expression as his scent became *possibility*. “So?”

Graves didn't seem to notice that Bennett's mood had suddenly lifted. "When the poles started to wander too much, satellites were launched to act as beacons to compensate with the global GPS system, which was also failing. The satellites were built to survive Exodus, and had nuclear fuel that should last at least a few more centuries. The flight computer relies on them for the landing sequence. And they're *gone*."

All attention—including Rainer—swung to her.

*Crap.*

## THIRTY-ONE

She hadn't spent much time analyzing the landing protocols for the ship—she'd been focused on figuring out how to get the crippled ship to Earth, and then into Earth orbit. *Landing* the ship was an entirely different situation. Spending time and CPU cycles examining the existing programming when she also had orders to plan a contingency route either to Pluto or another galaxy hadn't been anywhere near the top of her list.

And now everyone on the bridge looked at her like she'd just peed in the corner.

Bennett's face twitched and slithered. He folded his arms across his chest and his entire body tightened under his uniform while he swelled with a nauseating excitement he couldn't contain. She fought down a growl and her teeth shifting in her jaw with the urge to bite him.

Rainer's voice cut through her anger. "And?"

Graves practically threw up his hands. "*And?* And everything."

"*And* we can't land the ship," Bennett said. "Bit of an oversight on our Navigator's part, isn't it."

"There hasn't been an oversight," Rainer said coldly.

There hadn't been? Because it sure seemed like she'd made a major oversight. But what *idiot* would have designed a landing system to rely on satellites that may or may not have still been functioning in a century?

Granted, stupider oversights and mistakes had doomed earlier space missions.

Rainer's tone reminded her of a boot slowly grinding a cricket into dust. "There aren't going to be satellites around Pluto or in another galaxy, unless there are, and that would make for some very entertaining conversations. The presence or lack of the beacon satellites is immaterial and a distraction."

Tsu pinned her with a stare that suggested he knew Rainer had just bailed her out. "Is there a plan?"

Time to dance on the edge of a lie. "Not yet. My priority was Pluto or another galaxy alternative, so we didn't have to waste time if Earth was a fireball."

"What was the point if we can't *land*?" Bennett bit out.

"Go ask the poor bastards on *Haven*," she retorted. "Maybe they'll have some ideas."

Bennett's expression shattered outwards. He grabbed the edges of Tsu's chair and shoved himself forward across the Captain towards her. "You fucking feral *bitch*!"

"*Commander*." Tsu spun on his toes to face Bennett. He advanced a step, and Bennett, breathing hard, held his ground, then backed up a single step.

Tsu backed him up another three steps while he spoke. "I understand that this is an intensely emotional moment. I understand that none of us want to hear that there are yet more things not in our favor. But my officers turning on each other is *not* how this ends, and I will not allow the danger of this mission to come from *my bridge*."

Bennett looked at her, then the others, then back at Tsu. His scent a tangle of fear and fury and helplessness.

"You are dismissed," Tsu told the XO. "Go compose yourself so you can attend to the needs of the crew."

"I am fine, sir." His words came in short, tight bursts while he tried to smooth over raw, volcanic emotion.

"I suggest you take the hint, Commander. *Dismissed*. Keenan, on deck."

Keenan stepped into Bennett's spot.

Bennett visibly floundered before he realized (and accepted) no one was going to intervene on his behalf. He corked himself back up, nodded to Tsu, and left the bridge without another word.

His scent was a sharp knot that stabbed into her nostrils.

*Nightmare.*

He smelled like *nightmare*.

SHE DIDN'T EVEN TAKE OFF HER UNIFORM BEFORE DROPPING into wolf form. She squirmed out of her clothes and threw herself down on the Earth-fiber rug and stuffed her snout in it while keening and whining non-specific things about her blunder on the bridge with the beacon satellite system.

Rainer picked up her clothes.

She rubbed her shoulder on the rug and whined. Rainer had saved her from the mishap, and everyone would now mostly remember Bennett, but now Bennett smelled like *nightmare* and shaken trust.

Everyone was counting on her to *not* make obvious errors like this.

She rolled onto her sternum, forepaws out in front of herself, and rested her snout on them, ears slicked back.

“Bennett was forced to retreat.” Rainer's scent complimented the slow, molten violence in his tone.

She keened. He couldn't understand the lupine tongue in human form—there were things the human form couldn't pick up on, like sounds the human ear couldn't hear—but he could get a rough idea. “*My mistake came first. You had to save me.*”

Rainer, fortunately, *had* saved her from the blunder or else she'd have had to dine on a hearty helping of crow and Bennett's smugness undermining her.

Rainer crouched down and ran his hand from skull to the base of her tail. She shivered in pleasure despite herself. “As far as mistakes go, it was a trivial one. The satellites would not have changed anything except to create pointless hesitation and a sticking point for Bennett.”

She raised her eyes to him. “*You knew?*”

“I knew. I didn’t know if you did or not.”

She shot to her paws and barked at him. He had *known* and not told her? He’d let her blunder right into it?

He didn’t flinch when presented with her fangs snapping near his face.

She stopped barking and sat down and growled at him.

“I wasn’t going to distract you with something that didn’t matter,” he said.

She twisted into human form. “But that’s not for you to decide! I can handle distractions, I don’t need you... you... *nursemaiding* me!”

“I am not *nursemaiding* you. I am *helping*.”

“That is not helping! Letting me blunder into something when the crew barely trusts me to know what I’m doing is not *helping*! It’s not helping anyone!”

“But look how it ended.” Rainer gave her a sly grin. “With Bennett being dismissed from the bridge.”

“Gaia’s Sweet And Holy Pussy! You can’t just... *do* things and then say, *but it worked out, see?* You laid a fucking trap for me and *used me like a chess piece!*”

His amusement evaporated. “I didn’t use you. I didn’t *distract* you. The satellites don’t matter. I would have told you to play dumb and let them think you made a mistake.”

“Except I didn’t have to *play dumb*,” she snapped. “You get to decide that? You get to decide how I handle myself as an officer?”

“No, you decided not to look at the re-entry procedures until you were sure you were going to need them. That’s your



prerogative, and while I knew there were beacon satellites, I also knew they didn't matter to the overall mission. Earth is what matters."

"You *could* have told me and let me decide how to play that card."

He tried to put his hands on her arms. She shook them off. He grabbed her hand instead and ran his fingers over her knuckles. "It *didn't matter*."

"I thought you had faith Earth would be ready for us."

"I do, and it is."

"You *set me up*, Rainer. You *used* me. You *knew* it would upset Graves, and Bennett would pounce on it because Bennett wants to validate Graves because he thinks he can get Graves to his side, and you *used me to get Bennett to bite!*"

Rainer moved to say *no*, then hesitated.

This was *unbelievable*. "How long have we been married? A year? A year and a half? And you're *still* doing this?"

"Fourteen months," he supplied.

More than a *year*, and how many disasters later, and this was still happening. It coalesced into some aching knot of discomfort and sadness. She loved him. He was her mate. How was this still happening? "You used me again. Our entire relationship started that way, nearly ended that way, and nothing's changed. Why should I be shocked it keeps happening? I'm a piece you play when it suits you, just like being your mate was a piece you played when you needed to."

Rainer reached for her, caught himself, and yanked his hands behind his back. His tone changed to one of tempered professionalism. "You decided not to deal with the re-entry protocols. That was your decision, and I had no reason to question it. I was *aware* of the beacons, but that's all. When confronted by other officers with ulterior motives, who would turn a non-issue into an issue, I supported you. It also became an opportunity to go for the kill, and I wasn't going to pass it by."

Rainer inclined his head slightly, one brow a bit higher than the other, in his usual posture of attentive listening and engagement he took on with other officers. It wasn't his most contrite posture. He also didn't smell contrite. She moved closer and breathed in the scent from his collarbone, drawing it in through her mouth so it traveled up into her nose, deep in the back of her throat.

No, not contrite. Not ashamed. Only frustrated and slightly worried, along with the unique cocktail that was everything she identified as *Rainer*.

She tilted her head the other way to eye him from the corner of her right eye. He kept his gaze forward instead of acknowledging her attention. His hands remained behind his back. "I'll apologize that I mangled your trust so much it's still fragile. But I won't apologize for treating you like a competent officer and respecting how you want to run your section."

She brushed the tip of her nose along the line of his collarbone. His scent remained disgruntled, huffy Alpha, aggravated that this was even a confrontation he had to endure.

Perhaps she was seeing it one way, and he was seeing it the other—like looking at the numbers 6 and 9. Perhaps she was also upset because she'd been startled and come perilously close to embarrassment. Keenan was right that she struggled with developing situations, and Tsu had advised her that her confidence couldn't get shaken.

Lachesis shifted into his space, until the slivers of air between them hummed and pulsed with life. The individual fibers and threads of the three bars slashed across his shoulders reflected a mixture of metallic shine and shadowy darkness. "In the future, *Commander*, I want to be aware of potential stumbling points. I spend most of my time on the defensive and scrutinized by my fellow officers. Most of my duties have no margin for error. I am alone with the responsibility, and I spend every hour of every shift fearing today is the day I fly us into a corner we can't escape. I prefer to minimize the shocks to what little confidence I have."

Rainer twitched his chin in a nod. "Understood."

She let out the breath she'd been holding and bowed her head against his shoulder. The rough stripes raked her temple.

He placed his other hand over her hair and stroked her from forehead over her tightly wound braided bun, down the back of her neck, smoothing the wispy fibers that had escaped. "We're here. Earth. And it's blue. It's beautiful. We'll send word to *Ark* and bring them. We're home. We're home."

## THIRTY-TWO

The first thing they did was send word back to *Ark* that Earth appeared to be habitable.

*Hopefully* they sent the message, and *hopefully Ark* received it. Earth's new magnetic fields already played havoc with disrupting *NightPiercer's* systems, and while not as intense and ruinous as immediately after Exodus, there was the distinct possibility that the signal never got to *Ark*, or *Ark's* reply was never received.

Tomely had planned on getting *Ark* underway to Earth within sixteen months of *NightPiercer's* departure. The message might not make more than a few months' of difference, but those few months might mean everything for *Ark*.

Lachesis tried not to think about the possibility of losing her family for the third time. *Ark's* injuries had been, in a way, more serious than *NightPiercer's*, and *Ark* had been in worse shape from the beginning.

Granted, as far as habitable planets went, the new version of Earth was more than adequate, from what data they could gather through all the interference. It wasn't on fire; it wasn't a snowball, spectral analysis of the atmosphere revealed more or less the same composition as before, and it didn't appear to be oozing radiation from the surface. Despite the fact it had moved farther out from the Sun, its day period was the same, the Earth seemed to be tilted the same. The tides appeared to be much more dramatic because the Moon was closer and rotated more quickly. The more dramatic tides, and the huge

open stretches of ocean, created dramatic storms that tore across the globe.

Earth had, somehow, come to possess a massive amount of water. The oceans didn't appear to be shallow, and there was plenty of water frozen in icecaps and glaciers. The Arctic cap extended to what had been Alaska, United States, the northern provinces of Canada, and the Sakha Republic in Russia. The Antarctic cap extended into what had been Chile and Argentina and almost reached New Zealand. The equator seemed to be a temperate zone, but devoid of land.

Earth also appeared to now have four magnetic poles that wandered around so dramatically, Harkins couldn't be sure it wasn't an instrument error.

There were no large landmasses. Only small continents that were only called continents because it seemed absurd to call them islands and have a planet with no continents. These small island continents existed in four archipelagoes that mingled several of the "continents" and numerous small islands of varying shapes and sizes. Even calling the clusters archipelagoes seemed inaccurate, compared to the definitions of Old Earth. Two clusters in the north, two in the south, each pair split between faces of the Earth. None near the equator, and all thousands of miles apart.

The clusters were designated North One, North Two, South One, and South Two. South Two was so far south that it was probably too cold year-round to be a good candidate for recolonization—it appeared the southern hemisphere was in summer, and South Two was mostly frozen. South One appeared to be excessively mountainous, with no obvious fresh water streams or lakes.

That left North One and North Two. North One being at about 52<sup>nd</sup> north parallel, while North Two was about on the 60<sup>th</sup>. South Two was on the old 45<sup>th</sup> parallel, which had it effectively in the Antarctic polar zone (although the ice cap didn't extend up that far on that side of the planet), and South One was around the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel on the opposite side, but excessively mountainous, and what wasn't rocky appeared to be arid with no significant fresh water. But it did seem South

One had vegetation, trees, and indications of a functional ecosystem and weather.

North One and North Two were in winter, so it was hard to gauge what their terrain was like. North Two seemed the better option, with its islands being a combination of mountains, forests, and flat expanses that were hopefully arable land under the snow. There was also evidence of fresh water in streams and rivers. North One seemed more like South One—mountainous and dry, with the three major landmasses all having very tall mountains on one coast, with flat lands on the opposite, and at least half a dozen mountains rising out of the ocean an apparent five thousand meters or more. The result of all the mountains and uneven ocean depth? *Extremely* intense, even violent, weather.

But what they could see, and detect—which, granted, might not be everything—appeared to be eerily pristine.

It didn't even seem to be *Earth*. It was like they were analyzing a completely new planet in some other star system.

“There's no contamination you can detect,” Tsu said to Harkins like he was still in disbelief. Which he likely was.

Rainer's knee pressed along hers while they sat tucked up at the table in the officer's room. Once again, it wasn't just them—it was all the senior section staff, and specialists with Dying Arts in meteorology, geology, and other Earth sciences that had been going over the Telemetry data. They were packed into the room to see the first formal analysis of Earth.

Earth-viewings had been popular, with people waiting in line to press their face to the only available outward-facing windows left, and only for limited times due to radiation.

She got the view from the bridge. And it was... intense. Difficult to separate the emotion from the necessary critical thinking. But it helped that this didn't seem like Earth. Logically, intellectually, she knew it was Earth. But it wasn't the Earth she had been prepared for.

“None so far,” Harkins said. “There also doesn't appear to be any infrastructure left. We're able to *see* the planet very

clearly from up here, with excellent resolution, and I have seen no evidence there was ever anyone at all here.”

“This *is* Earth, right?” Arden joked from the far wall. A nervous titter went through the crowd.

That she could confirm, even if she didn’t know much else. “This *is* Earth. The Sun’s celestial thumbprint is a match.”

Tsu leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers on his knee. “Harkins. Thoughts.”

Harkins and his team shrugged. “Extreme magnetic activity makes detailed analysis difficult. I can’t guarantee it’s not a contaminated hellhole, but there’s plenty of flora, and we have seen fauna.”

Keenan sat up straighter. “Animals large enough you’ve *seen* them?”

“Definitely animals on South Two. Here’s video of them. Some sort of large hooved animal moving across dry plains. Indicates there is a fresh water source somewhere on South Two. Also seen silhouettes of what are probably large ocean mammals. Whales, orcas, maybe dolphins.”

Harkins brought up a video of South Two. It was slightly distorted from all the magnetic interference, but it clearly showed a herd of several dozen dark, large hooved animals grazing on dry-looking swept grasses.

Keenan visibly grappled with the information. “We only anticipated deep-ocean life and burrowing mammals and long-surviving insect eggs would survive. Animals were already dying in extinction-level numbers years before Exodus. What the hell happened?”

The videos of the Last Years were horrifying for any number of reasons. The catastrophic climate and Earth changes had killed millions of animals. The bodies were so numerous that they had to be left where they fell. As trees and other plants died, the die-off of species accelerated. Whole forests simply withered and died, becoming little more than sticks stuck into the dirt. Grasses turned to withered mats and

soil had dried, and the entire planet had been covered in a perpetual dust storm. Even the oceans saw massive die-offs, with bodies piling up on seashores as the oceans became toxic and laden with CO<sup>2</sup>. Scavengers like hyenas and vultures flourished, but the lack of potable water eventually did them in, too.

By the time *Haven* had gotten underway, Earth was in its death throes: storms, volcanic explosions, earthquakes, massive chemical and radiologic contamination from factories and nuclear power plants, red oceans. The estimation Earth would be ready for inhabitation within seventy-five years had not meant they'd find a pristine wilderness. Just a survivable one.

"It's hard to make out what species they are," Harkins said. "But our best guess is a wildebeest. But if they're wildebeests, that's a very small herd. So a small band of survivors, perhaps South Two is the fragments of Africa."

Her entire life had been about getting back to Earth (or living long enough to give Generation Four a chance at it), and here it was. There wasn't an emotion to encapsulate the experience, so she defaulted to bewilderment.

It didn't seem *real* either.

"Here me out," Arden said from his place at the end of the table, "is it possible we were... lied to?"

Graves asked, "Lied to? By who?"

"Lied to about what happened on Earth," Arden said. "And everything we've been told, and everything in our archives is fiction, probably generated en masse by AI."

Lachesis blinked several times. Forrest turned in his chair. "To what end? Why fabricate a lie like that?"

Arden grimaced. "Hope. I know it's outlandish. But what if *our* Generation Zero didn't come from Earth, but they were actually Generation Twenty, and no end was in sight. So the surviving ships created a new history, called themselves Generation Zero, and lied to our Generation One. Perhaps we've been up here centuries."



It was like having dinner with a drugged-up Rainer speculating about how they'd fallen through realities after *LightBearer*. But Rainer also might not have been wrong, just like Arden's suggestion didn't sound like fiction.

Simone looked at Juan. "A couple centuries locked in the eternal battle over fab and hull tiles? I'd be ready to rewrite history too. Sounds like hell. Are we even still alive?"

One of Graves' bare metal specialists leaned forward. "There *was* a theory back on old Earth our entire existence is a simulation."

"Great. The usual philosophy of if an AI thinks it's alive, does that make it alive and the actual truth doesn't matter." Belle sounded as exasperated as she felt when Rainer went on about toothbrushes.

"You've been listening to Commander Rainer on painkillers too much," Lachesis said dryly.

"The ship's AI regularly does things automatically based on feedback and input, so does its ability to choose a course of action constitute reality-shaping guidance? And if it does, does that mean sentience is not required to alter the cosmos? Is sentience required to have quantum influence?"

"Are you asking if we need a soul to ultimately matter?" Rainer asked.

Bennett bit out, "We do not have souls."

"*You* don't," Lachesis muttered.

Keenan pointed at Rainer. "*Could* this ship be much older than we've been led to believe?"

"The fuel in the Core degrades at a very specific and precise rate, and unless you're suggesting previous Generations were able to alter the fundamental laws of physics, I can confirm the Core's actual age. This is Year Seventy-Four. Or, more precisely, this is *our* Year Seventy Four. I'm not sure it's *Earth's* Year Seventy-Four." Rainer indicated the wildebeests with a finger.

Lachesis half-turned. “You’re joking. Please tell me you’re joking.”

“No.” Rainer barely suppressed an impish smirk.

“You are just not letting the alternate reality theory go, are you. Rainer, my love—”

He practically fluttered and shifted entirely towards her for the rest of her thought. Bennett, next to him, dramatically rolled his eyes and threw up his hands.

“—*two* of me is never going to happen for you.”

“There is some reality somewhere where—”

“No.”

“Well—”

“*No*. And *I* do not want to deal with two Rainers.”

“You say that now, but—”

“No. One of you is enough. In all things.”

“I’m not sure if I should be insulted or flattered.”

“Let’s go with insulted. It tends to be better luck.” Forrest held up his fingers and made a little swish swish motion like a miniature bell.

Rainer gave her a mischievous smirk. “I will set myself to improving. And convincing you sharing is caring.”

Tsu cleared his throat. “Commander. Your theory, please. And you can leave out what personal ambitions you would fulfill if proven correct.”

Lachesis smothered snickers. Or tried to. They came out as little snorts.

Rainer brought up a simulation of a weird double-funnel shape intermingled with a large number of fractal arms. “I’ve been contemplating the nature of time, and my theory that time is not a straight line—”

“It’s a circle,” Bennett muttered.

“No, the theory has been it is a *spiral*. I propose it’s a double-ended funnel shape lined with an increasingly compressed internal helix where any farther away we get from any individual event the delineation between—”

Tsu tapped the table. “Jump ahead, Commander.”

“To *us*, it is Year Seventy-Four. We already established when we escaped *LightBearer* that we slipped out of normal space and hit FTL for a very brief period. We traversed the helix faster than normal because *LightBearer* put pressure on the funnel neck, increasing the flow of time and shooting us out the other side. So that is *our* Earth, but in what everyone in this room would understand to be ‘the future.’”

Silence. Lachesis scratched her temple.

Graves finally said, “That sounds as far-fetched as Arden’s theory. No offense, Arden.”

“Or my other theory is Gaia spoke and transformed Herself, and She cares nothing for our scientific theories, and you are looking at the physical manifestation of divinity.”

“*Or* geological Earth processes we do not understand,” Keenan said.

“But you prefer a time travel theory you also don’t understand? In either of my theories, we have much less risk that Earth is contaminated. There will still be dangers, but not the ones we’re looking for, and if we get the theory wrong, we’ll be so busy looking for irrelevant risk that we’ll miss the new dangers.”

“What about the theory that this Earth isn’t *our* Earth, and we slipped into a different reality?” Harkins asked.

“You mean the theory he put forward while counting toothbrush bristles after surgery?” Lachesis asked.

“That’s the one.”

Rainer shook his head. “Functionally zero.”

“But time travel isn’t functionally zero.”

“Because *Ark* exists,” Tsu answered. “And not just *Ark* exists, but the *Ark* that exists is indistinguishable from the *Ark* we’d expect to find. The odds of encountering such an *Ark* would only be feasible if we traversed a few branches of reality and the deviation from where we began and where we traversed to was very recent, probably so similar we had to trade places with this reality’s *NightPiercer*. Otherwise, if it was any farther back, I would expect to have at least seen another *NightPiercer*.”

“But if *this* reality diverged so far back that *this* is the Earth we left,” he pointed at the screen, “then the chances of encountering *that Ark*, or really, *any Ark*, are functionally zero. And of course there’s the argument that *NightPiercer* and *Ark* traversed realities together, but *Haven* didn’t. This is our original reality. That is our original Earth.”

Lachesis nudged Rainer’s knee with hers. “There’s one way for us to find out if we’ve rock-skipped into the future.”

Rainer snorted. “It’s not the *future*. This is our present.”

“Okay, fine, if we slipped position along the relative timeline. Happy?”

“Close enough.”

Tsu focused on her. “How do we tell what year it is?”

“Orbital precession of Earth. The Earth’s axis isn’t straight up and down. On Earth, there was a star called the pole star—it never changed position in the sky regardless of season. It was always in the same place. And there’s a twenty-six thousand year pole star cycle. At Exodus, it was Polaris. A few thousand years earlier, it was a star called Thuban. As Earth tilts around on its axis, the celestial pole points at different stars. By *very, very* precise observation, I *might* be able to detect if Polaris has moved any appreciable degree in the sky.”

Keenan drummed her fingers on the table. “How close in years do you think you can get?”

“A thousand years, no closer. Even that will be difficult with the tools I have.”

Rainer moved to say something, then placed his hand over her knee and squeezed his fingers like her knee was a series of piano keys. She recognized the pattern by now: Morse Code for numbers. He was counting.

She added, “And I can only make the observation from Earth.”

“Which is a problem, because there aren’t any beacon satellites,” Bennett said shortly.

Rainer tapped out *eighteen*.

Tsu straightened in his chair. “Excellent redirection, Commander. The beacon satellites no longer exist—”

“Another bizarre thing,” Harkins muttered.

“Probably whatever moved Earth to this position also cleared out the local neighborhood. Except the Moon shows *no* damage of such an impact or disruption,” one of the Telemetry staff commented.

Someone else from Crèche chuckled. “Not if it’s been a couple million years.”

“Which is *another* thing to consider.” Bennett practically pounced. “Four unpredictable wandering poles? The electromagnetic activity at the surface is going to make technology almost impossible to use.”

“One thing at a time,” Tsu cut him off. “Lachesis. All other things aside, I’m presuming you and Rainer have figured out how to land the ship.”

Rainer tapped out *twenty-two*. “We have, yes. There’s a contingency plan for if the beacons were unusable.”

Everyone in the room leaned forward a few degrees except for herself and Tsu, who remained composed and calm. The Captain nodded once. “What’s the procedure?”

“Well, sir,” Lachesis said, putting her hand over Rainer’s. “That’s the part nobody especially likes.”

“Oh hell,” Keenan said.

“If there are no satellites in orbit,” Rainer said, “then we put the beacons on Earth. There are three drop pods intended for just this purpose, each will fit a team of three. We only need to drop two. Two teams of three werewolves, given the harsh conditions. I’ll need to be in the first, and assuming we land successfully, *Lachesis* in the second.”

“Absolutely not,” Captain Tsu said immediately.

Rainer nodded. “I wish I could agree. But the ship’s re-entry procedures are already programmed, and she won’t be flying the ship during the final phases as she is not trained for atmospheric flight in planetary gravity. The beacons have to be calibrated with location data for the flight computer. Since there are no GPS satellites in orbit, the only option for that is a navigator. If *Ark* was with us, they could use their own Navigators who have been trained for this, but we only have her.”

“We could wait for *Ark* to get here,” someone from Telemetry said.

“*Ark* might not get here at all,” Forrest said. “And we’re sitting solar ducks.”

“The magnetic disturbances are going to eventually wreak havoc with our tech,” Graves said.

Arden leaned against the table. “Forgive me if this sounds obvious, but whoever goes in those pods *isn’t* coming back.”

Rainer looked at him. “We know. But if we don’t go, if *Lachesis* doesn’t go, we aren’t landing. Not on Earth, not on Pluto, and not anywhere else. It’s this, Arden, or all of this was for nothing.”

## THIRTY-THREE

“No Rainer?” Forrest asked.

Rainer had faithfully come to every single one of her pregnancy checks since they had begun. She had insisted that he not come this time. “Don’t hold it against him, Forrest.”

Because this time would be the last time.

“I don’t and I won’t,” Forrest said wryly. “Just speaks to how overwhelmed and busy he is if he isn’t here for this.

“You smell like you’re worried there might be unexpected news.” Forrest had a distinct whiff of anxiety under his normally composed exterior.

“No, I’m expecting this to be exactly as it always is. Rainer’s fertility problems are well known and you’ve been shifting regularly for training. Your chances of getting pregnant are, as Rainer likes to say, functionally zero.”

Rainer always bristled whenever someone said *zero*.

Forrest added, “I have other things on my mind. It’s not you.”

Getting the ship ready for landing put a huge burden on all the sections, and everything relied on the little pods getting to Earth safely. And her putting her training to the test. She’d never actually observed stars through an atmosphere or in anything other than very controlled conditions.

Forrest drew the blood from her arm, and then did a final general fitness exam to verify she was, in fact, in good enough

shape to get into a landing pod and hurtle towards a cold, not-as-barren-as-expected Earth.

He disappeared, and about ten minutes later, came back. This time he smelled of even more anxiety and concern and worry. “You’re cleared to go.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Because you don’t *smell* sure.”

He let out a breath. “I’m thinking of Earth.”

“Are you worried about injuries from the landing sequence?”

“Of course. But...” He thumbed his lips. “I’m worried about Lily.”

“Lily.”

“That she’ll find her mate,” Forrest said. “Her *true* mate.”

Lily would have found her true mate already on *NightPiercer*. “She believes she has one? On *Ark*, you mean?”

“No, she believes you and Rainer are the first mates since Exodus. She says she loves me, but I’m human. She’s a werewolf. We aren’t mates. Human/werewolf relationships prior to Exodus were extremely rare, and having a human mate was worse than having no mate at all. Especially a female. They called those she-wolves terrible things and exiled them, sometimes even hunted them down and killed them. I’ve only been able to locate two examples of a happy human/werewolf relationship, and in both of them, the she-wolf *chose* the human male over her own mate.”

“Then shouldn’t that give you hope?” Lachesis asked. “Lily has chosen you. Rejection happens. I’m not with Rainer because I can’t survive without him.”

“I’m afraid I am going to lose my wife and my son.” Forrest tucked his tablet against his side. “There’s a great deal we’re putting at risk. Things we take for granted. Things we don’t know how to live without because we’ve never had to.”



It's not going to be the same as the other risks we've taken. And there is going to be damage we haven't foreseen."

"Lily loves you. I can smell it. And we don't have those old stupid stigmas about werewolves who partner with humans." The stigma wasn't *entirely* unfounded, as humans and werewolves produced extremely dangerous hybrids that had been the reason werewolves had been monsters in human stories. But the stigma and nonsense about being "Unwanted" or an "Abomination" if you had a human partner? *Clearly* proven false.

At least...hopefully.

THE MOON PAINTING WAS MISSING FROM THE WALL WHEN SHE returned to their quarters. The triptych of trees from the bedroom was also missing, as were all the little Earth treasures from the shelf by the entry.

He straightened from his work securing the triptych in a trunk. "You smell pensive."

"I'm not pregnant, don't worry. And of course, I'm pensive. I'm about to drop you out of this ship." After three months of planning, the day was finally here. They couldn't wait any longer. Earth was emerging from the depths of the brutal northern hemisphere winter. Landing the ship at the end of winter would give them as much spring, summer, and early autumn as possible to establish themselves.

Although no one knew what would happen with the seasons given the changes to the Earth and Moon. The Earth currently showed a warming trend and was in relative position of "late winter," but it was best guess about how warm spring and summer would be now, or how long it would be, or what the weather would be like. Or how deep the snow was, or if the snow would melt at all, and if it did, how arable the land under it would be.

But it wasn't like anyone had been expecting to come to a planet that was welcoming and pristine. The frustrating part

was the magnetic field, making any sort of detailed analysis more or less impossible.

She and Harkins had been able to put together a basic map of North Two, where they'd be bringing the ship down. While most of Earth was now ocean, there were sufficient landmarks on the four continental clusters to overlay the new geography on the pre-Exodus globe. The topography of North Two was much more difficult to visualize due to the snow cover and massive forests that covered the three largest islands in the North Two cluster.

But the second largest island of North Two appeared to have some mountains, hills, and a large, open plateau that spanned the upper northern third. No obvious water sources, and that was the point. Bringing the ship down in an area that was both flat *and* not obviously valuable for future use was critical. There would be considerable damage during the landing, and a massive debris field, and *great* care was being taken to shed all possible environmental contaminants prior to landing.

They had chosen to jettison the engines, since those were *highly* irradiated and would be exceedingly dangerous in atmospheric flight. The backup batteries too were extremely toxic. The generator disc would be sacrificed in the landing to absorb the primary impact, while the bottom of the ship would sheer off to protect the reinforced crew and animal compartments. So there was going to be a hell of a debris field. They were just trying to limit how toxic that debris field was.

But the Core would be kept. Rainer was confident it would survive the impact and be completely safe (since the Core was not *actually* very large), but there was always the possibility they'd start off their time on Earth with a radiological disaster.

Gaia would not be amused.

She handed Rainer the small folio made of very fine leather that Tsu had given to her. She pressed it against his chest when he didn't take it immediately. "A map of North Two. I've included some basic instructions on how to locate

the pole star, and how to find your way if you need to change locations.”

Rainer closed his hand over hers. She pulled her hand down and left him clutching the leather. He opened it, exposing a carefully made folding map of North Two, using waxed paper and ink made especially for this purpose. There was also a grease pencil that would write on the paper in wet or cold conditions.

She had circled the location she had calculated to drop him. “You should land somewhere in that circle. I will land here.” She pointed to another area about fifty miles to the south. She hadn’t circled it, just in case he got confused looking at the unfamiliar map and couldn’t remember which one was Pod One and which one was Pod Two.

He folded up the map and secured the folio’s flaps. He set it down on the trunk containing the canvases. He fished into his pocket and pressed his antique watch into her palm. “You take this.”

The slight ticking of the old mechanisms twitched against her skin. “You always fly with it.”

“The magnetic activity on Earth will make our tablets and devices and even our compasses useless. Remember to wind it, and it will keep time for you even in a solar storm. *You* will need this more than I ever will.” He rubbed her hand.

Her throat tightened. “It’s almost time.”

“This isn’t goodbye, Lachesis.” He smiled as he bent towards her. “You’ll be right behind me. I have absolute faith in your calculations that the pod will land right where it needs to be.”

She dug up a smile.

He took the watch and put it around his wrist. She kissed him while his fingers worked, remembering all of him, every part of him.

This would be the last time they stood in these quarters among the stars.

THE THREE RE-ENTRY PODS (TWO PRIMARY AND A SPARE) HAD been stored in a small launch bay since Exodus. The pods only had a small engine with a chemical fuel supply, and thrusters for control, but weren't meant for flying. They were meant to get their three occupants to the surface in one piece, and nothing else.

They were coming up on the launch point, so she couldn't linger. The pod mostly... *fell*... out of the launch bay, used the small engine for an initial burn to get on trajectory, and then more or less fell out of the sky to the target zone. She had to have *NightPiercer* in exact position and speed, and release the pod at the right moment, to give Rainer the best chance of being in the right spot.

Otherwise, he'd end up in the ocean. Rainer wasn't *that* good of a swimmer.

She rested her face against his chest and breathed in deeply of his scent.

Rainer ran his hands over her shoulders, arms around her back, down her hips. "Gaia has called us here. If She wants to mete out punishment, She won't do it by dropping me in the ocean or smashing me into the ground."

"I'm still not convinced we weren't supposed to *leave*, and that you and I are the final warning to *go away*. That Her mercy went as far as giving civilization a chance to escape. Look what She made Earth into."

"Then I am going to risk Her wrath. It can't be any worse than yours." He dipped and kissed her slowly, sampling her lips and tongue, breathing in her scent.

She shivered with a rictus of bittersweet love and fear.

He drew back. "We'll be together again soon. And I *will* take you outside and fuck you under the stars. *Under* them. Not among them."

"Such a mongrel. Civilization *dreamed* of being up here among the stars, and now that we're here, you're promising

me a life under them.” She tugged at his sleeves, then forced her fingers to unclench and for her legs to back her up two steps. Emotions knotted in her throat. Gaia didn’t deal in forgiveness. The closest Gaia got was perhaps offering a chance at atonement. If Gaia had summoned them back to Earth, this was not a second chance. This was not forgiveness.

Rainer looked at the little pod, his scent fierce.

It was the last time he’d be on *NightPiercer*. The last moments he’d be Lead Engineer.

“Go,” she told him. “I will come find you.”

On Earth, or in the next world...

If there was a difference anymore.

## THIRTY-FOUR

She took her place as *NightPiercer*'s flight systems slowed the creaking ship. The ship rattled and groaned like an old Earth galleon as it did so, and the lights flickered as Earth's gravity pulled on the fragile hull.

"Ready, Navigator?" Tsu asked from his place. Bennett's lips were so compressed they were white.

"Yes, sir." This didn't feel real, and it didn't feel like it was happening. She drifted somewhere half outside herself, like she controlled her actions by string and pulley.

The main screen split from the view of Earth to her navigation view, and Harkins' external video feeds.

"Coming up on the drop point," Harkins told her. "Weather looks good all the way down."

She didn't need to do much except verify that *NightPiercer* was at the precisely correct speed and position for Rainer's drop.

"Twenty seconds, Rainer." No point in calling him *Commander* anymore. In twenty seconds, *NightPiercer* would shed its Lead Engineer.

"Ready," his voice said in her ear.

"Eight seconds," Tsu said.

She put her hands flat on her console and took a deep breath.

Three.

Two.

One.

**>> LANDING POD LAUNCH : SUCCESSFUL <<**

**>> GOOD LUCK AND GOOD JOB <<**

They lost track of the pod in the auroras and magnetic interference within twenty-two seconds. Through the tangle of swirling charged lights, the fiery trail of the pod was impossible to see visually, and the transponder signal turned into garbled static.

She folded her hands under her chin and watched the screen, heart pounding against her sternum, thumping on the scar between her breasts like a fist demanding to be let out. Or in.

*NightPiercer* continued on its orbit around the other side of the Earth, leaving the pod to its thirty-eight minute ride down to the surface.

Bennett did not even move. He was as rigid and tense as she was, but for completely different reasons.

Praying to Gaia seemed an awful lot like pestering her mother when her mother had been angry. Like when she and her sister had *really* acted up and gotten into trouble, and they'd been banished to their room, and dinner time had come around and they'd crept up to ask about food. It had felt like a very dangerous life choice. It had *also* proven to be a very dangerous life choice when they'd once decided that they were grown enough to just go down to the mess themselves and find their own food instead of pestering their angry parents.

It hadn't *seemed* like a bad idea at the time.

The Kitchen staff had inquired why they were alone, which she and her sister had explained. After eating their meal, Crèche had greeted them on the way out of the mess. Her sister had instantly burst into tears (Clotho had been about six), which had left Lachesis to attempt to explain to Crèche their logic. That had only resulted in a child welfare investigation, but not before their parents had already realized they'd gone missing and were desperately trying to find them.

Using food as punishment on *Ark* was forbidden, and Crèche had shown up angry and ready for a fight.

But not nearly as angry as their parents.

And then *all* the adults had been angry.

She and Clotho had been very confused. Going to the mess hall alone hadn't even been *exciting*. They'd been trying to *avoid* more excitement by pissing off their parents, reminding them it was time to eat and they were hungry so... they'd just gone themselves to keep the peace.

And that was how she felt about this whole return to Earth thing at this point. Just waiting for Earth to whip around and snarl at them and smack them with a hurricane or a wall of water.

Because looking at what Earth had become... it wasn't exactly a *welcoming* sight once you got over the beautiful blue shade and contemplated the whole thing.

"It reminds me of Command Aptitude," Lachesis said as she waited for the ship to complete its orbit.

"How so?" Harkins asked.

"The planet, I mean. It all seems very benign at first. A few things that are odd, but perhaps they matter, and perhaps they don't. Then." She snapped her fingers.

"You think the planet is haunted?" Bennett didn't hide a shred of his disgust.

"I think there are three bad options to explain why Earth is what it is. We have a total lack of understanding of planetary processes, we travelled a couple thousand years into the future, or Gaia is real. Which one of those do you use to keep warm at night?"

"Which one do you believe?" Bennett shot back.

In mere hours, she was going to be beyond the XO's grasp. His seams were showing. He hadn't figured out a way to get back what *Haven* and Arden had taken from him, and for all his lurking in the shadows, that's *all* he'd managed to do. Now everything was in the final stages of slipping away from him.



“I was raised in the faith, just like my mother was. I also have always known Rainer is my Gaia-ordained mate.”

Harkins inhaled. Tsu raised a brow but said nothing.

“Always knew,” she said again, just for clarity. “But didn’t want to admit it, because that meant Gaia was real. But if I’m choosing which option I like best, I like time-travel. Harmless. Doesn’t represent a fundamental challenge to our understanding of the universe or involve vengeful deities. Because if Gaia is real, I personally don’t believe She’s welcomed us home. Gaia does not forgive.”

Bennett’s lips went white with tension and he seemed to swell under his uniform.

Harkins cut through whatever Bennett was about to say. “Five minutes. Starting scans now.”

She tapped her fingertips together as she waited.

“There.” Harkins spun around in his chair as he pulled up the video feed, showing the highly zoomed scan of the surface. It was hard to make out detail—it looked like shadows on the white surface—but there was also a large blot of green that didn’t match the field of white.

*NightPiercer* rushed past it.

Harkins called up the recording and played it back at half speed. Clearly visible was the pod, the charred path of its landing along the snowy surface, and a large green tarp laid out against the white.

Tsu surged to his feet. “They did it. Green tarp means go.”

Bennett swung around in front of him. “Sir, it could have just fallen out of the pod if they crashed.”

Harkins said, “That thing is laid out in a square. Someone pinned the corners in those winds, and there are no other signs of debris or an uncontrolled impact.”

Bennett snarled, “We don’t know that.”

“I just *told* you,” Harkins snapped. “I know. Now you know. Fuck, man, it’s like you *don’t* want to get off this ship.”

You saw *Haven*. Why the *hell* would you want to stay here? Why does *anyone* want to stay here? We're *this* close to completing the mission."

Tsu gestured for them to be quiet and pointed at her. "Get your team and go. Daylight is wasting, as they say."

She stood. "Yes, sir. And with regards, Captain, I am not going to miss this ship, that chair, or these stripes."

Tsu actually grinned. "Neither will I, Navigator. Now get the fuck off this ship. That's an order."

Behind Tsu, Bennett went white *and* gray at the same time. His scent filled the entire bridge with *nightmare*.

Harkins ignored Bennett. "Safe travels, Lachesis."

She didn't hide her feral grin as she tapped her comm. "Xav, Cheshire. To the re-entry pod bay. We're going on an adventure. Pack your fur."

THE PAINTINGS HAD BEEN PULLED DOWN OFF THE WALL AND crated. The precious trinkets from Earth that stayed on the shelf she had packed into the small case she had for personal items. Her tablets and daisy chain gizmo were in her flight bag, although hard to know if they'd be useful at all on the surface—probably not.

They could be museum pieces. Along with other trinkets and relics of this period of history. What would they call it? Exodus hadn't been called Exodus at the time, or the Final Years or Last Days, or Generation Omega. Those terms had emerged within a decade, but not as it had been happening.

She shouldered her flight bag. The small trunk containing her essential personal effects, like clothing, socks, blankets, hair brush, had already gone down. The pods were small, but had been designed with enough room to bring supplies, not just the beacon and bodies. The first people on the surface had to survive long enough for the ship to land.

Assuming the ship didn't destroy itself. She'd seen the simulations of *NightPiercer* "landing."

Hade had been stubbornly optimistic. But he probably hadn't had much choice in it, given the sheer scope of the problem facing him. Rainer didn't allow himself to doubt either. Rainer proceeded.

She sighed.

Yeah.

Time to get off this ship and find her mate before he *proceeded* straight into a crevice or such.

Bennett was on the other side of the door.

His scent was wild, panicked, desperate, *furious*. His pupils were dilated, and he trembled under his uniform. His fingers dug into her arm. "This isn't over."

She yanked her arm free and snarled at him. "You will *never* have *any* control over us again, and if you try, I will put my claws through your throat. Which will be better than if I let Rainer deal with you. You know what *he* does to his prey."

Bennett's scent flickered all over with *nightmare*, and an unbidden shudder went through his body. He yanked her right up against him. The hard lines of his abdomen and hip and thigh fit against her side. The softness of his cock pressed through his pants against her abdomen as his fingers dug into her wrist, threatening to separate the tendons and dig into the precious nerves.

She grabbed the earlobe of his comm-wearing ear. "Stay *away* from us. Far, far, *far* away."

"You think this is over, you stupid feral? You think it's just *me* you have to be afraid of? You think I've spent the time sobbing in my quarters?" He yanked her close again and whispered, "*You* should be afraid. You won't be free of anything. You'll be in a different sort of prison. A *human* one, just like before Exodus, where your kind lived in fear of *my* kind, of what we'll do to you. They're afraid of what the wolves will do to them, and I'll use that. They already know Rainer's a threat. This *isn't* over."

"Oh, going to make yourself Warden since you'll never be Captain?" She shoved up onto her tiptoes so her face was very

close to his. “I have civilization to save. You make sure everyone is in a nice, orderly line to disembark once I’m done. And then *your* work will be done. Mine will just be beginning. You should set yourself to finding a spouse. I think we’d both like to see what sort of partner you can pull without those stripes to help.”

She gave his stripes a tug like she was going to rip them off, then backed away from him, grinning while he turned white with fury. “I am going to enjoy smelling you while we celebrate being off this damn ship and back on Earth, and everyone commends you for your assistance and your name goes down in history. Rainer and I will even let you have *all* the credit and let history think you and Tsu saved everyone. You, and I, and Rainer, we’ll all know the truth,” she licked her lips and leaned almost close enough to kiss him, “that you are nothing but a sack of bones, bitterness, and broken dreams. That the civilization you’ll help build, that will laud you and love you and howl your praises, isn’t the civilization you wanted, and you’d rather have a life up here, presiding over a ship’s corpse. And you’ll wish you stayed on *Haven*.”

He shuddered as if she’d hit his brainstem.

“That’s right,” she whispered, “you’ll find yourself wondering if you’d die happier still being back on *Haven*. Instead, you’ll be imprisoned under the stars you once thought you’d rule from.”

She pushed away from him, smiled, and walked away.

## THIRTY-FIVE

Launching a shuttle into the abyss was infinitely *less* terrifying than being in a pod careening through an atmosphere.

At first, it wasn't. The usual launch, lack of gravity, silence, pressurization. Only difference was the planet in view was blue and white, not brown, red, green.

Then the noise began. First *whsp whsp* that gradually grew louder and louder as everything got brighter and brighter. Then the gravity grabbed hold and *pulled*, and the pull got stronger and stronger, and stronger, until it crushed her body against the seat, and the *noise* of the air tearing past the pod, and her ears popped as the pressurization switched from the life support tanks to a small turbine providing air from the outside.

The *smell* was dizzying. Wet. Cold. Crystal.

Her field of view became a whirl of clouds and blue and shadows and light, all tearing at the pod. Her ears told her she was tumbling, because her eyes said they were, but her instruments told her otherwise.

The pod smashed through the upper clouds and broke through the haze, giving them a blinding, bright view of the *endless* blue above *and* below.

The pod continued streaking downwards, swinging side to side as the thrusters kept it on course. The sound deafened her. The heat in the pod made her sweat despite the freezing cold smell of the air inside.

The blue ended in a rocky, craggy shoreline and the pod streaked across a white, snowy landmass that sparkled in the wintery sunlight. The orb of the Sun shone through thin, wintery clouds, the light diffusing into a pale, pastel rainbow.

The white below continued on, punctuated only by the sweep of snowy forests and mountains to the left.

The ground got closer. The pod beeped, then abruptly slowed, lurching them against their harnesses as the forward thrusters gave a final burst, then the pod tilted up, the back of the pod dropping out from under them.

The *noise* of the pod hitting the snow was deafening. A wall of sparkling white flew up around them. The pod bounced and then hit for a final time with a teeth-rattling jolt, and slid, and slid, and slid, pushing up a wall of white in front of it until it finally came to a halt under the white wall.

She blinked several times, trying to comprehend everything her senses perceived. Her eyesight seemed compromised, so her hearing sharpened in response, feeding her a hissing, sizzling sound. Where was that coming from?

Her body was so *heavy*. Like she'd been woken out of a dead sleep and was stiff and disobedient or she was standing under a thick, wet blanket. Her *eyelids* felt heavy. Her tongue moved to say something, but was so *heavy*. Even her brain felt squished to the bottom of her skull and like her eyes weren't the right shape and something was pinching the globes.

Her vision, in fact, was somewhat blurry.

Had she hit her head on landing?

No, it didn't seem so. She could *think* just fine through the overload of sensory data and the extra effort everything seemed to require. This was like trying to do math while sprinting around the gym track.

She tried to focus on the wall of white in front of them. The pod being buried under a bunch of snow had not been part of the risks, and they'd suffocate if they didn't get out. Dying like this would be inconvenient.

Her vision remained blurry enough she couldn't read the numbers or text on the pod console, but she could make out individual gauges and screens, and that the compacted layers of snow on the windscreen were sliding down.

The snow must have broken their impact *and* now was melting because the exterior of the pod was super-heated from the re-entry.

"Everyone okay?" The two words were hard to say. *Had* she hit her head?

"Yeah," Xav said.

"Gravity," Cheshire said. "Heavy."

She unbuckled her harness. It felt *very* heavy. "We've been living in .93G."

Ug, her tongue got tired even speaking.

"*Haven. LightBearer.* And this is *real* gravity." He finished with a gust of breath and leaned back in his seat.

His point being that the other ships had had different gravity from *NightPiercer*, and they'd felt it then, just in reverse. She'd even felt the very slight difference between *Ark* and *NightPiercer*.

Real gravity had been firmly established as *not* the same as artificial gravity. Gravity was gravity, right? Wrong.

Since the snow was quickly melting off the windscreen (and presumably they would *not* suffocate under an avalanche of their own making), she let herself sit. They were on *Earth*. They'd survived and not gotten smacked back out into orbit. Or slammed to the ground and made into a lovely organic paste.

Her brain, overwhelmed with trying to process all the intense new sensory input, dumped processing the emotions of *Earth* to the back of the line.

She unbuckled her harness. No time to sit and process. *NightPiercer* was in the grip of Earth's powerful magnetic field and gravity. Rainer and his team needed to be found. The days were short, and the conditions difficult. They had a

weather window. If there was one thing her preparations had impressed upon her, it was that in winter survival conditions, even half an hour mattered.

The pod's automated systems had handled everything, as expected, and the pod appeared secure and more or less intact. The limited exterior sensors indicated breathable atmosphere with a slightly higher O<sub>2</sub> concentration than they'd be used to, precisely 1.02G, and an exterior temperature of 272 Kelvin. So not far off the freezing point of water, 273.15K. The gravity being higher than expected was intriguing.

All that critical information was displayed on a central panel in big font that she could actually read with her affected vision. And as expected, all the panels flickered and fritzed, and that was from *within* the shielded pod. Once they opened the pod, they'd lose all electronics.

The hissing had stopped. It *probably* was the sound of the snow melting and evaporating on the heated hull, which had now cooled, and would start to refreeze, so before that happened, time to get out of the pod.

"Everyone ready?" She was not ready. She was not ready *at all*.

Rainer had probably bounded out into the snow without even noticing the gravity or sunlight.

Snow. She'd only seen snow in videos, and she'd only touched artificial snow a few times.

Natural gravity was a shock. Or more like an oppressive force pulling the meat along her bones.

Cheshire and Xav gave her shaky smiles and thumbs up. Cheshire said, "Sure. What's *ready* for a moment like this."

"I'm properly intimidated myself."

"Do we have any contact from Rainer's team?" Xav asked.

"No." They had anticipated being too far apart for the old-fashioned radios on the entry shuttles to pick up anything, and there was a *ton* of activity in the ionosphere, making radio communication more or less impossible.



They compared notes on how they were feeling—the males all admitted to the same things she was experiencing, but their vision was worse than hers. That part wasn't unexpected—it had been discovered back on Old Earth that males and females responded to space flight differently, with biological females being less affected by and recovered faster from being in reduced or no gravity for any length of time. While *in theory* there wasn't that much difference between *NightPiercer* and Earth gravity, nobody actually knew what would happen.

She would have smiled, but her facial muscles and tongue were still getting used to the gravity. Her tongue, especially, hadn't been so tired since she'd had her first make-out session as a teenager and woken up the next day with a sore tongue and realized the tongue was a muscle. "Tongue-wagging" had taken on a whole new meaning.

"Right." She let out a breath. "Let's do this. Xav."

They made their way to the ramp door. Xav threw the bolt, and the ramp disengaged from its harness. The electronics went *fzt!* and the entire pod went dark.

A blast of cold air swept into the pod, then light.

She caught herself on the side of the pod while her senses blanked and her brain flailed under all the new sensations and information. The *intensity* of it felt like shocks straight to her brain as neurons formed and jumped.

The air was cold, and it was bitter and damp, and she'd felt cold, damp, bitter air, but not like *this*. This was... this was... something else. This *felt* like something. It was like a Biome, but a hundred times more intense. And it didn't have a single scent she recognized. There were a thousand other scents, some slightly familiar: ice, frost, tree, dirt. And the sky was so *high*. It went up and up and *up* to a moving mass of gray-bottom clouds that spread across a field of infinite blue.

In the distance were some trees. Tall trees. Very tall. And the sky rose above them.

And the Sun was behind the clouds, the light streaming in shifting shafts as it pierced through the breaks, and the snow in front of them sparkled and whipped around by the breeze.

Her brain had no words. Her brain was having a hard time keeping essential survival functions going. It tried to tell her this wasn't real and wasn't happening.

She looked up at the sky. "No stars."

The sky, beyond the clouds, was a blank azure blue smeared by ribbons of gauzy green and purple. No stars. No points of light.

The disorientation hit her like a wave, and she had to catch herself again. A crush of dizziness rushed over her.

*Somatogravic illusion.*

It wasn't *exactly* a somatogravic illusion (since she was standing still), but she shifted her gaze to the top of the trees in the distance and waited for the disorienting crush of not having stars or the corridors or confined, measured spaces of a ship to pass.

It didn't really *pass*, but it did ease. Even if there was a strange ringing sensation *in her brain* and her proprioception was badly off. And she still couldn't quite see correctly.

"Keep your eyes on the treetops," she told the others as she sensed them stumbling and struggling the same way. And it was *cold*. The biting cold finally cut through the rest of the mental noise.

They were going to have to go to wolf form, or they'd freeze. But that would mean *another* wave of disorientation from the assault of all the scents.

But they could huddle together in the snow and wait for their brains to re-wire.

Rainer was probably fine, given he had Hade's genetic imprint of Earth, even if this wasn't Hade's Earth. But *she* had to find *him*.

Fifty miles across an alien planet had seemed daunting from her view above the planet. Now it seemed impossible.

A few dark birds made screeching noises and flew into the air over them. She ducked instinctively.

The landscape was like the view from *NightPiercer*, except the reverse. A vast empty *brightness*, with trees and clouds instead of stars and an invisible, swirling breeze that was nothing like that steady fan-created flow of the Biomes.

She raised her hand to touch the scar. “Shift. Now.”

She followed her own orders. The shift felt different: silky and flowing and graceful and *beautiful*. It rushed over her skin like Rainer’s hand over her fur and, for a brief, wild second, it was almost like he *was* there, but inside her, his fur brushing against hers.

She dropped to the snow as the sensations overwhelmed her again.

She fought through the spiraling disorientation. Xav was in wolf-form, but Cheshire was half-there, a twisted mangle of bones and skin and fur. His howling/screaming of pain cut through the ringing in her brain.

She yelped and tried to go to him, but her legs went every which way and she flailed/swam/squirmed through the snow as he collapsed. Xav floundered the same way and as he flopped, she saw one of his legs was still a hand, and one of his ears was still a human ear. And that was just what she could make out.

*Oh Gaia.*

She wrestled herself to Cheshire and flung herself at him, somehow managing to flop onto him and push him into the snow. “*Slow! Slow! Let it happen!*”

“*It’s nooootttt!*” He howled while his howl was a mixture of human and lupine that made her pelt stand on end.

She licked the top of his head, which tasted half-human and half-wolf and all sorts of terrible. “*I am here. I am here.*”

Xav managed to flop over to them as well and whimpered. She squirmed like a worm and draped herself over both of them and alternately licked both of them to comfort them like

they were extremely large puppies while keening the comforting song her mother had sung to her.

Getting stuck in a shift had been rare on old Earth, and was something that had historically happened to human/werewolf hybrids. In addition to mental, emotional, social, and physical problems. Producing hybrid children had been a capital crime with a non-negotiable death penalty for the parents, and a punishment for the entire pack, and, at best, a life of close supervision and control in an Elder Pack for the hybrid.

No, Crèche *couldn't* have tampered with attempting to hybridize werewolves. The werewolves had been losing the ability to shift over generations. Her own sister couldn't achieve war-form, and could barely get into wolf form. Wolves on the ship had simply... not been able to shift at all, and felt no urge to shift.

Gaia, *had* Crèche been hybridizing them? And for whatever reason, the AG environment hadn't resulted in the usual horrifying consequences?

## THIRTY-SIX

**C**ouldn't be true. *Couldn't* be. The AG had just damaged their DNA. Or being far from Gaia and whatever passed for Her Grace.

She licked around their ears to comfort them. If they could calm themselves enough, the spasms might pass, and they could complete the shifts back to one form or another.

The wind cut across the open field and kicked up a dusting of snow. She hunkered and slicked her ears down as the ice crystals burned her snout. Her lungs tingled in the cold air. The wind made a low groaning sound and carried with it scents she couldn't place. Nothing human or wolf, but things that smelled like they were alive. Lots of birds and trees and rocks and something else—the wind itself? The clouds?

There was a strange crackling and popping noise, then Xav went still. No, not still—he was still breathing. More slowly now. Deep, gulping breaths. She peered under her legs as much as she could manage—it looked like he was all in one form now. She focused on Cheshire and pushed all her body weight onto him and chewed his one lupine ear. He heaved and groaned, and abruptly, his body settled and flipped into lupine form.

Their thick pelts and the snow itself insulated them from the blustery cold. She tried to take stock of their surroundings again. Her eyes were better in lupine form. She crawled off the two males and tested standing up. Her body was all out of sorts and didn't quite move the way she expected it to, but it got better if she closed her eyes. The slightest turn of her head

made her fall or wobble or get dizzy, which was *not* very conducive to her mission of finding Rainer and his team.

Didn't *seem* to be a head injury.

Didn't matter if it was, either.

She shoved herself to her paws and picked her way through the snow. One paw in front of the other. One, two, three, four. Her raised leg wobbled, and it *looked* like she was putting it in the right place until it hit the snow and it wasn't in the right place—it always ended up not going far enough or forward enough.

So then she made what felt like *grossly* exaggerated movements and: success!

Gaia was *not* making this simple.

If she kept her head *very* still while *dramatically* exaggerating all her other movements, she could move around. Her packmates still rested in the snow.

They needed to get the beacon set up and head out towards Rainer's camp. They didn't have a lot of daylight left. Maybe eight hours, if their *NightPiercer* estimates were right. Which they very well may not have been.

What would dusk look like? Like she'd seen in photos and videos?

Above her, the sky had gone from blue to blue with a swirling mass of greens and purples. The auroras. And the clouds had lifted until the sky was almost entirely formless swirling colors. The Sun, a burning ball large in the eastern horizon, had risen well above the horizon and stared down at them, but she didn't *feel* it. Maybe it had to be summer to feel it.

She'd been trained to tell time by the motion of the Sun, and she calculated it to be about ten in the morning. Once she got her gear unpacked, she could check her estimate against the watch ticking away with her other tools.

She worked her way over to Cheshire and Xav and gave them reassuring nudges. "*Come on. We have to get the big*

*stick up, then get our things together and head out.”*

There was no word for “transponder” in the lupine tongue, so she went with *big stick*.

They gave her sad expressions and a rush of fear and anxiety hit her nose. Cheshire ducked his head and tucked his tail, and Xav whined.

Damn. What would happen if they shifted back to human form, then couldn't shift back to lupine? It was possible to scare a pup with a painful or awkward shift, and *eventually* they'd get the urge to try again, but it could take months. Many wolves on Earth had reportedly liked to shift regularly, but not always—some were perfectly fine wearing one skin over the other for long stretches of time. Some had even suppressed their ability intentionally with a specific concoction. On the ships, the concoction had been necessary for a lot of Generation Zero to take the edge off, but the sensation of one's fur being right beneath the surface had faded for many wolves.

Her own sister had mastered shifting, and once the novelty had worn off, Clotho hadn't really been interested in wearing her fur. Couldn't play an instrument while wearing fur, she'd said, and that's what she liked to do with her spare time.

Couldn't play Jovian Hopscotch or fly a shuttle in lupine form either, and reading with a lupine brain was difficult (lupine brains were not very good at complex literary or mathematical analysis) but that had never stopped Lachesis from wearing her fur as often as she could.

If Xav or Cheshire got stuck in anything but functional lupine form, there wasn't time to wait until their urge to shift was greater than their reluctance.

She told them to practice walking and demonstrated how she'd managed to somewhat figure out how to go in the direction she wanted to go and then picked her way back into the pod. Their gear was still secure and waiting.

Waiting for *thumbs*.

She shifted back into human form to contemplate her options. The beacon transmitter was a solid eight feet and a couple hundred pounds. Graves and Harkins had already pre-configured it, all the landing team had to do was unload it, set it up, take some measurements to verify that the pre-configuration was valid, and hit the button. Then she had to find her way to Rainer, verify *that* beacon's pre-configuration, and hit that button and *NightPiercer* would do the rest and land itself.

*NightPiercer's* "landing" was really going to be more the ship careening madly, using the thrusters (since the engines had been jettisoned, the Core shut down, and the only power left supplied by the Core bleed heat), and a final dramatic flare so that it would hit the ground generator disc first, peel off the disk, the hull tiles, tear away the bottom section of the ship, and then the remainder of the massive ship would skid on its belly for a couple of miles and (hopefully) partially embed itself into the terrain.

It was a crazy idea, but given the design had been spearheaded by Hade, it probably fell under the "crazy enough to work" category.

Another reason she had not touched the re-entry programming. It had been written by people who had actual experience with atmospheric flight and the detailed data about "controlled flight into terrain" and things like crumble zones and impact craters and such.

"Right," she told the cargo. She glanced out at the biting cold. Cheshire and Xav stumbled about mastering the fine art of walking. The sunlight shone behind the clouds and she caught herself staring at the way the sunlight turned the underbelly of the clouds silvery blue with orange edges, and the blue of the sky created little rivers between the silvery fields.

Nothing for it: she was on her own. It was too heavy for her human form to lift, and her wolf form lacked thumbs, which meant...

War-form.



She rubbed the tattoo on her neck. Could she manage her war-form well enough? Or would she lose her mind and run off into the woods? Would she be cloudy-headed after she shifted back?

Xav tangled up his legs and fell tail-over-snout.

Maybe her making it very far from the ship in war-form wouldn't be that big of a risk.

The cold bit into her ass crack and nipples. The only part of her that was warm was the back of her neck from her unbraided, loose hair. Which was getting tangled and snarled in the breeze.

She reached deep into her core and pulled her war-form to the surface.

The velvety, bloody, silky sensation of pure violence slid through her whole body. The shape of her teeth, her bones, her claws. Even the air tasted of violence in this form, and everything came to her through a smoldering haze.

*Focus.*

*Fuck focus*, the bigger part of her snarled back.

She stomped towards the cargo and grabbed the beacon's crate. Her claws dug into the container, scratching it, and she snarled at the metallic sound. Her claws dug into the pod's grate, puncturing the mesh floor.

She hefted the crate and stomped down the ram to outside, each step coming with a breath and a count:

*ONE.*

*TWO.*

*THREE.*

*FOUR.*

By twelve, she had the crate on the snow and backed away from it, clicking her teeth and fighting the urge to bolt towards the forest. Something on the wind pulled at deep, feral, violent threads. What was that scent?

She wrestled her body back into human form. The scent—whatever it was—eased.

Probably something she instinctively recognized as prey. Perhaps even a... rabbit? Had rabbits survived? Were there rabbits?

She was eating *all* the damn rabbits. All of them.

Her stomach rumbled.

“But first,” she forced herself to shape human words, “let’s get this working. You guys doing any better?”

A bark from Xav, who almost seemed coordinated. Cheshire was still wobbling like he’d fallen into a vat of Rainer’s most recent home-brewing attempts, but he *was* up and moving around.

She went back into the pod and found her case of instruments, some of which were wonderfully useless, like her compass. It would probably be possible with enough time to build something that would compensate for Earth’s assortment of poles and their meanderings, but for right now, she only had the Sun and a general idea of what latitude she was at.

In her case of instruments was Rainer’s precious antique watch, still ticking away. Tick, tick, tick.

The pod’s computer disagreed with the watch by eight minutes.

She wound the watch and put it on her wrist. It was possible the pod’s timekeeping had been affected by the landing. She’d go with the strictly mechanical mechanism.

“Fuck me.” She shrugged back on her uniform and overcoat and boots so she could work outside. Landing a spaceship with a watch that had been an antique back before the ship had even launched.

Her tablets wouldn’t start. She chucked them onto the crates and went to set up her sundial mat and take measurements of the Sun’s position.

She’d never actually *done* this before, but she’d been trained extensively and practiced with all the instruments on

fake suns in the Biomes or on the real Sun as best as could be replicated from the ship. Except now she was doing it on a planet with winds, clouds, shifting light, and eyes that didn't quite want to focus and a body that was thoroughly confused by what had just happened to it.

Fortunately, the Sun was a very large item in the sky, and she wasn't supposed to look right at it. Scorching her retinas was not the way to improve her vision.

She focused on her work, took her measurements, and then retreated into the relative shelter of the pod to unfold her map folio and establish where they'd landed. From her measurements, they'd landed in the zone they needed to hit for the beacon. They were about fifty miles southwest from Rainer's position, give or take ten miles. There were no significant landmarks between their current position and the forest they'd have to traverse, but there did appear to be some sort of large rock cluster about three miles from the forest's opposite side to use as a reference.

Still: fifty miles with her having to navigate by the sky alone? Intimidating.

Except she had literally navigated billions of miles by the sky alone so...

She plotted their route and then headed out to the beacon, which was shielded heavily from all manner of interference, and plugged in the necessary information.

**>> INITIATE BEACON A STATUS: READY <<**

**>> BEACON A: INITIATED <<**

**>> DATA STREAM: COMPILING <<**

**>> DATA STREAM : STATUS OK (94% INTEGRITY)**

**<<**

**>> DATA STREAM : SENDING PACKET <<**

**>> ... <<**

**>> ... <<**

**>> ... <<**

>> ... <<

>> DATA STREAM : PACKET RETURNED <<

>> DATA STREAM : ESTABLISHED <<

>> POWER REMAINING : 195.2 STANDARD HOURS

<<

>> WARNING: BEACON B NOT ONLINE <<

>> DE-ORBIT PROCEDURE NOT READY <<

“One down, one to go.” She popped the little keyboard back into the beacon and hit the *close* button. The beacon panels folded back into place.

Their packs were specially designed satchels that could be put on, taken off, and carried comfortably in lupine form. She had spent hours trotting around carrying a fully laden pack to condition her paws, shoulders, and hide, as well as practice putting on and taking off her pack. They contained all manner of gear, including her small, precious hard-shell case of navigation equipment.

The pod contained more tools, but these were the ones she would need to make the overland trek. They’d come back for the sextant and such.

She pulled her pack out of its slot and whistled to the males, who now seemed infinitely more coordinated and capable of handling moving in a straight line.

She shifted into wolf form and squirmed into her pack.

“*Which way?*” Cheshire asked as he carefully picked his way up the ramp to get his own pack.

“*The forest.*” She pointed her snout at the line of darkness about four miles ahead of them. “*Are you doing better?*”

A semi-enthusiastic yip to affirm he was ready to go, even if he smelled doubtful.

Hell, she was doubtful. It would have been nice to have a few days to acclimate to the unexpected physical deficiencies, but they didn’t have a few days. They had a couple of hours. They’d have to acclimate on the way.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

They made decent time to the forest's edge. Their coordination was almost normal, her vision was improved (the males reported they were still a bit blurry), and as long as she didn't tilt her head too quickly, the vertigo didn't hit her.

The sun was low in the western horizon at that point. Night would be here soon.

Night, however, had already come to the forests.

The forests were a starless void. Familiar, but *not* comforting.

*"They're so thick."* Xav crept up along her shoulder and shoved his head under her chin so he could peek out at the dark forest from under her ruff.

*"Will you be able to see the sky?"* Cheshire sniffed a tree.

*"I think so?"* This forest was mostly very thick evergreens. The large trunks were well-spaced, but the branches intermingled and created a canopy. Most of Rainer's paintings that had involved looking up through the trees to the sky had been broadleaf trees.

Xav pawed at the snow. *"Is there a way around?"*

There wasn't. Her folio contained the same basic map that she'd given Rainer, along with printed images from video stills to clarify the map. Based on their current position, the only way to Rainer was *through* this massive forest. Going around was not an option.

Even through the shortest route she could plot, they were fifty miles across uncertain terrain and elevation changes, in bad weather, with limited time.

Knowing her mate, if she didn't show up within a certain time frame, he'd come looking for her. And he'd justify wandering around the planet as he'd be able to find her Because Mates and all.

Cheshire advanced into the shadows of the forest and then emerged, carrying a stick. He trotted around them with his stick and made happy snuffling noises and smelled of joy.

Lachesis wagged her tail. Xav charged over to Cheshire and snapped at the stick, and Cheshire bolted away. He crouched in the snow and chewed on the stick while Xav danced around him and whined for the stick before darting in to take it.

Lachesis sneeze-laughed to herself and rubbed the side of her snout along her leg. *"I am telling Rainer about you playing with a stick, Cheshire. And enjoying it."*

There weren't ready lupine language translations for any of their names, although attempts were usually made to keep lupine names close to the meaning of human names. Rainer's mother had chosen to translate his name as *Resolve*, while Cheshire's name was translated as *Fortitude*, and Xav's *Cheerful*. Just like hers was *Lake*, since her mother had not wanted *Fate* or *String*.

Cheshire snorted and shook snow off his pelt. He flipped his tail up, and despite a vertigo-induced wobble, assumed a dignified posture. *"Playing with a stick. Hmph. I was investigating the stick."*

*"Of course. Investigating the stick."*

Xav dropped the stick in front of Cheshire. Cheshire picked it up and trotted into the woods. The darkness consumed his black pelt instantly, with only the reflective patches on his pack visible.

Xav loped after him.

She stood up, adjusted her pack across her spine, and headed into the darkness.

THE SHADOWS OF THE FOREST WEREN'T QUITE AS ALL-consuming as they seemed from the outside. It was probably *very* dark when there was no snow to reflect what little light there was from the stars and auroras, but with the snow, there was enough light that everything existed in shadows. Some darker than others. The mostly flat terrain helped, even if it was eerie. Was it normal for the forest floor to be so flat?

Birds whispered in the branches. One in particular sang a soft *hoo-hoo* that sounded far away and close at the same time. Little things that smelled like possible prey skittered about on the ground, little paws or claws making soft noises, and their warm scents wafting along the breeze.

Every ten minutes or when the branches thinned, she looked up at the sky to check her bearings, then they headed out again.

This was definitely more of a workout than trotting around the gym track wearing a heavy pack filled with water bags and ankle weights. That hadn't involved breathing frigid air with wind and darkness and a thousand small sounds and an *infinite* number of scents. The scents were the most exhausting. Somewhere deep in her mind, her instincts told her she should recognize them, but she couldn't name them. It was like trying to remember one of her father's musical pieces, or the name of something *just* on the tip of her tongue.

Rainer might know. In fact, Rainer probably *would* know. Or have a good idea.

Her heart beat a bit faster when she thought of him. And his promise about what they'd be doing under the stars.

Cheshire did the little sneeze-snort that was the lupine equivalent of clearing one's throat.

Damn lupine form. Wasn't just her heart beating faster. No privacy. "*Wasn't thinking about you, Cheshire.*"

Xav laughed so hard he almost fell over.

*“Don’t worry,”* Cheshire replied with a loll of his tongue. *“We’re all used to it down in the section. Male snouts. Good to know you’re so relaxed out here. I wonder if he will be.”*

More snickers from Xav. *“Of course he will. She’s all he thinks about.”*

*“Especially when she sneaks down into the section to... consult... with him. Official business.”*

*“CRECHE official business.”* Xav snickered. Because *Crèche* had no lupine translation, he went with—of all things—the term of *breeding*. As in, when a female was in heat and the sex wasn’t recreational.

The snow could have melted all the way to the ground from the mortification radiating off her paws.

They both descended into laughter.

*“Probably need to get even more used to it now that we’re off the ship.”* Cheshire ground it in a little more. *“Who knows what we’ll see out in the open in broad daylight. Repopulation and all.”*

He chose terms meant to convey *large litter* and *rebuilding the pack*. Not that she would *ever* consent to having a litter of lupine puppies. She wouldn’t be kicking off their return to Earth with a very bad decision that might result in her with a belly full of pups.

Although according to Rainer, he *had* been tested to see if he was fertile in lupine form as opposed to human form, which was gross and distressing on any number of levels. Thank Gaia he had been deemed functionally sterile in that form as well. He had never suggested they play in any form other than human, and she’d never dared to suggest it. Not that she would. Wisdom from previous Generations and in the bunks was lupine-form playtime was not worth doing between two wolves in lupine form. Any other combination of forms quickly became *deeply* uncomfortable.

Lupine form was good for squeezing into small spaces and sleeping in cold bunks. Human form was good for the



opposable thumbs and sex.

*“Hmph. Don’t act like you’ve never been in a bunk.”* She replied with a prim toss of her head.

Cheshire’s scent shifted to a slightly embarrassed but also spicy confirmation that Cheshire did, in fact, know what happened in bunks after lights-out. Oh, Cheshire knew *quite* well. Cheshire knew better than *any* of them.

If Xav had been in human form, he’d have had the hiccups from laughing so hard.

The scent she’d picked up as war-form tickled her nostrils again, but closer this time. Much closer. Stronger.

As one, they stopped.

The soft *who-who* of the quiet forest went absolutely silent. The wind continued to rustle the trees and made the branches crackle, and the scent disappeared in the swirl of air.

Lachesis looked up through the tree tops at the dome of stars above. The shadows of the trees blocked out the dome in slashes and crooked lines. Still on course for Rainer. Couldn’t get distracted by whatever kept getting her attention.

In the snow, something small skittered, then the sound disappeared. No more bird sounds.

The wind sent the tree branches knocking against each other. It sounded like dry crickets being shoveled.

Her brain didn’t know the scent, but her instincts did: *be careful, danger.*

Except she had no idea how to be more careful than she was already being.

Cheshire’s nose moved as he drew in the scent, his mouth open to hold the scent in his snout longer. *“I don’t know what that is.”*

*“I know I don’t like it.”* Xav’s tail wagged back and forth slowly.

*“Nothing was seen from above,”* Lachesis agreed. *“But we’re in a dense forest.”*

This part of Earth, North Two, and this particular island, seemed to be taiga in terms of climate and geography. Large swathes of it were covered by dense evergreen forests, making seeing whatever was moving in the shadows impossible.

It was possible that Earth was filled with nocturnal animals, or animals that had survived by adapting to a life in the deep shadows of the forests. Shelter from ashfall? Acid rain? Nuclear fallout?

There was no evidence those three things had been a factor.

Lachesis headed back out, keeping one eye on the stars above to keep her bearings in the darkness.

*Urf.*

They all stopped at the sound.

The wind swirled again, briefly flitting the smell in their snouts.

“*There,*” Xav nudged her shoulder and pointed his snout towards the shadows at their right.

She focused her slightly grouchy eyes on the movement. In the interplay of white snow, snow-laden dark branches, and darkness, it was hard to see, but the form looked huge—bigger than them by a half-height—and *round*. Massive paws made soft noises as it broke through the first inch of snow, but somehow it didn’t sink all the way. Its head was small by comparison to its massive round frame.

It moved slowly, deliberately. The faint light glinted off teeth.

What the *hell* was that thing? A large apex predator?

*Wurf, wurf.*

And then the soft *squish squish* of paws lightly compressing the snow. She twisted her head—regretted it as the vertigo hit—but managed to make out another one, then another.

A *pack* of those things?

*“Back away. Slowly.”* Whatever those things were, sudden movements seemed a bad way to survive the encounter.

As one, the creatures matched them step for step. Something rustled outside her field of view, and Cheshire whispered there was a fourth behind him.

*“We won’t be running that way,”* she said.

*“Nope,”* Xav whispered.

The one to the left *roared*. The others responded. The trees shook. Snow fell off the branches. The *ground* shook.

As one, the creatures sprinted. Their round, tumbly bodies moved with terrifying speed. Their huge paws barely broke the surface of the snow. Their long, shaggy coats swayed in a hypnotic way with their gait, and what light there was flickered over *very fucking large teeth*.

Teeth large enough to make a war-form pause, and *definitely* large enough to make a couple of lupines do the opposite of pause.

*“Run!”* She spun, slammed into Xav with her shoulder, and instinctively nipped him. Xav yelped and scrambled, she nipped him again and he shot off out into the dark forest. She stumbled as vertigo hit, and her left foreleg crumbled under her. Cheshire bounced over her and shot after Xav.

She got herself up and sprinted in the direction they’d been going. She threw her head back and howled. *“Get back here! Run this way!”*

The creatures lumbered after her. And the fourth had circled around behind them and now ran straight for her.

She sprinted with everything she had. Her smaller paws broke through the snow and she sank several inches with each foot-fall, and each stride required her to half-leap through the snow. Her muscles burned with the effort. The pack strapped to her added too much weight and too much restriction on her shoulders.

If one of the animals hit her and sent her tumbling, her instruments might be damaged. She forced her shoulders to

stretch against the straps and plunge through the snow and darkness.

The fourth animal lunged with a roar that turned her blood to ice. The shadow it cast made it invisible as it blotted out the light.

She swerved into its oncoming path and shot under it. It tumbled as it landed, skidding through the snow in a massive shower that glittered in the limited light.

She sprinted with everything she had to accelerate away from them. Another one took a massive leap. Claws brushed through the trailing hairs on her hamstring and the plume of her tail.

Xav and Cheshire charged through the forests back towards her. Xav shot in and barked at the creature closest to him. The creatures startled, and Cheshire and Xav took the opportunity to charge, tails up, and barking, before curving back around and following her trail through the forests.

The creatures growled and resumed chasing, but they seemed lumbering and spent.

*"They're slowing down,"* Xav panted as he accelerated to run at her shoulder.

*"So are we,"* Cheshire said on her other side.

*"Keep going."* Her muscles burned, and each stride felt harder than the last. *"Don't let them see us stop."*

They slowed to a jog once the creatures were out of sight, but the wind still blew their scent, so they were back there. Possibly trailing them. Could they smell how tired and drained their muscles were?

*"Are you hurt?"* Cheshire asked her.

*"No, I'm fine."*

*"You ran right towards that thing."*

*"Seemed the only option. This bag is heavy."* It felt heavy now. *"But big predators weren't supposed to survive?"*

*“We scared them off,” Xav said. “They weren’t expecting aggression.”*

*“What do you think they were?”*

*“Bears, I think.”*

*“Bears. White bears?”*

*“There were white bears. But they lived in the north.” Xav used the word to mean the arctic. He added, “But they were aggressive. Couldn’t scare them off like we did.”*

*“Maybe they thought we were prey and got confused when we showed teeth.” She’d heard about bears. They’d been considered very dangerous prey by the Old Earth wolves, and hunted in ceremonies. Other large prey, like moose and lions, were also ceremonial prey. Her mother had shown her pictures when she’d been younger, but there hadn’t been any bears in the Biomes. They were apex predators, and hadn’t been conserved, along with lions, tigers, alligators, or orcas. Badgers, however, had been preserved. Nasty little bastards.*

*“So bears survived, but not regular wolves.” Cheshire clicked his teeth.*

*“Or they didn’t survive on this island.”*

As they jogged through the snow, Xav explained what he had learned about bears in preparing for survival on North Two. That they were big, surprisingly fast, and some were aggressive, while some were not. Brown ones you were supposed to lay down and play dead, black ones you howled and chased them off, but advice for the white ones were to lay down and wait to die, it would make the inevitable easier. But he also relayed that the videos he’d seen of “polar bears” didn’t match what had attacked them. That polar bears were swimmers that stayed close to water, and while they could hunt on land and sprint for short distances, they had no ability to run down prey. And most importantly: bears were solitary creatures. They didn’t live in groups, and had never displayed cooperative hunting behavior.

*“Perhaps not bears then?” Lachesis squinted at the dancing auroras through a break in the tree branches. Still on*

course, although it would be nice to know how far they'd travelled. From the rotation of the stars, they were probably three hours until dawn.

*Dawn.*

What would dawn look like? Videos? Or Rainer's paintings?

*"Lake?"* Xav nosed her shoulder and bumped into her.

She acknowledged Xav with a low growl and kept studying the sky.

*"You smell..."* He nosed her again and sniffed her shoulder.

There was also not much privacy in lupine form. Emotions, thoughts, reactions, even physical status, were readily communicated through scent. In lupine form, the ability to read scents was infinitely more intense than human form, and males had much better snouts than females.

In the distant past, there had been a very delicate etiquette about what could be smelled on packmates and what was acknowledged by packmates. There was a very delicate etiquette around that on the ships with humans, since werewolves had superior senses of smell even in human form, and most humans didn't like being around wolves in lupine form for that reason.

It was acknowledged in the Repopulation Protocols that that ability was probably going to cause considerable social awkwardness as appropriate etiquette re-developed between wolves and entirely new social conventions evolved between wolves and humans.

Wolves and humans had never, openly, lived side by side before Exodus.

She acknowledged Xav's concern with a toss of her head. *"Thinking about dawn. What it will look like. We'll see it."*

Cheshire sat down and wagged his tail slowly across the snow while he thought. *"We will, won't we?"*

Xav also had to sit down to process this.

She twisted her head to study the stars. It would have been nice to make some notes about the positions of the stars and take some measurements, and figure out where they were in the endless forest, but between the bitter cold and fear of more “bears” showing up, she wasn’t unpacking her instruments and gear.

Once daylight came, it would be very difficult to navigate through this forest if she couldn’t take measurements of the Sun. It would help to know how far they’d come. It *felt* like they’d been on the move for hours and covered at least fifteen miles, but the snow had to be slowing their pace.

Even at a plodding pace, they should exit the forest sometime around dawn.

Cheshire looked up at the trees. “*These are so massive and old.*”

“*Pre-Abandon, perhaps?*” There was also no word for “Exodus” in the lupine language. Another term that came from humans, specifically, her understanding was, from their mythology, where an angry deity had driven the first humans from paradise because the humans had broken a promise.

“*I was talking to friends before we left, and they think this is part of an old Northern continent. Would explain the bears.*”

Except bears didn’t hunt in packs. How many generations would it take to evolve such sophisticated behavior?

Or how much divine inspiration.

She dismissed the line of thinking and ignored the insidious exhaustion that tried to take hold of her brain. She’d trained on *NightPiercer* carrying this pack, so she already had the necessary toughened hide for the straps, but the ship hadn’t been able to completely replicate real-world conditions. Like how much different planetary gravity was to the ship’s AG. Or the mental strain of not quite being able to see properly, or the extra effort to fight the vertigo.

Mental and emotional exhaustion. Task and stimulation saturation.

“*We’re on course,*” she told them. “*Let’s go.*”

*“How much longer in the forest?”* Cheshire stood and wagged his tail back and forth, the plume held in a high arch. He was a handsome, smokey black shade that seemed ghostly in the shadows, while Xav was more of a bark-and-snow colored shade who blended in with the trees.

She lifted a paw and contemplated her own white pelt. Did she match the snow? Or did she stand out in the shadows?

*“Lake?”*

All the forest looked the same from within the forest. They hadn't spotted anything that could pass for a landmark. She'd had Cheshire mark trees as they passed using his claws, so at least they'd know if they got turned around, or had to backtrack. *“I don't know how fast we're going, and the size of the forest was our best guess based on what we could see from above. Ask me again at dawn.”*



## THIRTY-EIGHT

The sky was not quite so dark. And the trees had begun to thin, with more space between each trunk and the branches lower to the ground. She willed her tired legs to keep going. Above them, things moved in the branches, but nothing attacked them.

“Prey?” Xav asked, head tilted up as they trotted along. “Have the prey moved to trees because of the bears?”

“Squirrels?” Lachesis suggested.

“Lot of squirrels.”

Well, how many squirrels on Earth was a lot of squirrels? They’d had squirrels and chipmunks in the biomes, and she had hunted both. But like everything in the Biomes, hunts on those had been strictly limited and required recreation credits. So was this a *normal* quantity of tree-going critters, or an excessive amount?

And most importantly: had they suddenly evolved large fangs and a hunger for blood and a growing number of them were congregating in the treetops preparing to attack from above?

They picked their way down a slippery slope. Her paws gave, and she slid down on her haunches, and Xav nearly ended up tail over ears.

She hit the bottom of the slope and kept sliding... and sliding. She scrambled, her claws scratched something hard, and she spun around, and kept spinning until she splayed out all four legs and on her belly.

Cheshire, who had managed to not lose his footing, stepped carefully onto the flat at the bottom of the slope and promptly slipped onto his haunch.

Xav pawed at the snow. Lachesis picked herself up with care. Her paw-pads gripped the surface and if she was careful, she didn't slip too badly. She snorted at the snow and pawed—a clear, dark surface stared back at her, along with a faint reflection.

*“Ice!”* Xav said eagerly. *“It's ice!”*

He looked up and down the length of the shallow valley they were now in. He sneezed snow out of his snout. *“It must be a frozen river.”*

So... fresh water? And now she had a good look at the sky because no trees were growing in the river, and there was a very narrow strip of visible sky, which was now a haunting purple.

Dawn was coming.

She memorized the stars from this position. *“Remember this. But we've got to keep going.”*

Getting up the slope to the other side required digging their claws into the frozen ground like going up a climbing wall and left them panting at the top, but from there, it was only another mile before they suddenly broke out of the forest.

The trees just... stopped, and they had a spectacular view of a rounded hillside opening up onto more snowy hills with undulating lines of deep forest, shadowy and gray from the illumination to the east.

The birds were chirping more loudly, and the *hoo-hoo* of the owls was gone. As long as the birds chirped, the bears weren't around. She turned her attention to the east. From their current point, all of Earth unfolded around them in soft hills and cascades of trees.

*“It's not flat.”* Cheshire sat down next to her.

*“It's so... round.”* That wasn't the word she wanted, but how did she express what it looked like to see these soft hills

all decorated with sweeping lines of trees? It looked like Rainer's blueprints, where the trees and shadows were the elegant scrollwork details against mechanical surfaces.

Xav sat on Cheshire's other side. They watched the east as the sky went from deep purple midnight to more purple, then to a yellow-to-purple gradient, and the illumination grew and seemed to push the stars away, and the light spread over the hills, pushing the darkness into the crevices and depressions.

The massive burning red edge of the Sun appeared first, then steadily rose, emerging degree by degree, first fiery red, then oranges and pinks and yellows, dismissing the stars and shadows in a sweeping gesture of *light*.

She threw her head back and howled to the Sun.

The sunlight moved over her fur.

Cheshire and Xav threw their heads back and joined her song.

She sang until her throat gave out and she collapsed into the snow, keening, as the Sun rose higher and the light brushed over her fur.

The fiery dawn faded into a winter morning, gray and demure.

Her joints shook and her limbs felt weak as she forced herself to stand back up.

Cheshire wriggled out of his packs. Then he shifted up into human form. She shook off her emotions and yipped at him.

"We need to eat," he told her. "I'll be okay shifting this time."

*"Are you sure?"*

He guessed what she meant. "I'm sure."

A worried whine and the swish of her tail, but he gave her a reassuring smile, which smelled a bit sheepish.

She squirmed out of her pack and shifted into human form. The cold sank fangs into her naked skin. She shivered and hurriedly dug into her pack for a uniform and some gloves—

the knitted ones that Bennett had given her—and her instruments. Time to take some quick measurements of the Sun and get their bearings.

Rainer's watch still ticked away. Shivering, she quickly wound it and checked the time: seven-twenty in the morning. They'd set out from over fourteen hours earlier. From the terrain map she'd made—it tried to blow away in the breeze—it looked like they'd ended up slightly off course.

“Lachesis?” Cheshire unfolded the large, shallow metallic pan that Rainer had fabricated and scooped it full of a massive heap of snow. Xav whined nervously.

She brushed at the strands of hair assaulting her face and managed to wrangle it all behind her head so it blew in the breeze *away* from her. “I think we're... here...” she pondered the map and then their surroundings another minute before using a grease pencil to make a note of the time. Fourteen hours to cover that twenty-something miles? Plodding pace.

Also possible the map's scale was off. They hadn't picked up the river valley through the forests.

Or the bears.

As it was, they seemed to be about two miles northwest of where she'd intended to come out of the forest, which explained why it had taken longer than she'd expected. But if they headed a bit towards the east, she should pick up the rock formation she expected to see. It should have been visible at a distance. Orient on that, and keep on plodding.

Not perfect, but a passing grade for her first land-based navigation effort.

And today, her eyes actually wanted to focus properly and her vision appeared to have been returned to normal.

She did some quick measurements of the Sun, made some notes, and planned their path out of the hills. From *NightPiercer*, it had looked like this area would be flat, with perhaps rolling hills—actual topography scans had proven impossible due to the EM interference—but this was more

dramatic, with hills that were significant mounds. They were almost like bubbles rising from beneath the surface.

They were beautiful to look at. Like the half-globes of snowballs planted against the ground.

But weren't softened mounds like this *old* geography? Young mountains were sharp and craggy. Old mountains had had eons to soften.

She flipped back into lupine form and huddled up to Xav to regain some warmth.

Cheshire passed around the extruded protein paste sticks that had been formulated for this adventure. The taste was absolutely disgusting—like someone had scraped the crust off an algae vat, mixed it with cricket frass, sugared it, then burned it.

“*Gross,*” she commented as she gnawed on the end of her stick while they huddled up to the pan so their body heat could transfer to the specialized alloy of the pan to melt the snow.

“*Perfect food,*” Cheshire answered, meaning that the sticks had been specifically formulated to meet all their nutritional needs on the surface. Another reason werewolves had been chosen: their caloric demands in wolf form were somewhat lower than human form. And as generalist carnivores, werewolves in lupine form could survive primarily off protein and fat diets, as opposed to human form, which required a balance of carbohydrates, and carbs were not as nutrient or calorie dense. They were able to carry more calories in less space and weight. What was malnutrition or an unbalanced, non-optimal diet in one form was not in the other.

The downside being they needed to stay in lupine form through most of the digestion process to ensure optimal absorption.

“*Still gross.*” She clutched her stick between her paws as she gnawed. But she was also so hungry she didn't care. The paste softened into a sticky, chewy substance that left her licking her chops.

*“All that snow made this much water?”* Xav lapped at the relatively small amount of water the pan had produced.

*“Something to remember,”* Cheshire agreed.

They greedily drank the pan dry. Cheshire shifted once again—it looked slow and a bit painful—to pack up everything and wriggle back into his straps, and they struck off again, this time heading south east.

*“How far?”* Xav asked as they crested the mound of the hill and were confronted with a somewhat steep slope down.

She tested the slope. *“Thirty miles, give or take. We won’t get there today.”*

Cheshire scooped his haunches under himself and slid down the slope on his rump.

Looked like the way to do it...

ACCORDING TO HER BEST GUESS, THEY MANAGED TEN MILES before night came. But within three miles (she estimated) of heading out, they found the rock formation she expected to find, and she pointed them back on a northerly track that would hopefully intersect with Rainer’s landing site.

The Sun setting behind the rolling hills was as fiery and intense and eerie as dawn had been beautiful. The way the sky became night and day for a split second, a mixture of reds and golds and purples and starlight blues was exactly like Rainer’s paintings of sunset. The stars appeared like the night unfurled.

There was no cover out in the hills—the trees were a line of shadows on their right, and more hills and a non-specific horizon on their left. Even where they were headed was fields of endless, nondescript white that all blurred together.

They dug out an indent in the snow, placed the packs in a circle to try to block the wind, and curled up together in the snow. There had been a stiff breeze all day long, but as the Sun set, the wind *tore* across the top of the hills and whipped through the narrow, shallow canyons. Clouds raced across the sky, creating a woolen haze obscuring the stars. The moon

eventually rose as a narrow waxing crescent that cast no light across the hills. There was only enough light from the stars to create eerie shades of shadow, but otherwise, they drifted in total, complete darkness.

Something that *wasn't* the howl of the wind made her raise her head from her lupine doze. There was *nothing* but darkness. After a second, her eyes adjusted to the shadows, and her ears teased out the sound of *two* winds, one a long howl, the other... a pulse?

And there was a weird smell on the swirling wind. Like a chicken. But not a chicken. Definitely not a chicken.

But she could go for some chicken. A tasty fat chicken. She'd never eaten fresh chicken. But the few times she'd had chicken sausage, it had been delicious.

The *wump wump wump* was similar to the throb of *NightPiercer*. Interesting. She squinted at the darkness and realized the darkness above her was *moving*.

Right towards her.

She yipped and scrambled. Cheshire and Xav woke up at the same time, and they bolted in three different directions as multiple dark forms swooped in on them from above.

"*The packs!*" She barked as something that sounded like claws scratched at the canvas, and a shadow darker than the other shadows and as big as Cheshire swept where they'd just been laying. It swept back upwards. She lunged towards it and clacked her jaws.

She got a mouthful of... feathers?

She spat out the musty-tasting feathers and crouched on her pack.

*Scree-aww! Scree-aww!*

Something tore at her shoulders and talons clamped into her hide. She yelped and twisted and her fangs swiped at something... leathery and nubby. Xav barked and jumped and his jaws clamped down on the shadow and it screeched and released her. Xav yanked it down. Cheshire jumped on it and

bit into something. Something crunched and cracked and it screeched again. Lachesis snapped at another shadow, then another, as at least three more feathered, winged shadows descended on them, pecking and clawing and buffeting. She twisted up into war-form, howled, and *swiped* with her right claw.

She caught something and her claws sliced clean through it. It fell to the ground in two pieces. Sharp things pecked at her hide. Below her, Xav jumped again and his jaws clacked at empty air.

The shadows screeched *scree-aww! Scree-aww! Scree-aw!!!* And rushed away into the night once more.

She growled and flicked gore off her claws.

She twisted back into lupine form and crouched down over her pack, lifting her lips to match the short growls. Violence clouded her mind. She sniffed the air, but the birds were gone, except for the one Cheshire and Xav had killed and the pieces of the one she'd killed.

She forced herself to hop down back into the snow-divot they'd made. It was too cold to be out in the open, and apparently, too hazardous. She snuggled back in with her packmates. "*I'll take first watch.*"

"*You sure?*" Cheshire inquired.

"*I'm awake. War-form.*" The after-effects of the violence and the violent form she'd taken would keep her awake and sharp for several hours. She rested her snout across Xav's back and into the swirling breeze. Xav tucked his head against her side like a puppy, and Cheshire snuggled close.

*Two* distinct species of apex predators had survived on Earth.

That meant that there was enough prey to support those predators. That meant water, vegetation, probably insects, and a lack of profound contamination. They just had to find those things—they had to be *somewhere*.

She raised her gaze to the sky.



Faint lights appeared and disappeared beyond the tangled green and purple auroras. Little bits of debris burning up in the atmosphere. *Shooting stars*, they'd been called on Old Earth. Her mother had told her people wished on them.

One of the stars moved quickly across the dome, burning longer than any other, and disappearing within seconds.

*NightPiercer.*

Her heart warmed and her tail wagged. Prayers were hazardous, but wishes were harmless.

## THIRTY-NINE

**D**awn was just as beautiful the second time as the first. The birds that had assaulted them the previous night were not.

She'd sliced hers into two pieces, and its guts had spilled all over the snow in a pile that was not the least bit appetizing. Cheshire and Xav's kill was intact. They stretched it out on the snow to get a better look at it.

The bird was *huge*, with a massive wingspan and a body over a meter long, and talons perhaps eight inches around, and a beak like a war-form claw. The feathers were various shades of nondescript grungy dark brown, with the brightest spot being a collar of gold feathers where the neck joined the body.

*"Bird,"* Cheshire confirmed.

*"What bird ever attacked wolves?"* Lachesis asked.

They both looked at Xav.

Xav shook his head. *"I don't know. There were big raptors, but wolf hunters?"*

*"Did any birds hunt in packs?"*

*"Only one species of hawk that lived in a desert. They hunted like wolves. But it had red feathers, and it was smaller than this. I think this is an eagle."* Xav cocked his head to the side.

Cheshire sniffed the bloody claw marks raked into her shoulders. *"That doesn't look too bad."*

*"It doesn't hurt."* The raptor's claws had just scratched her shoulders and hadn't punctured her hide. Unless there was horrifying bacteria breeding on the claws (which, honestly, there might be), it was no worse than a scraped knee. Guess they'd be finding out if some new special microbes had been breeding on Earth while they'd been gone.

So they'd been attacked by bears in a pack and now attacked by large raptors that hunted in a pack. They must have come from the forests and flew out over the hills to hunt prey.

She shouldered her pack, and they headed out. Xav carried the intact, frozen bird corpse in his mouth the entire day.

*"So... why are you dragging around a corpse?"* Cheshire finally asked at lunch.

*"I'm going to put it near us while we sleep. Like a scare-crow."*

*"Scare-crow?"* Lachesis cocked her head to the side. Cheshire gave a confused tail swish.

Xav bobbed his head to affirm he'd said what he said.

If Xav wanted to tote around a frozen corpse that shed feathers, fine by her. If it kept the raptors away, worth it. No harm in running an experiment since the corpse was frozen solid.

When they curled up to sleep the next evening, Xav deposited the frozen corpse about six feet from their huddle. They took turns keeping watch for the raptors. That night, perhaps around midnight, the *wump wump* of raptors descended out of the forests. Cheshire woke them, and they held still as the shadows flapped *huge* wings that blotted out the auroras and stars and cast shadows over the snow.

They got up and barked at the raptors. The raptors screeched back and flapped, circling over the corpse of the dead bird and doing a few threatening swoops before sailing back off into the darkness.

The scare-crow appeared to work.

“*We’ll be keeping that corpse,*” Cheshire said as they settled back down to sleep. “*Put it on a stick.*”

“*Scare-crow,*” Xav said cheerfully. He snuffed his snout into Lachesis’ ruff and sighed happily.

THE HILLS GAVE WAY TO SOFT SLOPES. THEY DIDN’T CROSS anymore streams or water (but maybe it was all frozen and snowed over), and the forest curved to their right as the map indicated it would. They should be getting close now.

Cheshire yipped. “*I smell them! Faintly, but I do.*”

She willed her tired legs to keep going. Her paw pads were raw and one was bleeding. The pack on her back rubbed the scratches from the raptors raw and had turned her back into a blister. Xav’s paws were already leaving bloody pawprints in the snow. Cheshire limped slightly from tearing off a claw sliding down a steep hill. It had gotten caught on a hidden rock and torn clear off.

Just a bit further.

She’d set up the beacon, there’d be more protein sticks, and then she’d collapse and sleep. Maybe even in a tent. Curled up on a blanket. Out of the wind. And line of sight of those damn raptors, and away from the bears.

And with Rainer again.

Cheshire trotted out ahead, his snout to the air, and pointed them slightly more northerly. “*This way, this way!*”

Up another hill, which wasn’t very steep but *felt* steep, and she took a quick scan of the endless white landscape. Nothing but white, and an occasional stone cluster sticking up out of the snow. She perked her ears.

Xav wagged his tail. “*I hear them!*”

Cheshire barked, then threw his head back and howled.

The howl spread over the hills, then, in faint response, a howl answered.

Rainer!

She yipped. They hurried down the hill towards the howl as best they could. Another tall hill stood in their way, but just as they were about to start up the incline, Rainer's form emerged from the sunlight and snow. He barked and bounded down the slope.

Her heart lifted right into the big, blank blue dome above them. He barked a greeting that had no translation, but her instincts understood.

She stopped dead in the snow and panted. He finished the distance and touched his snout to hers, tail wagging back and forth over his back. She dropped her head under his ruff and pushed into him, keening softly in response to his rumbled greeting. He pushed back into her, his bulk warm and strong and broad enough to feel all-encompassing.

He sat down, and she did as well, and leaned into his chest. He dipped his head over hers as much as possible and rumble-crooned his happiness and pleasure. He smelled of *victory*. Fierce, jaw-clamping *victory*, and the same sort of hard-edged happiness, and a joy so intense it burned, and the scents that had no human translation of being reunited with his mate, and being reunited with his pack. And finally, laced through all of it, the scent that was *Rainer*.

*"I knew you would find me."* He dipped his head and shoved his cheek alongside hers. *"It was so hard to wait."*

*"I'm here now."* She gave his snout a quick, affectionate lick.

He shoved his snout into her shoulder and inhaled.

They were back together. They were on Earth. They were *free* of Bennett. They were free of the consuming dark. They had wind and clouds and snow and raptors and bears and trees and *dawn* and *dusk* and *real* days and *real* nights and *real* gravity.

She squirmed out of her packs and bounced away. She splayed her forepaws in the snow and snuffed at him, tail wagging. *"We're free. We're free."*

Rainer bounced and bowed before her, and then shot in for a playful bite, and she twisted around him and bit his ruff, and he tumbled her into the snow. She laughed, her heart brimming with happiness and relief. Now to bring the rest of the pack to them. Even Bennett, with all his claws blunted and fangs dulled.

She squished down her giddy joy. A lot to do yet—they had to get the rest of *NightPiercer* to the surface. Rainer sidled shoulder to shoulder and sniffed the raw marks raked into her pelt, then sniffed her paws. “*You’re hurt.*”

She lifted a paw and set it down before tossing her head towards Cheshire and Xav. “*I’m fine.*”

“*What did this?*”

“*Raptor.*”

He backed up, tail dropping. “*The large brown birds that come out of the forests to hunt?*”

She bobbed her head. “*Just blisters.*”

He sniffed again.

“*My paws need toughening.*” She lifted her most painful one again. Now that the pack was off her back, the marks on her back were just stinging pain and raw. Her feet still protested.

Rainer trotted over to greet Cheshire and Xav, taking inventory of their injured paws and general condition.

She glanced at the sky. The blue dome was *bright* that day, with the moving streaks of green and purple within it as the auroras danced.

Rainer trotted back over. “*Come.*”

“*I need to work with the big stick. There isn’t much time left.*”

“*It can wait until you’ve had some food and rest.*” He wriggled himself between the straps of her pack and hefted it onto his own shoulders.

The camp was two miles farther south. Rainer had decided to make a guardian circle around the camp for the past two days, hoping to catch her scent on the breeze. As it was, she had more or less been on the right heading. It was a huge relief—it meant that the map had been correct in terms of where things were relative to each other, which indicated that while the *exact* miles might not be accurate, the relative distance scale was. For landing the ship, those were the things that mattered the most. As long as the beacon positions were accurate relative to each other, the auto-land program could do the rest.

After five days sleeping in snow, the two domed tents looked like paradise, even if the fabric that made up the exteriors wiggled and shuddered in the breeze. There was also a large shallow water-melting bowl that fed a constant trickle of water into a long wood trough, and a raised area made of planks of wood that had been placed over split logs and was large enough for ten or twelve wolves to sit. And *most* importantly? There was food.

And it wasn't protein lumps. A delicious smell unlike anything she'd encountered in her life permeated the area, and combined the delicious scent of meat with the scent of forest.

The source of the scent was an area where the snow had melted back—it wasn't immediately obvious, because apparently, they were standing on a solid meter of snow, and the pit that the heat source created sloped downward into a crater. But it was a pit (not dug into the frozen earth) lined with branches that crackled and sizzled and smoked and popped. Two dark iron forks stabbed into the ground between the wood, and suspended between them but resting directly on the burning wood, was a large iron pot with a heavy lid.

*"Dinner,"* Rainer told her with mischief.

*"What, no fish?"* she managed to say while her brain tried to process fresh meat cooked over fire and how amazing it smelled. She'd only seen wood burn a few times in her life as a pup, to demonstrate wood, did, in fact, burn, and that fire was very dangerous. Wood on the ships had been far too precious to burn for cooking.

She had heard that there had been something called “smoked meats” and that certain members of the Kitchen staff had such culinary skills as their Dying Art, but she’d never had anything like that, even in the officer’s mess where more rare culinary feats were accomplished.

*“Show me a river, and I will get you your fish,”* he murmured, giving her ear a gentle nip. *“All the fish you wish.”*

*“I know where to find a river, but it’s frozen.”*

*“A frozen river is no obstacle.”*

*“Not even your claws are that sharp.”* Silly wolf.

*“Haven’t you learned not to doubt my fishing skills?”* Another playful nip, and he circled behind her and nipped her hocks.

She took the hint and let him herd her into the larger of the two domed tents. One was the shared tent for all six of them, the other was for work.

Her snout led her to Rainer’s bed—which was a nest of blankets—and she flopped down into it. The wind shook the tent panels, but the quiet and still air was a relief. And it was moderately warm.

She sighed contently.

Rainer shook off her packs, then, in human form and quite naked, sat down next to her. She sighed again. Fine. He wanted to have a conversation that lupine form couldn’t have. She obliged him by shifting to human form and pulling one of the blankets over her shoulders.

His eyes were bright, a little wild. He leaned over and kissed her gently. His hand, calloused and chapped from cold, caressed her cheek. He smelled of wood and dirt and snow and wind and weather, and prey, and a thousand other things that made her brain quiver and her body shiver. Hot jolts shot through her nipples and between her thighs, at odds with the frosty exhaustion that permeated down to her bones.

“We did it,” he whispered against her lips.



“It barely seems real.” And the ground hadn’t opened up to consume them, or an angry storm blasted them off the planet. Running away from some bear-like creatures or getting harassed by massive raptors was more a curiosity than peril.

“Shift back to lupine form.”

“Why? Shouldn’t we be discussing bringing the others down? And then going to get the supplies from the other pod?” It was tempting to celebrate, but she’d take her victory in a lump sum. Rainer and his persistent optimism could consume it in small bites.

“We will. Just shift. And go sit over here.” He indicated the place next to the blankets.

She obliged him while he went to fetch something out of one of the three trunks inside the dome. He came back carrying a large container that smelled sort of like soap. He opened it and scooped out some of the foamy, white insides. She sneezed, then sneezed again as he rubbed the foam into her pelt and down to the skin.

She purred and closed her eyes. Especially when he got behind her ears.

“Dry shampoo,” he told her. “Quite the novelty from Old Earth. But it requires human hands to apply.”

The shampoo tingled and removed grime and dirt and whatever else she’d picked up from five days of traversing a frozen planet. Once he had all the shampoo in her pelt, he took a slicker brush and ran it through her coat, then rubbed her down with a soft absorbent cloth. When she shifted back to human form, she was almost entirely clean, and her hair even had a bit of a shine.

She flopped into the blankets and sighed. Earth was so *solid* and so *heavy*.

Rainer bent over her, bracing himself on his hands on either side of her. She reached up and fondly touched his scarred jawline.

Rainer bent and kissed the scar between her breasts. She inhaled and ran her hand along the back of his head, closing

her eyes as a crush of emotions ran through her.

*You're home, she-wolf.*

Rainer kissed the scar a second time, lightly, reverently. The muscles of his back and shoulder pushed against his skin, the deep valley of his spine leading to the horizon, a map not unlike that hills and valleys she'd crossed to find him.

He settled alongside her, his head against her arm, his thigh along hers.

“Did your wolves have trouble shifting?” she asked softly.

“I didn't, but they did. It was very disturbing.”

“But they're able to now?”

“It seems so, yes. But they were strong shifters on the ship, like Cheshire and Xav.”

“I worry,” she said softly. “I worry what we've lost.”

A long pause. Then, “So do I.”

## FORTY

Over stew, she, Cheshire, and Xav got the story of what Rainer and his team had been doing while waiting for them. The pod's supplies had included the tents, iron cooking gear, and numerous tools, like axes and hand saws and hammers. They'd set up the tents, and then set to work chopping down trees in the forest five miles to the west. The work was brutal, hence the logs just being split in half and still full of splinters. The wood also smelled *amazing*.

Like a Biome, but a thousand times more intense.

Rainer had gone hunting in the forest. Prey was not plentiful, but he did hear creatures in winter burrows under the snow, and there were birds, squirrels, and chipmunks in the trees.

*"That sounds like a bear,"* Rainer said when hearing the story about the large creatures that had attacked them in the forest. *"But bears don't hunt in packs."*

*"After enough eons, perhaps they do,"* Cheshire commented.

*"We'll find out tonight when Lake measures the stars."* Rainer bobbed his head.

After dinner, she, Cheshire, and Xav retreated to the big tent to sleep, while the other two wolves worked in the other tent on more preparations for the ship's arrival. There wasn't much that they *could* do, and *NightPiercer* would (hopefully) act as a makeshift, temporary home, but they were building

wood buckets and frames to hold the shallow metal pans to melt snow to increase available water supplies.

Rainer woke her sometime around midnight. Everyone else was curled up asleep. She yawned once, but followed Rainer out of the tent into the bitter cold.

The wind pulled at her pelt, but the sky was mostly clear. Just some stringy grey clouds whipping through the upper atmosphere.

They went into the other tent and shifted into human form and got dressed. She checked her hard-sided case. Watch still ticking faithfully. “Have you managed to get any devices to work?”

“No,” Rainer replied as he pulled on one of the lined uniforms that had been issued to them for the mission.

She pulled on the knit gloves Bennett had “given” her. Rainer tugged on his own gloves. “You have warmer gloves than that. Missing a certain someone?”

“More like these gloves will let me do my job.” The gloves *he* was wearing—and that she had in her kit—were bulky and tough and great for hard work, but useless for delicate tasks like writing. “Observing the heavens is a delicate art.”

“There’s nothing delicate about the heavens.”

“I hope there’s nothing delicate about your mind. I need you to do the calculations if we don’t have any devices. You can do them in your head, I’d have to waste paper doing math.”

“As my mate commands. This way.”

Rainer had set up a shoulder-height three-sided blind using roughly-hewn wood from trees cut in the forest filled out with evergreen branches. It cut the worst of the wind, but did little for the damp, biting cold.

She hugged herself as the wind pulled at the strands of her braid, singing a mournful sound, and above her, the auroras danced.

“Can you hear them?” Rainer looked at the sky.

“The aurora?”

“Yes.”

The sound, under the sound of wind and night and Earth, was a strange crystalline chime combined with a slight hiss. Like she was hearing the chime across a distant radio signal.

“I still can’t believe I’m seeing them from below, and not above.” She’d seen auroras dance across Jupiter’s northernmost pole all her life.

Rainer watched the auroras. “They unsettle me.”

“The Final Days?” she asked.

“I have no specific memories, but my feelings around the auroras are complex. Like once I enjoyed them, but now I fear them. Or used to.”

“Is Earth... familiar to you?”

“This isn’t the Earth Hade knew.”

“No?”

“It is to Earth as I am to Hade. The same, but not.”

Her skin prickled, and it wasn’t from the cold. She hid it by flipping open her case. “Not another alternative reality theory.”

“Not at all. Not unless the Lachesis in this reality is on South Two. Which is inaccessible. For now.”

“She won’t share her Rainer. I won’t share mine.”

“But if there *is* a Lachesis in this reality, she would be so different from you she *might*.”

“Then how do you know you’d even want her?”

“Of course I would. She may be so different I appreciate you more than I do, and she may be so similar in all the best ways that I drown in ecstasy.”

“Drown in ecstasy? What are you even talking about.”

“It occurs to me that now there will be a return to romantic poetry, romantic songs, and romance novels, and many such

equally trite lines.”

“So you’re getting in some practice?”

“Just trying to express how no matter what the other Lachesis might be like, I win. You might win too. Don’t dismiss the idea of—”

“Rainer, if I want to play with my tits or pussy, I *can just play with my tits or pussy*. Would you fuck yourself?”

“I do get told to go fuck myself quite a bit, I have to wonder if given the opportunity, I should do just that. For science.”

Why was she *not* surprised? “You two go have fun with that. Other Lachesis and I will find something *disappointingly* non-sexual to do. Like refuse to speculate on if you’re enjoying yourself—yourselves—or not.”

“You wouldn’t even compare notes on if we’re the same in bed?”

“No.”

“Not even a—”

“No.”

“But—”

“Shhh.” She pressed a finger to his lips.

He bit the finger. And didn’t let go.

She tugged.

He gave the tip of her finger a swift swirl of his tongue before releasing her from his jaws. The knit fibers dampened and were a little rough against her skin, and it shot crackles along every nerve right between her thighs. He glanced up at the stars, then back at her. “Get to your measurements. The stars are waiting.”

Her pussy dampened and her skin betrayed her with the scent of the effect he had on her. This wasn’t fair! They had civilization to save.

Although technically, sex *would* be contributing to future generations.

She turned her attention to setting up her equipment and getting situated. “I’m going to take our location first for the beacon. Then Polaris.”

“Hmmm,” he said.

“I’m trying to focus here.”

“So should I fuck you now, or after you’re done?”

Her fingers faltered.

“Or both?” His gloved fingertips caressed the line of her thigh along her sciatic nerve, making all of her shiver, then he moved behind her, warmth and solid in a world of wind and snow. He slipped his hand over her waist and across her belly and tugged her firmly against him. His lips burned as he kissed her freezing cheek.

“After,” she gasped. Her body had to be steady and still to do this, and post-fuck Lachesis was sort of boneless and languid... especially when Rainer’s scent promised what it currently promised. Fucking Rainer was rarely casual or simple. Fucking Rainer when he smelled like that...

Rainer released her and backed away.

It took twenty minutes before the wintery chill steadied her fingers and her breathing enough that the measurements felt reliable. She marked them down on the precious paper she had, and compared them to her map.

There was no room for error. If she didn’t have the location of this beacon—and the other—precisely exactly correct, *NightPiercer* would end up in the ocean. Or smashed into a mountain. Or falling from the sky in flames.

She took the measurements six more times.

Rainer placed his hand over hers when she turned to do just one more set. “Lachesis.”

“It has to be right,” she told him softly. “It has to be *perfect*.”

“I know. And I know there is no one to consult or check your work. But you’ve gotten the same results six times.”

“What if I’m doing it wrong?” she whispered.

“The pods landed exactly where you wanted them to. You found me. There’s no evidence you *aren’t* doing it correctly, and all the evidence we have is that you *are* doing it correctly.”

She looked at her numbers. The paper flickered and flipped in the night wind. Rainer’s hand remained over hers. She released her pencil and let it roll to the little ridge at the bottom of her clipboard.

She adjusted her equipment to measure Polaris. If it had been more than a thousand years, she probably would be able to measure that with this equipment and her own visual acuity. If it had been less, perhaps not—she was doing measurements in arc seconds. Tiny slivers of sky were hard to measure with the tools she had available.

But in terms of geological timescales, Earth’s transformation was so radical that anything less than a thousand years wouldn’t be possible through any known natural means. Unless they’d looped all the way around and were, say, *twenty-seven* thousand years in the future.

She took the measurements three times, then a fourth for good luck, because the auroras made things a bit tricky to see. Polaris, though, was still bright.

Bright like Jupiter. Jupiter was even brighter.

“There,” she pointed at it. “That’s Jupiter. It’s the brightest object in the sky.”

From Earth, Jupiter was just a bright dot in the darkness behind the colorful aurora veil. Its shifting bands, colors, storms, auroras were hidden, along with its sheer mass. For hundreds, maybe thousands, of years civilization had grown up wanting to see it, to study it, to *know* it. And she’d done everything in her power to get away from it.

She’d never see it again. Generations of civilization would never see it like she had. Civilization could have gone to



another world, seen other planets, dwelled in the light of other stars.

Maybe they should have done just that.

Because Polaris hadn't moved enough for her to measure it.

Rainer brushed his cheek over her hair.

She checked the position of other stars to verify they hadn't just gone twenty-seven thousand years in the future and circled back around again.

"Polaris hasn't moved," she said softly. "And neither has the rest of the sky."

"So we did not travel through time to any meaningful degree."

Rainer's scent and steady gaze told her he had only humored the time-travel theory as an entertaining exercise. A *what if* scenario.

Only tens, or even hundreds of thousands of years, would explain Earth's new position farther from the Sun, the radical planetary changes, the presence of predators and prey, and vast forests filled with trees that were at least as old as Exodus, yet showed no signs of having been alive during that time.

But it couldn't explain why the Moon now orbited closer to Earth. The Moon had inched farther away from Earth each year pre-Exodus. There was no mechanism she was aware of, absent a massive collision, that would have pushed the Moon *closer* to Earth. There was no evidence of such a collision, and it would have taken hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years to erase that evidence.

If an object *so* massive it had disrupted the orbit of Earth had passed through, the ships would have known.

The stars told her that not even ten thousand years had passed. The stars above her were the stars she'd been trained to expect. The pole star rotated on schedule, the greater starfield didn't. Polaris hadn't completed a rotation, because

the greater starfield didn't show twenty-seven thousand years of change.

She let out her breath in a puff of frost.

There were only two possibilities: that civilization had no understanding of planetary processes, or Earth had been deliberately remade to be *exactly* what it was.

He tucked his face against her neck. His breath was warm. His lips brushed her skin. "This is our Earth, Lachesis. That is our Moon, and our Earth, and our Sun. It is our dawn and our dusk, our night, our day, our stars, our seasons, our months, our years. Surrender to it. Accept it. Embrace it."

She shuddered.

"Stand in the cold of the stars," he whispered as he kissed the hollow of her throat, "stand under their gaze, under the sky, in the darkness."

His hands scooped up the hem of her shirt, and in a smooth motion, he pulled it over her head. Cold bit into her skin. His hands were the only warmth as he stroked her skin, cradled her breasts, his thumbs teased her nipples.

Rainer tossed away his own shirt and gloves, pulled off her gloves, dropped those in the snow.

Seeing him in the faint light, against the backdrop of darkness and starlight, spun her mind around. Everything told her standing out in cold darkness without a wall between her and Rainer was a good way to die.

Granted, this probably was a good way to die if they didn't move quick.

Her breath was smoke in the darkness. She almost laughed as he gathered her close and kissed her. "We're going to freeze to death," she whispered. His lips and tongue were hot, everything else cooled in the blistering cold.

He drew her down to her knees into the snow. "Then we will have to be fast."

She slid her hand along his cock. He groaned against her lips. His shaft was already slick with hot fluid. She brushed

her thumb across the tip. “How *convenient* for you.”

He grabbed her wrist and twisted her hand away. “I promised to fuck you under these stars.”

She quivered.

“And that is exactly what I am going to do.” He wrested her wrist behind her back, and pushed her hip, spinning her in the slippery snow. Her ass facing him, he tugged her backwards against his chest. His cock slid between her thighs as he grasped her breasts in each hand.

She arched and moaned softly. The wind carried the sound away. The cold bit the soft skin of her inner thighs. Rainer reached between her legs with his right hand and gently parted her lips to expose her clit to the frigid cold wind, before he sampled the rest of her with feather-light touches.

He released her breast and she dropped to all fours in the snow. Rainer nudged her knee, parting her further as he moved behind her.

The cold snow melted to slippery, frigid cold under her knees and shins. Rainer slid his hand along the inside of her thighs and then grazed her pussy, testing to see if she was ready for him. The cold air burned against the hot, wet apex, two completely contradictory sensations. His finger grazed her clit, sending a hot pulse through it at the same time the cold brushed over it again.

She gasped and bit down a cry. Any noise would bring their packmates to investigate.

She arched as his cock pressed into her, then pushed deep inside. Rainer buried one hand in her hair, and the other held her hip, pulling her down onto his cock.

She arched up to the stars. Cold ripped across her spine and breasts, bit her nipples, pulled at her lips, while the warmth confined itself in her hips. His fingers twisted in her hair as he sank deep again and she clenched her jaw against a cry. The cold didn't numb her—every nerve felt *alive* and on fire and *ready* to explode.

He started to pull away, breathing hard.

“What are you doing?” He was going to kill her if he stopped now. Her spine arched and she dug her hands into the snow, which only made her nerves sear.

“Trying to wait,” his whisper was ragged.

*Wait?* No. “*Don’t. No waiting!*” Her whisper turned into a low whine and a keen.

“*Demanding she-wolf.*” He twisted his hand in her hair as he sank back into her.

“I want what I want,” she keened as he filled her and his cock raked across all her nerves. Cold air ran claws across her exposed throat, bit her nipples, his body searing hot in comparison. It drove her senses over the edge and her body clenched on his as her orgasm crashed through her.

His hand twitched in her hair as he poured into her, his groan ragged as the wind that tore at them.

She sagged and panted. Rainer slowly released her hair. His hand shook as he ran his fingers down her spine, over her ass, his body still inside hers.

Overhead, one of the stars streaked across the sky faster than others.

## FORTY-ONE

“Did we time-travel?” Cheshire asked over breakfast, which was left-over mystery meat stew from the previous night.

She had debated all night just lying to them. Nobody would ever know. Werewolves might take the news more readily, but humanity wouldn't, and could anyone afford for civilization to fracture along these lines?

But re-starting civilization with a lie seemed wrong too.

Her heart fluttered in her chest. “No. We didn't.”

Xav scratched behind his ear. Cheshire contemplated his bowl. It was already empty. The silence got as thick as the snow that had fallen the previous night.

It was a great deal to take in. And there was no theory, no hypothesis, that explained their current reality that was tidy and easy to digest. Either there was a huge hole in the assorted scientific theories that could explain the Earth they stood on, or there was no scientific theory at all worth discussing.

Hell, Exodus hadn't exactly been tidy or easy to digest. It had left the Old Earth scientists scrambling to try to explain the Earth changes that defied established models. The way Earth's post-Exodus antics had driven the ships out to Jupiter also defied models. The way Earth had been impossible to actually get a good look at from Jupiter defied the science.

Overall, the past century for civilization had been an absolute mess.

She looked at her stew. Her stomach knotted and unknotted. Her body begged her to eat, but her stomach warned there would be no eating. Because after she ate, she had to program the beacon, and from there, *NightPiercer's* re-entry procedure would begin.

It wouldn't happen right away. The ship still needed to get buttoned up and secured, various systems taken offline or sealed. Especially the Core. The Core preservation protocols were critically important or various assorted terrible things could happen. Crèche needed time to secure the livestock in the Biomes and the frozen biological materials, while Medical needed time to finish up any surgeries, procedures, or births. The entire process was expected to take between ten and twenty days, depending mostly on Medical and if there were still any babies due. The ship would hold off "landing" until those babies had been born.

As far as Lachesis knew, there weren't any pregnant women on *NightPiercer*. Crèche had halted all Civilization Management once the departure date had been decided upon *specifically* so that there wouldn't be any pregnant women or newborns on the ship during the initial return period. There would still be young infants, though. The only possible pregnancy on the ship (outside of an implant failure) would have been hers, and they'd been spared that particular complication.

"Lachesis." Rainer's voice intruded on her stormy thoughts. "You need to eat something."

"I can't." She passed her bowl to him.

Rainer passed it back. "The conditions are too taxing and the work too high for you to *not* eat. Choke it down."

"I'll eat it," Xav offered.

Rainer snarled at him. Xav dove behind Cheshire. Rainer growled, "You will *not* eat a she-wolf's food."

Cheshire shoved Xav away from him. The other two members of Rainer's team gave him scorching looks of disapproval. Xav made small noises of apology.

She grumbled and poked at her food. But she had to choke it down, as Rainer said, and how many times in her life had she had *fresh* meat? Had the novelty already worn off? And it was tasty. Not quite rabbit, but rabbit-like. Rainer said he'd caught several "hares," which were related to rabbits.

Her throat didn't instantly rebel swallowing the meat, and her stomach didn't instantly reject the food. Her body was starving. It was her mind playing tricks on her.

She passed the last of the broth to Rainer. He had to be hungrier than her anyway. He started to refuse, and she said, "Oh please, on *NightPiercer* I always gave you my extra food."

"We aren't on *NightPiercer*."

"You can't go catch me food if I'm hungry?"

Cheshire snickered.

Rainer swallowed the few mouthfuls of left over broth.

"Thought so. Now to go program the beacon." She dusted off her hands, pulled on her gloves, and headed for the beacon before she lost her nerve. It wasn't even complex calculations. All she had to do was plug in some coordinates and other data, and the ship would handle the rest.

The simplicity of it terrified her. After training on the practical dangers of the Jovian system, flying shuttles, and flying *NightPiercer* using the X-PB-NAV system and gyroscopes and hand drawn lines, just plugging in some data and trusting the flight computers she had been *trained to distrust* went against everything she'd ever known.

The others followed her to the beacon and crouched in wolf form while she unflipped the small panels and screens.

Even through the heavy shielding on the beacon, the system still flickered from all the EM whipping around Earth. But the beacon's system designers had had the foresight to shield the system for extreme cold, extreme heat, EM, radiation, and every other environmental scenario they could imagine.

All the other technology on *NightPiercer*... not so much.

She looked up at the sky. “Fuck.”

Somewhere overhead, through the green and purple lights, was *NightPiercer*.

**>> INITIATE BEACON B STATUS: READY <<**

**>> WARNING: BEACON A DETECTED. INITIATING  
BEACON B WILL ALLOW SHIP TO COMMENCE DE-  
ORBIT <<**

**>> WARNING : ONCE CREW CONFIRMS DE-ORBIT  
INTENTION, PARAMETERS CANNOT BE CHANGED.  
<<**

**>> ADVICE : IF YOU DO NOT HAVE CURRENT  
COMMS WITH SHIP, YOU’RE GETTING ONE  
CHANCE AT THIS AND BETTER HAVE A GOOD  
PILOT AT THE HELM AS A FAILSAFE. <<**

Her throat twisted and her lungs refused to breathe. “It’s a bit fucking late to tell me that *now*, isn’t it?”

Xav yipped and wagged his tail.

**>> BEACON B: INITIATED <<**

**>> DATA STREAM: COMPILING <<**

**>> DATA STREAM : STATUS OK (94% INTEGRITY)  
<<**

**>> ... <<**

**>> ... <<**

**>> ... <<**

**>> ... <<**

**>> SHIP STATUS : DE-ORBIT PROCEDURE READY,  
DE-ORBIT WILL COMMENCE ON CAPTAIN’S  
ORDERS <<**

**>> GOOD JOB, TEAM. DRINK A COLD ONE AND  
ROAST A COW FOR US. <<**



“A cold one?” Cheshire asked no one in particular while she dropped into the snow and dry-heaved from the stress. Her stomach had apparently made short work of her breakfast in anticipation.

Rainer held her hair back. “A reference to beer, I believe. It was served in cold containers and ‘a cold one’ was a beer.”

Her esophagus coiled on itself to get some extra spring-like stress-vomit action to purge every shred of the eighteen months of stress she’d been stuffing down into some dark corner of her psyche. Tears froze to her face as she spit out the traces of bile and drool.

She sagged back onto her heels and covered her face with her hands. Rainer knelt next to her and smoothed his hand down her spine. She shuddered. Not quite tears, not quite howls, not quite normal breathing.

Rainer found a tense, sore spot just above her left SI joint and rubbed it.

She tilted her head all the way back, eyes closed. Her whole body trembled violently. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. “Mission completed, my love. Mission completed.”

## FORTY-TWO

She trotted after Rainer up the slight incline and into the shadows of the forest. The sky was *brilliantly* clear and the wind actually still for once, with barely a breeze to tickle the sensitive tips of her ears. There was also a slight scent on the breeze that tickled her snout.

“*Spring.*” Rainer supplied. “*Just the first hints of it. It’s coming.*”

Rainer was a whole treasure trove of the scent-knowledge that wolves had lost in space. The rest of them could vaguely identify scents as specific scents, but it was Rainer who could give them names. Or, as he liked to tease her, it was *Hade* giving them names. The other wolves didn’t ask how Rainer knew what he knew. They just attributed it to his propensity for hanging out in the archives reading about Old Earth.

“*Seasons have smells?*” She plumed her tail across her back and tilted her head to the side.

“*Yes. That hint you’re smelling in the air is spring.*”

She wagged her tail and inhaled, trying to catch more of it so she’d remember.

Rainer chuffed a laugh. “*It’s a long way off. Weeks of winter left. This way.*”

She moved up to his shoulder and followed him into the forest shadows. They didn’t have a lot of time. There was *so* much to do before *NightPiercer* arrived. They needed to backtrack towards Pod 2 so she could map the location of the river, since scouting for other rivers and lakes had turned up

nothing. Then they needed to return to Pod 1 camp, pack up as many supplies as they could carry, and start out for *NightPiercer's* anticipated landing site.

If everything went according to design, the ship would land fifty to seventy-five miles southwest of Pod 1's position, towards the coastal edge of the island on what looked like a large, flat, open plain near boreal forest and rocky foothills to a larger mountain range. They planned to be two or three days out from the site by the time they saw the ship overhead.

And they *would* see the ship, probably glowing incandescent, but the actual fireball ripping through the sky would happen on the other side of the Earth and they wouldn't see it. Thankfully. Even if everything was going fine, and the fireball stage was normal and expected, she'd rather not see it.

The only major unknown was how the ship would "fly" given the massive damage to the front section.

Rainer froze, one paw up. She crouched and followed his twitching snout and perked ears.

The sound of something going *thump thump thump*. And it wasn't her heart.

Rainer picked his way forward, *very* slowly, low to the ground.

She followed in his shadow.

In the shadows of a tree twelve feet ahead of them was something that *looked* like a rabbit, but was not a rabbit. The *thump* was from it scratching its white-and-brown speckled belly with a massive hind leg.

"*Hare,*" Rainer whispered.

So *that* was a hare! She drooled with excitement and had to keep excited barks tight in her throat. She had never hunted hare, only rabbit, that that hare looked fast. And powerful.

It looked towards them.

They froze.

Its nose visibly moved, but then it turned its head straight and ran its short forepaws over its huge, floppy ears.

*“It doesn’t realize we’re predators,”* Rainer whispered. *“They’re still prey animals, but it doesn’t recognize wolves.”*

*“I want it. I want it.”* The *want* to close her jaws over it was *so* strong she couldn’t contain it. But they needed food, and Rainer was the more accomplished hare-hunter than her.

*“Take it.”*

*“We need it.”*

*“There will be another.”*

She inched around the far side of the hare. Her white pelt hid her in the snow, but not the shadows—Rainer blended in better with his silvery-and-brown coat. But the hare kept grooming itself, unbothered by the two wolves staring at it.

She bolted.

The hare fled.

She chased it through the forest. The damn thing was *fast!* And hard to see with its mottled coat in the gray shadows. Its scent of fear and meat and blood and life hooked into her snout. Off to her left, Rainer sprinted ahead. She curved to the right as he passed the hare, and two seconds later, he bent towards the hare. It made an *eep eep* noise and cut right to avoid him.

She shot in, slammed a paw into its haunch, sent it tumbling, and dove forward to clamp her jaws around it. It fought and jumped *eep eep eep* and kicked with powerful hind legs, the claws scratching through her fur and leaving stinging scratches on her side. It twisted and bit with two fierce front teeth, but she bit down on its neck. The fragile bones gave and her fangs parted softer tissue.

The body stilled.

Rainer trotted up. She licked his snout and wagged her tail. An Earth rabbit! Or hare. Whatever. She barked and tore in circles around him, yipping madly while jumping and twisting into the air. Rainer chased her and they tore through the forest

and snow while she gave in to every stupid feral urge she had to act silly.

Rainer tumbled her into the snow and she flipped and wriggled and he playfully grabbed her ruff in his fangs. She bit at his forelegs. They broke apart. His tail plumed over his back, his tongue hung between his fangs, and he barked at her.

She picked up her kill and trotted back towards camp with her prize.

*“Proud of yourself, hmm?”* Rainer laughed as he trotted next to her.

*“I am.”* And she wasn’t even going to hide how fucking smug she was about her first Earth prey. She was going to prance right into camp. A first kill was a very big occasion. She now had her first planet-side kill. Proof that the skills learned in the Biomes could hold up.

They might just survive long enough to piss off Gaia again.

A strange sound made her look up. She perked her ears. It was a dull, tearing roar across the sky.

*“A storm?”* Rainer tilted his head and held his snout to the non-existent breeze.

Whatever it was, it was coming closer. A strange rumbling started in her paws. She dropped her rabbit. *“Quake?”*

The *trees* behind them shook and shed snow in clumps and showers. The sky remained a dome of blue with the usual faint ribbons of green and purple.

The sound *tore* through the sky along with a terrible creaking and *tearing* sound. Sounds she’d only heard on the videos of the Last Days as buildings and bridges collapsed while the ground shook and storms tore at the planet.

*“Oh Gaia,”* she whispered. *“Oh—no.”*

*NightPiercer* tore through the sky, ripping through the blue, on fire, trailing smoke and flames of every color. Pieces of the ship tore off, and the ship *screamed* with each lost piece. It tilted and rolled wildly along its x-axis, bowed down over its

shattered bow like it had wanted to fly in space: nose down, like a penitent.

The ship wasn't even headed in the right direction.

It streaked overhead, leaving a trail of smoke and sparkles and the smell of ozone and the burning of things that shouldn't burn.

It disappeared over the horizon within seconds.

*"Oh Gaia,"* she whispered, *"what have I done?"*

SHE AND RAINER SPURTED BACK TO CAMP. SOME OF THE ship's smoldering wreckage had sprinkled the snow, melting deep pockets that sizzled and steamed in the cold air. The *smell* was ozone and burning metal.

She shifted into human form and ran to the beacon. It still had power and was still transmitting, but told her nothing useful and helpful.

**>> SHIP DE-ORBIT PROCEDURE : INITIATED <<**

**>> BEACON PING LATENCY : EXCESSIVE <<**

**>> INTENTIONS : CONFIRMED <<**

**>> HASH MISMATCH : PARTIAL, WITHIN LIMITS <<**

**>> SHIP DE-ORBIT PROCEDURE : CONFIRMED <<**

She moved through what few screens and file trees it had, finding nothing except timestamps of when *NightPiercer* had begun its de-orbit. "Excessive ping latency? Hash mismatch? What does any of that mean?"

Hash mismatch... had she... had she put in the wrong coordinates? Had the ping from the beacons been too far or incorrect? Were they too far apart, and she hadn't calculated that correctly, and—

She backed away, hands over her mouth to hold in the screams.

The Earth spun under her, around her, whirling through space in a mad dance with the Moon, laughing.

—and Tsu had trusted her, and confirmed the warning to go ahead?

And why not? She'd never been wrong before.

“Oh Gaia,” she whispered. “It’s my fault. I killed all of them. I killed *all* of them.”

She backed away from the beacon, shaking, and torn between screaming and vomiting. But what good would either do? “I killed them. I killed all of them?”

Rainer grabbed her and spun her around. “You *didn't* kill them, Lachesis. You didn't!”

“I—I—” she gestured at the beacon.

His fingers dug into her bones. “You *didn't* kill them. Do you hear me? You *didn't*. We don't know what those messages mean. You are *guessing*.”

“Why?” Tears cascaded down her cheeks. “Because you can't live with your mate having killed civilization?”

He gave her a shake. “Beacon Ping Latency just means the ship was outside of ideal range. The curvature of the Earth and the narrow transmission band give them a short range.”

“Why would Tsu initiate a de-orbit outside of ideal range?” Cheshire's voice shook. “He could just wait ninety minutes. And what hash did it accept that was *partially* correct?”

“Error tolerance, maybe,” Kos said grimly.

“But why not wait for optimal ping?” Cheshire bit back. “It doesn't make any sense! And why *now*? The ship needs *days* to get loaded and strapped down. What the hell is going on?!”

“Maybe they were ready,” Kos countered. “You guys did take five days to make the trip from Pod Two. Tsu had a lot of faith in Lachesis.”

Tears fell. She didn't sob. She wasn't allowed to weep.

Rainer's grip on her remained bone-bruising. He gave her another shake. “Look at me. *Look* at me, damnit. This *isn't*

your fault. Get the packs. We're following the debris field and finding the crash site. *Now.*"

FOLLOWING *NIGHTPIERCER*'S TRAIL WAS HORRIFYINGLY EASY: miles of debris had plunged into the snow. Most of it was very small, but burned so hot that it melted the snow, creating an icy pox that smelled of shattered sky and scorched metal.

Fragments of hull tiles, wire mesh, bolts, nuts, rivets.

But the pieces were relatively small. Sometimes actually small.

They didn't speak. No one said a word. They chased the debris field, they ate, they huddled together in the snow and slept. Repeat. Over and over.

*"For now, there's hope it came down intact. Or mostly intact,"* Rainer said on their fourth night as they huddled in the snow alongside the debris trail. *"The pieces are not getting larger and the trail is narrow."*

She rested her snout on her paws and ignored the protein stick Rainer had shoved between them. She couldn't eat. Her stomach refused to accept any food. Her soul curled into a tiny ball and didn't even howl. She made herself as small and unobtrusive and quiet as possible.

Rainer pawed at her ears and licked her head. *"Eat."*

She turned her snout the other way.

He pawed her head again. *"Eat. You have to keep up with us."*

Ashamed, she gnawed on the protein stick and gagged it down. Her stomach almost rejected it. Rainer curled up next to her, wrapping his larger form around hers. He smelled of love. Pure, abject, unyielding, uncompromising love.

She couldn't bear to rest her head on his shoulder or in the sanctuary of his pelt.



CHESHIRE, WHO HAD GONE AHEAD TO SCOUT THE THICKENING trail, raced back through the dirty snow, barking frantically. *“Survivors! Survivors!”*

Lachesis lifted her head. The snow had been partially melted to ice, everything stained shades of soot and rust, spread far and wide, a mile in each direction at least. The debris had increased in size, and Rainer identified some of the fragments as pieces of the generator disc. Some stood on their shattered ends, plunged deep into the Earth, while others were like strange sculptures. Massive chunks of hull tiles, swaths of wire mesh, cables and cords and filaments of every type and size. Rainer sniffed most of it, identifying (but not sharing) what each piece was and where it had come from.

The chunks of generator disc gave hope that the ship had been able to wrestle itself from its nose-down attitude to tail-down, allowing the disc to be sacrificed in the initial impact. The debris would have been thrown back an estimated ten to twelve miles.

*“Are you sure?”* Chance asked.

*“I know dead bodies from living ones,”* Cheshire barked. He spun around. *“Let’s go, let’s go!”*

Even a few survivors... even some...

She stayed at the back of the pack as they weaved their way through the debris field, trying to avoid cutting their paws on the debris or breaking a bone on the pitted ice. The wind blew from behind them, not that it mattered, because the smells of the mangled wreck permeated everything like an unholy miasma.

They crested a small hill and spotted forty or so people stumbling through the snow a quarter mile in the distance, dragging some hard-sided trunks with ropes through the debris and snow. The collection of people was wearing appropriate winter gear for humans. There appeared to be a few children and a few wolves mingling in the group.

Rainer barked and sprinted towards them.

She followed. The main wreckage couldn't be much farther. They had to hurry—there *had* to be more survivors.

The group stopped, and a few in the front crumbled down, while some behind them leaned over them. She slowed—something was wrong. Something about the way they—

*\*BOOM\**

The sound split through the air.

She skidded to a halt.

Rainer dropped to the snow.

# FORTY-THREE

**T**ime became taffy again. The worst kind of taffy.  
*A gun. They shot him.*

They.

Shot.

Him.

It made no sense.

But this was Earth, and nothing made sense.

Her legs were moving again and her brain caught up. She yanked the emergency release strap on her packs with her teeth, it fell away, and she tore through the snow towards the group. The muzzle of the long, slender gun (a rifle? Was that what it was?) still trailed smoke in the air. It was braced over the shoulder of—

*Bennett.*

Bennett knelt in the snow, and some Security goon had shot Rainer.

Rainer staggered to his feet. Red blood splattered the snow and stained his pelt.

The smell of silver hit her nose as she passed him.

*Silver.*

She lunged over Bennett's bent form and latched onto the shooter's arm just as he fired another shot. The bullet went into the snow.

She tore the Security goon into the ground. Her fangs sank through his thicker outer coat and clothing and into his skin, but not deep enough.

His throat, though, was exposed. She yanked away, spun, and dove for his throat, closing her jaws over it. He screamed again and kicked and she went to bite *down* but—

*Is this how it begins? With silver and blood?*

She opened her jaw. The neck fell from her maw.

Something jerked snug around her neck and *snapped*.

Her vision swam red, then quickly darkened around the edges. She scrambled, tried to breathe, inhaled, but the darkness kept coming. Something clamped over her snout. She breathed in again, inhaled something that coated her entire snout with a burning metallic taste and was the last thing she remembered.

RAINER FOUGHT TO HIS PAWS AND STAGGERED IN THE SNOW TO stay upright. His nerves were bathed in fiery pain, his *brain* was bathed in fiery pain, his consciousness flickered as his brain tried to shut down to avoid the overwhelming agony coursing through his system while each beat of his heart pushed the silver through his blood and organs and bones and eyes.

They had Lachesis—children screamed, people floundered around, and one Security person had a rope twisted around her neck while a second one had clamped a cloth over her snout. It had a chemical on it that would sedate anyone within one breath.

Bennett, kneeling on the snow at his eye-level, smiled at him, distinct and separate and in total control of the chaos behind him.

Another shot split the air. The bullet grazed his flank, singing off hair and tracing a line of silver-banded agony across his hip. He staggered, snarling, trying to coil his body into war-form to rip Bennett's head off—

But the silver held him, bound him.

Cheshire and Xav barked, but another spray of bullets kept them at bay.

Bennett stood. "Shoot the dogs! Keep her. We need her."

Another shot. This one, from the sound, hit one of his packmates, but only a glancing blow.

Cheshire grabbed him by the ruff. "*We have to go.*"

"*We can't leave her!*" Rainer staggered after the group. His legs gave out and his organs felt like they flipped inside out and re-arranged themselves in his body. He wormed through the snow towards the retreating group.

His mate. He *wasn't* abandoning her. Bennett *didn't* get her. He *wouldn't* let them take her.

Cheshire dragged him by the ruff in the snow, inch by inch. "*We have to get help!*"

His body left a bloody trail in the snow. Each tug sent brain-blanking pain through his body.

Help? There was no one to help. *They* were the help.

Another shot. The bullet landed three feet away in a puff of snow.

He tried to howl. The silver muzzled him. Wove around his teeth and wired his jaw shut. Wove around his bones, wired them into this form. Constricted his spine. Trapped him. Paralyzed him.

Someone carried Lachesis away over their shoulder into the swirling snow.

---

AWARENESS CAME IN ITS USUAL SLOW, METHODICAL FASHION.

*Awareness* being the first thing that came. Awareness of his body. Awareness of the world. Awareness of Lachesis *not being with him.*

She was far away. She was trapped. She needed him.

Bennett had taken her.

And he would find her.

After that galvanizing awareness, his brain loaded with *pain*. The agonizing pain of every nerve having been set on fire. His *brain* hurt. His *eyes* hurt. Every layer of every mucous membrane was painfully aware of every other membrane, and the center of the agony was the acid-like burning in his scarred shoulder, dancing across those already-mangled nerves.

It hurt like the radiation and plasma burns that had given him those scars.

Actually, it hurt worse. That had been localized. This was through his whole body.

It didn't matter. He had to find Lachesis.

He managed to roll halfway to his sternum before the pain chewed through his reserves of strength and stubbornness and forced him to pant. He prodded his bones. The silver's grip on his ability to shift had lessened.

*Silver.*

He realized he was on blankets. And there was no snow. Or sunlight. In fact, he was staring at the wall of a tent. He shoved the rest of the way onto his sternum, ignoring the pain in his shoulder, gagged once as his organs re-organized themselves, and took in surroundings.

Where the hell was he?

*Belle* sat next to him, knees up to her chest.

"Fuck, you in there this time?" Belle unfolded her legs and crouched down onto his level, peering at him from a somewhat safe distance.

Rainer cocked his head. Then he looked around. He was in a tent, but it wasn't the tent back at the landing site. It was a totally different tent, smaller, but with various beds made of matching blankets and not much else arranged in two rough

rows of three. The flap to the tent fluttered in the wind outside, periodically giving him a glimpse of sunlight and motion.

“Here.” Belle shoved a bowl of water under his snout. “You need to drink. Forrest said so.”

Forrest?

Where was Lachesis? Had they found her? Where were the others? How had he gotten here?

He pushed against his paws and managed to get halfway up before flopping back down.

“Just drink the water, you idiot.” Belle’s voice cracked, and she jabbed the bowl at him. “Do it.”

He shoved upwards again and managed to stand up, and he stumbled towards the tent entrance. Each step sent fire coursing through his nerves, and his eyeballs threatened to blister and peel back from the pain. They didn’t, of course, that was the lie the silver-pain told his body.

He staggered out of the tent and half-stopped, half-collapsed outside, discovering a row of similar tents along a path of snow so compacted it had turned to treacherous slippery, ice. Clouds swirled above, and flurries delivered large puffy flakes to eyelashes and ear-hairs. To the left, the wreckage of *NightPiercer* rose high, twisted and blackened and charred.

Belle came out of the tent behind him and jogged down the path to the first person she saw, grabbed them, and said, “Find Tsu. Tell him Rainer’s awake.”

The fresh air helped, and he arranged himself into a sitting position, panting around the pain and trying to piece together what the hell had happened, and where his mate was.

Had they just *left* her with Bennett and nobody had gone after her? How much time had passed?

Belle jogged back to him. She crouched down at his level. He gave his tail an aggravated thump against the packed snow.

“Don’t try to shift until Forrest says so,” Belle said. “You took a silver bullet. If you don’t remember. Forrest said you

might not remember. But Xav got it out of you, so it wasn't in you long. Still fucked your shoulder up pretty good. It's a big hole right now. You just can't see it."

Yes, silver ate holes in flesh. It also ate nerves and blood vessels. If Xav had gotten the bullet out, he hadn't gotten a lethal dose.

Tsu was alive. Forrest was alive. Belle was alive. Bennett was alive.

He twisted his head around. The row of tents made no sense, but the hulking wreckage of *NightPiercer*, split and torn and charred, rising beyond the row befuddled him even further.

His brain dismissed *that* in favor of processing the necessary information to find his mate.

"We'll go find her," Belle whispered to him, fiercely. "We are going to go after that fucker."

Rainer lifted his lips to show his fangs. No one had gone after her yet?

Tsu arrived a while later—time was difficult to gauge in wolf-form through a haze of silver and pain. With him were Juan, Simone, and Cheshire, and a bit farther behind, a Keenan who clearly had not slept in some unknown but unacceptable length of time.

The Captain had two healing black eyes, a missing tooth, a gash above one eye that had a few stitches holding it together, part of his ear was missing, and smelled of some other assorted injuries Rainer couldn't identify immediately. The Captain had been in a fight.

And a ship crash.

But a fight *before* the crash.

"That is *nasty*," Simone said while Juan winced. "Holy fuck, Commander, your shoulder is—"

"There's a hole in it," Juan said soberly.

Bullets tended to do exactly that.



“Good to see you’re coherent,” Tsu told him. “It’s been three days. Xav dug the bullet out of your shoulder, your team dragged you the ten miles to us. We don’t know where Lachesis is. There’s been a blizzard the past two days. Once you’ve recovered enough, put a team together and go get her back.”

Good. Right to the point. Excellent. The blizzard would have immobilized the group, and the group would leave a trail easy to follow, even through the new snowfall. He would pick up the scent, retrieve his mate, and kill Bennett.

“It was fucking Bennett,” Cheshire told him. “*He* de-orbited the ship.”

The information bumped to the top of his mental list. His mate blamed herself for the ship’s landing—this new information would provide immediate comfort to her.

“He used the *Haven* AI to do it.” Belle pivoted on the balls of her feet towards them. “I don’t know how, but convincing the flight computer to accept a mismatched command hash that results in an entire fucking ship getting smashed reeks of the *Haven* AI. I’ll bet it happened when he brought over the *Ark* crew manifest. That’s *when* he did it. Don’t know *what* he did, but that was *when* he had access.”

Tsu crouched down in front of Rainer. “I don’t know if that’s *how* he did it, we can’t start the computers to find out, and frankly, I don’t care. But *he* de-orbited the ship. I didn’t. He used his friends in Security and other sections to bog down the OIC staff. Your section wasn’t having it. Arden and I fought our way to the bridge and got enough control back we didn’t end up nose-down in the ocean. We lost people, animals, material, but the reinforced compartments mostly held. Core is intact and preserved. Electronic systems, computer systems, all that is useless. Trying to get people out of the crew containment now since it’s just a husk unfit for even short-term habitation, but many people refuse to come out into the open spaces. Bennett and his friends were prepared, made off with pre-packed supplies and a weapons cache in the confusion, and are headed to who knows where. There. That’s your briefing.”

“Bennet’s plan was to crash the ship and kill everyone.” Simone hugged herself in the biting cold. She had no gloves and her fingers were a mix of white and scalded red. “But I’ll bet he didn’t tell his buddies that part and is disappointed to still be alive.”

“Fucking unhinged,” Belle said.

“He wanted to be Captain,” Juan said.

“The old Earth saying *the Captain goes down with the ship* only applies when everyone else has evacuated the ship,” Simone grated.

Rainer lifted his head. Forrest jogged down the pathway towards them.

“Doctor,” Tsu said as Forrest braced himself on his knees and caught his breath.

“This gravity is a hell of a thing,” Belle said by way of sympathy.

Forrest took a few deep breaths, then straightened. “Are you leaving to go get her, Rainer?”

Rainer barked once.

“He needs to recover more. At least until he can shift,” Tsu said.

He gathered himself and forced his bones to shift. The silver held for a split second, then shattered and he twisted into human form. Juan caught him as he staggered under the blinding pain from his silver injury, but he managed to not fall, and after a few seconds, had fought through it.

“He’s shifted. Now he needs to go after her,” Forrest said instead.

“Doctor, a few days is not going to make a difference. If Bennett wanted to kill her, he would have.”

“He’s not going to *kill* her,” Forrest said. “But I don’t want him to silver her to keep her in one form and trap her. Rainer can shift, he’s fine.”

“He’s got a hole in his shoulder, doctor.” Belle pointed at the blackened puncture.

Forrest dismissed the bullet wound with a brush of one hand. “The bullet didn’t hit anything but scar tissue and meat. He’s fine.”

Rainer took inventory. He felt like he had the flu, he was exhausted, and everything hurt so much his brain buzzed, but all of that was meaningless. His limbs worked, his cognition was excellent, and there were no major physical deficits that were not tied to pain and lingering silver-sickness. Nothing that force of will could not overcome.

Tsu looked skeptical. “I can’t stop him from going out into the snow, but I’m not sending anyone else on a fool’s mission for the sake of a few days.”

“Don’t have to send me, Captain. I’m volunteering,” Belle said.

Forrest brushed off Tsu’s concern. “The bullet was a silver-banded. Not a high dose of silver, especially for a wolf like him. Just intended to drop him in the short term, but not put him down long term. I’ll shove some painkillers into him, put some salve on that wound to protect it, you feed him whatever we have, and let the wolf be on his way.”

“I’ll take the salve and food, but keep the painkillers.” He didn’t need them, and they might dull his sharpness. Bennett was about to meet with grave, grave, *grave* misfortune.

Cheshire turned. “I’ll get the others.”

Tsu held out his hands. “Everyone, settle. Forrest, I appreciate your ability with field medicine and triage, but—”

“Fuck, you want to leave her with Bennett *one second* more than necessary?” Belle cut the Captain off.

“No, I want to ensure we get her back and we don’t lose anyone to stupidity and hastiness.”

Forrest threw up his hands. “We *have* to get her back before they use silver on her, and Bennett *will* silver her to

make sure she can't shift if he hasn't already. It might already be too late!"

Tsu nodded, exuding the scent of intentional calm. "We're aware of what silver does to wolves. We don't need silver to goad us to find her."

Forrest twisted his hands together. "No, I mean she's pregnant."

## FORTY-FOUR

**P**regnant? That couldn't be true. Forrest had tested her before she'd left. Had that been the scent on her shoulders, though? She'd smelled different—a slight change that had piqued his interest and curiosity.

But all his senses were different on Earth, and *everything* smelled slightly different. Her scent had been sharper, clearer, more nuanced. Like a hundred pages being added to a book he already enjoyed.

How had his Hade-chiseled DNA not recognized such an important scent?

Keenan, arms crossed and expression skeptical, said, “She’s *pregnant*? This is news to me, because I know I had nothing to do with it.”

Forrest lowered his hands but kept them clasped. “Rainer, she’s pregnant. She came up positive at her pre-drop medical. I did not log it and I did not tell anyone, including her.”

Rainer snarled and lunged at him. Tsu and Keenan caught him and shoved him back.

“We’re not doing this, Rainer!” Tsu shouted, smashing into the wolf’s chest and sliding one arm under one of Rainer’s and securing a hook.

“Don’t kill him, we need him!” Keenan added her weight to Tsu, like a flesh wall.

Forrest didn’t take a step back.

Rainer counted to eight, coiling his fury over and over like a cable in his grip. His teeth shifted in his jaw, and his nails itched in their beds, but the knowledge paralyzed him—anger twisted with happiness with near panic and an overriding feral need to *get to her*.

As if that wasn't intense enough already. Bennett was an armed adversary not operating alone. His mate was already in the proximity of silver and Bennett *would* use it if pushed to do so.

What he'd do if he knew she was pregnant could be even worse.

Rainer receded from the restraining hands while the thoughts coiled over and over in his mind. Lachesis not knowing she was pregnant meant she could not betray it to Bennett. His eyes narrowed. He tried to speak, but his vocal cords refused to form human words.

Tsu kept one hand on his chest. "She doesn't know?"

Forrest answered the question, but maintained eye contact with Rainer as he answered. "No. From the levels, it was a brand new conception. She had to do the drop. No one else could, and the mission could not be delayed. There was no medical reason to add to the mental or emotional load."

"Except she could have had a miscarriage," Keenan snapped.

"Not that early. She was *that* early she might not be pregnant anymore at all and resorbed it." Forrest shot back.

"She's still pregnant," Rainer said in a silky growl. "That's the new scent. It's not Earth altering my sense of smell."

Forrest said, "At the risk of getting my head ripped off, Earth *is* altering all our senses. The changes to your sense of smell are being caused by gravity's effect on your olfactory nerve and pressure changes in your sinus cavity."

Rainer added that fact to his coil of understanding.

"Rainer," Forrest said, "it's a *very* early pregnancy. She was never in any danger. I would have cleared her for the

mission anyway, but I didn't want her or you to have that level of distraction. She might have resorbed the pregnancy before her next check. I did *not* want to add to your mental or emotional loads."

"We would have rescued her anyway." Keenan's tone was tart and exasperated.

"Silver exposure, even being in proximity of it, if Bennett so much as puts it against her skin, could be devastating," Forrest said. "And he *will* do it, even if he thinks she's pregnant."

"No, he won't," Rainer said darkly. "He won't jeopardize the pup."

"Hell," Forrest said with a sigh. "*Fuck.*"

Keenan cocked her head to the side. "Oh, he will, Rainer. He most *certainly* will, to the most effect possible. Every personality matrix also includes what Civilization Management calls a shadow matrix. Who you become when circumstances push you beyond your limit and your fundamental understanding of your place in the order of things is irrevocably broken. Bennett wanted to be Captain. It was the shape of his entire understanding of himself. Right now, since that's impossible, he's rebuilding himself, but it's not Commander Bennett, First Officer. It's the shadow matrix version of Bennett."

"Which is what?" Tsu asked.

Keenan shrugged. "Violent despot with no regard for the morality that previously outlined his existence but ultimately failed to produce the results he wanted."

"Comforting," Forrest said. "And you let this person become First Officer?"

"Oh, we all have an ugly side, Forrest," Keenan said wryly. "You think you don't? Your shadow matrix tells me I shouldn't let you near a sharp object. If anyone thinks Bennett won't do something because it's too far, nothing is too far from him now. For him, it's all now a calculation on the

desired result. The people with him, no matter what he does, will not stop him.”

“Then I will,” Rainer growled. “He’s on foot, he’s human, he has children with him, the weather is terrible, and the terrain taxing. He’s not moving fast, and he’s not going far.”

“And I know where the bastard is going,” Tsu told Rainer.

Tsu’s confidence and the matching scent pulled at the nebulous fiber of anger brewing in Rainer’s mind. He counted, silently, then focused on Tsu. “Where is there to go?”

Tsu gave him a half-grin and a shove on the chest with his palm. “There’s only one place *to* go: the pod drop site. He needs the supplies.”

Rainer coiled his thoughts again, number by number. But a forward attack wouldn’t end well—Bennett was armed with silver, and had all the Security forces on his side.

“I’d like to minimize losses as much as possible,” Keenan said. “We need *everyone* if we’re going to survive. They’re still warm hands and able bodies, not discounting he has women with him as well. We already lost too many in *LightBearer* and the subsequent attrition to cut out a cancer that might be curable.”

Rainer nodded slowly.

Keenan spoke to him now, somewhat kindly, “Rainer, you know,” she paused with meaning behind her word, speaking to the part of him that was Hade, “that Repopulation was going to be a dangerous and confusing time. We can’t be quick to judge the actions of people who are afraid and confused.”

“Not everyone in that group is reacting out of fear or confusion,” Rainer said darkly.

“I am well aware of that.”

He needed to find them before they took his mate, and their pup, to their deaths.



## FORTY-FIVE

**B**ennett crouched down in front of her.

Well, of the absolutely most unpleasant things to come around to. *Bennett*. In the middle of an Earth blizzard. Tucked into the shelter of sleds and nothing else. And she had on a *muzzle*. A silver-lined muzzle. As long as she didn't move her snout at all, the silver bars presented no danger.

But Bennett also looked like he'd been taken into the kitchen and beaten with an assortment of heavy objects. He'd been in a fight, in addition to the crash.

Who had he gotten roughed up by?

"It's just you and I," he told her in a whisper, his lips by furry ear. "Shift. Now. I'm not holding a conversation with a dog."

She almost growled. But if Bennett had survived, and these people had survived—

They'd shot Rainer.

Panic shot through her as sure as the silver bullet that had hit her mate, and then immediately was followed by the knowledge that if Rainer had died, she'd *know*.

Rainer was still alive. And he wasn't out dying in the snow.

Warily, she complied with the demand to shift, which resulted in her being naked in the freezing cold. The blizzard made the world a veil of gray and white, and from the dimness, darkness was falling.

Bennett removed the muzzle from her.

Time to focus on what was important. “You survived. Is this all the survivors? Where are you going? Is anyone hurt? Why the hell did you shoot Rainer?”

“I didn’t say to talk.”

“I thought you wanted a conversation.”

He shoved a protein stick at her. “Eat. And keep your mouth shut. You know why I finally put a bullet in him, and he’s still laying in the snow where I left him.”

*Liar.*

“And as for you?” Bennett smirked. “Well. Everyone in this little group?”

Bennett leaned very close and whispered, “They blame you for the crash.”

Her heart shattered.

“That’s right,” Bennett whispered. “You failed them, *Navigator*. When it mattered most, you failed them.”

She sobbed once.

Gaia, it was true, it—

“Or that’s what I let them think,” he whispered as softly as the flurries. “But Rainer made a mistake when he took me to *Haven*. Rainer forgot that before I was Operations, I was Tech.”

She yanked back.

Bennett smiled.

It was deranged.

“You—” she whispered. “*You—*”

“What is it you tell Rainer? Ah, yes.” He pressed his finger, hard, to her lips. “*Shhh.*”

“You fuck—”

“*Shhh.* They won’t believe you, scream if you want, and I will tell them to come silence you. But to avoid your head.

Since I need that. I don't need the rest of you." He looked her up and down. "But someone else might."

"You fucking *ghoul*," she whispered.

"I'll let you sleep in wolf form while I find you a coat. But once this storm breaks... we have work to do."

---

THIS WAS INTENSELY STUPID.

How no one had died yet was a miracle straight from Gaia's blessed asshole, because Gaia also knew absolutely nobody in this sad little group of separatists had a damn clue how to survive in the elements.

Maybe they were just too stupid to die.

After three days and nights in Bennett's close company, she was about done with this nonsense. Bennett probably would have gotten started on whatever his Grand Plan was, except the past two days had been a swirling blizzard, and everyone had crammed together in two hastily erected tents that had somehow also not blown away in the wind.

The smell was not worth discussing or contemplating. Security had also brought a strong-smelling goo that they plastered on her nose to obstruct her sense of smell, and she had not complained.

But it had become obvious that half of this little expedition were Bennett's toadies—mostly Security and a few younger Crew—and the other half were mostly humans and a few wolves. How the latter had gotten mixed up in this or gone along with it, she didn't know, because none of them seemed very enthusiastic about their life choices. At the same time, none of them seemed able to process that they weren't just miserable out here, but that Bennett wasn't *leading them anywhere*. There was nowhere to go. There was nothing but *snow* and forests and hills.

And eventually hungry birds and bear-like things.

But they all *hated* her and blamed her for the situation they were in. Yet all seemed aware they'd left behind, apparently, the numerous other survivors.

It didn't make much sense.

But now the tents had been taken down and re-packed, and everyone huddled together in the miserable cold while the wind cut across the open hills and snow flurries fell and Bennett stood in front of her with a silver ball between his thumb and forefinger.

Bennett had demanded she be in human form for this, and considering he was the one with the silver, humoring him seemed prudent.

Rainer *was* alive. Her mate was still alive, and he'd be coming for her.

There was no point in goading Bennett or pissing him off further. He *wanted* her to submit, and if she needed to play along and wag her tail to appease him, fine. She'd wag her tail.

From the whispers in the group, *most* of *NightPiercer* had survived. Details about what actually happened were scant. Most of them still stumbled or had to catch themselves if they moved too quickly. The physical misery and overwhelming sensation of weather seemed to have reduced most of them to husks.

Any attempts she made to try to get anyone to tell her *anything* resulted in hostility, including a smack at one point from one of the miserable followers, and Gibbons shoving the butt of his rifle into her ribs.

"I have no idea how you convinced most of these people to follow you," she told Bennett, "but this is the part where they should realize you're only leading them to their deaths. You aren't going to survive out here. There is *nothing out here*. Turn around and walk *back* to the ship."

Bennett's smile was wild, empty, cruel, and full of hatred. "You'll lead us to the pod drop site."

*That* was his long-term survival plan? The *Pods*? Had he *seen* the pods? They were tiny and not fit to shelter more than

three people. Five if they were feeling friendly. There were two months of food stores... *for three wolves*. There were some medical supplies, tools, valuable implements, some tents. But for *three wolves*. Not forty-something humans.

“The pod sites are miles from here,” she told Bennett, trying to sound reasonable and calm while keeping an eye on the rest of the group. That and he’d spent the past week telling all the other survivors how useless she was as a Navigator, and it was *her* fault they were in this situation.

“Which is why *you* will lead us to them,” Bennett told her, still rolling the silver ball in his fingers.

Half the group looked at her the way Bennett looked at her, and the other half didn’t look at her at all. Zero chance of anyone talking sense into Bennett and turning this doomed march back towards *NightPiercer*.

Her heart sank. None of them had any concept of what a *mile* was. A mile was what you did on the training track. A mile on Earth didn’t *mean* anything. She had watched videos and done research to try to prepare herself for how difficult the conditions on Earth would be, and she’d been so overwhelmed and focused that she hadn’t processed anything beyond *fifty miles overland in winter is going to be hard*.

She could tell them how cold, dangerous, difficult, and far it was, but she might as well have been naming pulsars. She could explain to them there was *nothing* waiting for them in the wilderness, and Bennett was leading them to *nothing*, but could they wrap their heads around it? *She* had seen it and still had a hard time processing there was just... nothing. It was a blank canvas of a world.

Their lives had been cracked open like a carton of dropped eggs and they were still confused and in shock.

“There’s nothing there,” she looked at the entire group, trying to draw some of them out, “I know it sounds difficult to imagine, but it’s just like this. The entire planet is like this. There are predators that attack at night. There’s no food. There’s no prey. There’s nothing to hunt, because the predators

have hunted it all, and they'll take the children next. Go back to *NightPiercer*."

"*No one* is going back to *NightPiercer*," Bennett growled.

"Are you going to stop anyone who wants to?" She lifted her chin. "It's a miracle no one has died yet!"

"It's not a miracle," Bennett snarled. "It's *my leadership*. Not your Gaia, not you, not wolves, *me*. It is *my leadership* that is keeping everyone alive, warm, and fed. *Mine*."

Ice clung to her eyelashes and stung her eyeballs as she blinked. His *leadership*? Dear Gaia, he had lost his mind.

No one moved except the Security crew, who resettled themselves as if to say *yep, his leadership*. Nobody else so much as shot a skeptical look at anyone else, or looked back the way they'd come.

"It will be easy to find our way back to the ship. Follow the debris field." Bennett wasn't going to let *her* go, but maybe the parents would at least turn around. Rainer would be on their trail by now, and he'd hopefully find deserters before they died, and get them back to the ship.

The ship probably wasn't *safe*, but it did sound like there were people alive, and that automatically made it better than whatever *this* little trek straight into Bennett's suicidal delusions was.

Nobody moved or even seemed to register that turning around was something they'd consider.

"Now," Bennett told her, "while you're being *so* reasonable, Lachesis, that's a sign you're up to something. I'm just going to ensure your cooperation going forward. And that *you* don't run away in the night. Wouldn't want to have to put you down like we put Rainer down."

"I'm not sure how silver is going to make me *more* tractable." Silver was how you made a werewolf the *opposite* of tractable and reasonable. Unless you aimed to make a dead wolf.

He extended his hand. “I had thought to make you swallow this, but Gribbons pointed out that would probably kill you. And if it didn’t, it’d incapacitate you, and we need you functional.”

And he’d been so willing to see her dead on assorted other occasions. What a hypocritical idiot, but nobody was going to get caught up on those nice little details. “Should I be thanking the Security Chief for his logical thinking?”

Bennett pulled open the coat she wore, exposing her breasts to the biting cold. Her nipples instantly felt like little shards of glass were being stuck in them from the cold.

“We don’t want you shifting and biting someone.” He extended his fingers to her breasts.

Two of his Security lackeys grabbed her arms.

He shoved the silver bead into her transplant scar.

For a second, she didn’t feel anything. Her scar was somewhat numb.

Then the silver entered her bloodstream, and her little blood vessels felt it traveling through them like plasma.

He yanked the bead away.

She gulped for breath. The cold punished the back of her throat and she coughed.

Bennett brushed the bead under her nose, letting her get a good whiff of it. She coughed again.

So this idiot thought that if he shoved a silver bead into her skin for a few seconds, she wouldn’t be able to shift? Into her thickened scar to boot?

Well, it hurt like hell. She’d give him the satisfaction.

Bennett shoved the bead back into the scald mark.

Each beat of her heart pulsed the scalding silver ions through her bloodstream. Blood trickled out of her scar as the bead melted skin and sank through the thick, gnarled skin.

She screamed.

Twelve heartbeats later, he yanked the silver back. She hung her head, gasping and coughing. The bead had left a round blister melted into her transplant scar. It stank like burned flesh and silver, and wept blood that dripped into her navel before dropping into the snow.

The searing sensation radiated through her breasts and along her ribs, with the final tendrils of pain reaching as far as her clavicle.

“I think that’s enough.” Bennett tucked his hands behind his back. “Are you going to be a good dog?”

Oh *fuck* this asshole... She raised her head and curled her lip at him. “Fuck. Off.”

“Tell me you’ll be a good dog.” He rolled the bead in his finger.

Rainer would be here soon, and this would be over. Even a bit of silver was too much silver, and she had civilization to rebuild. Letting Bennett think he’d won would make his defeat so much more satisfying. She coughed a few more times and muttered, “I’m a good dog.”

“No, that’s not what I want to hear.”

“I’ll be a good dog.”

Bennett pocketed the bead. “Remember: you might find this put down your throat if you aren’t.”

She ducked her head as if he’d hit her. Now she didn’t have to look at him and her nose was to the wind so she didn’t have to smell him.

He yanked her chin up. “Which way?”

“To what? Certain death? Pick a direction.”

He squeezed her jaw hard enough it threatened to pop. “The *pod*.”

This bright light had failed to steal her navigation instruments and map. Those were probably still laying in the snow where she’d shed her packs. The sky was obscured by



thick clouds. There was more snow on the wind—she could smell it, and the flurries had already started.

But he, and all his gun-totting cronies, had no idea how any of this worked. So she pretended to contemplate the disc of sunlight behind the clouds, then the other direction, and made a big show of holding one finger up to the wind.

“That way.” She pointed in a direction that would take them to the general vicinity of the pod. No chance she was finding it again without a map.

Hopefully, Rainer would be along soon and she wouldn't have to try.

THE MISERABLE GROUP GROUND THROUGH THE SNOW AT AN equally miserable pace, taking turns lugging the supply sleds. She walked behind Bennett, clutching her borrowed coat closed at her breasts and cursing the sad little canvas shoes she'd been given, which were worse than just her feet being bare in the snow. The wet canvas and braided soles tried to devour her feet.

The whole point of Bennett's little silver-bead exercise had been to make sure she couldn't shift. She hadn't taken nearly enough silver for that, but no point in waking him out of his happy little delusion. And fuck him, he *was* happy.

At least, that's what he sort of smelled like, in the same way rotten meat smelled like meat.

She'd *eventually* get frostbite and hypothermia, but being a werewolf, she was more resistant to it than the humans. From the looks of noses and fingertips and cheeks in the group, there was already frostbite to go around.

The snow had started to fall again, and the cloud cover was so heavy and thick it was impossible to see dusk happen. Suddenly, it was just very gray, and getting darker.

She huddled in her borrowed coat with the rest of the group, shivering in the dark, brutal cold with just the sleds and

a canvas to provide any sort of shelter. There were just protein sticks for dinner, and only one each.

Bennett sat with his allies, all of them seemingly unaware of how much danger they were in.

DAWN CAME IN SHADES OF POWDERY WHITE AND GRAY, THE wind swirling all of it as flakes fell in a steady snowfall that obscured vision and scents.

The birds had flapped and circled them all night. It was cold, bitter. Her nipples were numb, her pussy was frozen, and her toes were a mess from the canvas shoes. When she tried to take them off, Bennett told her to keep them on, even though they were stained pink with blood from blisters.

Someone screamed.

*WHUMP!*

A beast breathed, just loud enough to be heard over the swirling wind.

Fuck—was it the bears? Had they come this far out of the forest?

She bolted behind Bennett as he stood up, scrambled, and crawled behind one of the sleds.

Something hard hit something pulpy. Or something that *became* pulpy. In the dawn gloom and swirling wind, shapes were blurry, and scents confusing.

The swirling wind brought Rainer's scent to her nostrils—was he here? Just as quickly, the wind tore the scent away.

She squeezed herself into the shadows of the trunks just in case it *wasn't* Rainer. Whatever was currently on a killing spree could start with Bennett and his allies.

Male screams were cut off to be gurgles. The scent of blood and gore swirled in the snow. There were no howls, no barks, no roars. Just screams and shouts and then silence.

She stayed tucked into her spot. On the other side of the sled, twenty or so other people huddled as well, their breath

hot fog in the increasing light, almost fiery the way the sun's first light shone through it in the meager grey dawn.

There were no more shouts, just the breathing of several large animals.

The sun peered over the hills, hot fingers pushing at what had happened under cover of night.

*"Lachesisssissss."*

It *had* been Rainer! She shoved up to her feet and spun just as Rainer came around the shadows in his silvery war-form, splattered with blood, but less gore than she'd been expecting.

She threw her arms around him. It was like hugging a very violent rock.

He shifted as he held her. He squeezed her tight, then released her, smoothing her hair. "Are you hurt? Did they hurt you?"

She tried not to stay crumpled into his chest. "I'm fine. Just sleep deprived."

And cold, and damp, and sore, and chafed, blistered, and the worst chapped lips ever, but none of that mattered.

"You're sure. You feel fine." He pushed her off him and looked her up and down. "Your chest. He silvered you—"

"It was nothing. Just a little bead. He thought it'd hurt me. I am *fine*. My scar took most of it. And you." He had a healing wound on his shoulder and upper chest, and a tangle of angry red veins streaking out from the network of scars. "Gaia, Rainer—"

"This is also nothing."

"Well, if you're fine, then I am the best I've ever been." She stared at the wound crater.

"*Nothing* will keep me from you. I'm sorry it took me so long. We had to wait until the Security forces were off their guard. I didn't want anyone else to be shot."

She shook her head and smiled. "I knew you'd come."

Cheshire trotted up through the snow. He tossed his head and barked, beckoning them to follow.

She kicked off her bloody canvas shoes and took Rainer's hand.

Cheshire led them to where several other wolves waited, in wolf form and in a small circle. At the center of the circle, Bennett knelt in the snow. His scent *nightmare* and fury and despair. Rainer ducked his own head enough to get within the man's line of sight—Bennett was actually a bit taller than him. It didn't require much.

As if Rainer's gaze was his hand on Bennett's chin, Bennett lifted his head a few degrees. A beard sprouted on his jaw, and his eyes were sunken—and full of hatred.

“Get it done with, wolf,” Bennett bit out.

Rainer looked around at the three bodies of the dead Security officers that had been killed in his ambush. Then he looked back at Bennett. “There are enough dead. Keenan asked that as many warm bodies be returned to the pack as possible.”

“The pack,” Bennett scoffed. “The *pack*. Is that what it is now?”

“What else would it be?” Rainer asked. “We're the *NightPiercer* pack. We were the *NightPiercer* crew.”

Bennett, hatred dripping from his words, told Rainer. “Do it. I don't want to be on this planet one minute longer than I have to be.”

Rainer held up one hand, and the bones extended and thickened, his nails growing in the bed, and silver hair emerging from the back of the hand.

Bennett tilted his neck back to expose his throat.

Rainer tucked his hand behind his back. “I'm not going to kill you. I don't need to. If you want to die, there are a thousand things on this planet that will do the job. I am taking my packmates back to the pack. Those who don't wish to go can remain here to find whatever fate they can in the snow.

This is the First Law. And like it or not, *you* are part of my pack. I choose not to banish you from it.”

He glanced at Lachesis.

She nodded.

Cheshire spun up into human form. “He’s just going to cause problems. Silver is war, silver is death.”

Rainer took her hand. There was a wild light in his eyes, like something burned beneath the surface. Time to mop this up. Lachesis said, “I’d rather all of them be alive to cause trouble than start off our time on Earth with more death. We already lost people in the crash.”

“That *he* caused.” Cheshire pointed at Bennett.

“The only thing he has *ever* wanted is to be Captain,” Lachesis said. “And if he can’t have that, he’ll take being a martyr. The best punishment is making him live with getting neither of those things.”

Cold wind cut across the hills and howled in the valleys. Rainer didn’t flinch as the cold and kicked-up snow hit his skin. “It’s time to get you back to camp. Can you make it?”

“Of course I can.” What was Rainer about? Just to prove it, she shifted into wolf form and barked at him.

“*This is a mistake,*” Cheshire told her as Rainer shifted into wolf form.

“*Might be,*” she agreed. Civilization had a second chance to be, well... *civilized*. Whatever that might look like, but it probably didn’t look like a public hanging before they’d even had the first harvest.

“*There are a lot of people back at the wreck site who are unhappy. Mostly humans. Wolves have warm fur and don’t need boots or gloves. But they are unhappy.*”

“*Traumatized,*” Rainer commented. “*And the lack of comforts isn’t helping. People didn’t have time to prepare.*”

The lack of hot water *definitely* was a serious downside. Rainer and the rest of Engineering needed to get on that.

Somewhere, after *permanent shelter* and *food*, there needed to be hot water.

Doing her business out in a hole behind a blind? Not *nearly* as upsetting as the lack of hot water. Then again, she was saying that as a wolf who wouldn't freeze her literal privates off squatting in the cold.

*"We're all just unwashed heathens until there's hot water,"* Lachesis told her mate.

*"My priority is sanitation and electricity, but hot water will not be far behind. We will need it."* Rainer's scent bloomed with a deep sort of worry.

Lachesis paused. Rainer stopped dead next to her. He nuzzled her ruff. She bit at him. *"I'm fine. I think I just hit the wall. I'm so tired I might puke."*

The adrenaline had worn off. Her stomach felt oily and roily. The sad line of people shuffling through the snow back towards the wreckage didn't help. She sighed.

Rainer worriedly licked her snout. She took another swing at him with her muzzle. *"I'm fine. I am tired. Can't I be tired after I was abducted?"*

*"You will tell me if you start to feel unwell?"*

*"I don't have silver sickness. I'm fine. Go keep the rest of the pack safe."* Up ahead of her, Cheshire and Xav were leading the rest of the group back the way they'd come through the increasing storm. Hopefully it would hold off long enough for them to make it back before the front truly arrived. The winds always seemed to pick up hours before the storms actually hit.

He didn't move.

She growled and bit his foreleg.

Rainer loped up to the front of the group, then swept back down the other side, pausing to sniff her as he did so, and give her an affectionate lick (or a reassuring one for himself), and then swung out wide in a large hunter's arc with several other Biome-trained wolves.

Bennett stood on his hilltop as they descended.

When they came to the bottom of the slope, she turned back again.

Bennett slowly followed them.

## FORTY-SIX

Rainer literally ran himself ragged on the way back to *NightPiercer's* wreckage. Every twenty minutes he circled back to her to annoy her with questions of if she was feeling unwell or too tired or *anything* that wouldn't qualify as *I feel wonderful, thank you*.

She did not feel wonderful. *Nobody* felt wonderful. For a list of reasons as long as the debris trail.

Bennett followed them. Eventually his most ardent supporters fell back to walk with him, although if Bennett said anything to anyone, she didn't hear it. His scent was something she had no word for and was a cocktail of various scents that all made no sense together, so she decided to simply call it *bennett*. He smelled like *bennett*.

Arriving at the main wreck site was... odd. It was like she'd imagined a ruined city to be, all shattered monoliths and large chunks and trails of smoke from fires going into the air, and people wandering about, and a thousand strange smells.

She'd also never appreciated how *large* the ship was. In space, it had been small compared to *Ark*. But on *Earth*, it towered above her in shattered, tattered remains, huge panels torn off to expose the strata of decks and sections, cables dangling in the wind, pipes and metal clanking and creaking, debris of every variety. Two large arches of the massive generator disc had fractured off not far away and rose out of the ground like pincers.



A makeshift camp had been arranged a hundred yards off the ship, with two dozen of the domed tents set up along a packed ice walkway. Some ambitious chickens had escaped the Biomes and roosted on the tent poles.

People moved in and out of the shattered remains of the ship. The crew compartment and Biome compartments were largely intact, although some decks (and whatever and whoever had been on them) had been crushed or had collapsed in the impact. It was unknown how many had survived. All power had been lost, which meant most of the biological material, like frozen eggs and DNA samples for plants, were in danger of thawing, and the Crèche compartments were being stuffed with compacted snow blocks to preserve the material as long as possible.

It was oddly quiet, and oddly noisy at the same time.

There was no power, no computers, no electronics, no plumbing, no running water.

Rainer let her pause to try to take it in while the rest of their little group shuffled into the camp and towards the wreck.

*“This way,”* he told her, leading her down the ice path. *“The officer deck is inaccessible.”*

She glanced up at the massive ship. *“I would imagine so.”*

He took her down the line of tents to one tent in particular that smelled of Forrest, Lily, and Belle. Her tail wagged. Tsu was already there, waiting for them.

Rainer twisted into human form. She followed suit and grabbed Rainer before she passed out from exhaustion.

“She was silvered,” Rainer told Tsu.

“It was only a little micro-dose, I’m *fine*. Stop!”

“Silver is no small thing,” Tsu said gravely. He cast a glance back at his Security forces, who now were *Bennett’s* Security forces. Or at least not trustworthy. “Silver is war. Silver is death. Bennett knew what he was doing when he burned you. He should be dead, Rainer. Why did you bring him back?”

“I want him alive. Call it a family tradition.”

Rainer wasn't making any sense. Maybe she was just too tired to understand.

Tsu didn't hide his disapproval. “Tradition be damned. That man tried to crash our ship and wipe out civilization. I was not expecting *you* to show mercy. Did I *need* to issue orders not to bring him back?”

Rainer set aside his fretting long enough to focus on the matter of Bennett's continued existence. “There's nothing merciful about forcing him to lead a life he wants no part of. He has allies and sympathizers. The power of his death is greater than the trouble his life presents. But if you want him dead, he's over there.”

“I'll let Arden know,” Tsu said. “But if Keenan wasn't telling me we need *every* warm body, we'd be tying knots around his ankles and finding a very long rope and a tall tree for those raptors.”

“Why a *long* rope?” Lachesis asked. That sounded like a waste of rope.

“Slack, so he could move around enough to think he might be able to fight the raptors off.” Tsu's eyes narrowed and his scent shifted to something deep and dark. For a brief second, it was laced with hatred.

Rainer contemplated the Moon that hung in the daylight sky, and the sunlight cast shadows off his scars, while his Jupiter-like eyes searched for something beyond the tangled clouds. “Bennett being dead doesn't make him a non-factor. Bleeding him until he is a husk of broken dreams that throws potato scraps at an indifferent moon is much more satisfying and a long-term solution.”

“That is *oddly* specific, Rainer.” Tsu twisted on one heel as Forrest arrived. “Doctor. Lachesis was burned with silver.”

Rainer instantly resumed fretting.

Forrest immediately spotted the ugly blister on her scar and gave it a quick exam. She said, “There are other people who need you more.”

“Silver sickness is *not* minor,” Forrest told her tersely.

“I’m not *nearly* as important now.” They could muddle through figuring out how to draw maps and navigate by the heavens. Well, as soon as Rainer and Graves figured out how to get the computers back up and running so those old records could be accessed.

Rainer leaned into Forrest’s space. “Is she—”

“Will you go stand over there!” she demanded and pointed. “Go! Over there!”

Rainer was about to argue, but Forrest shook his head and Rainer obediently went to go stand where directed.

“Any symptoms?” Forrest asked her.

“I am tired and sore and about done with this. What symptoms are you looking for?”

“Bleeding? Cramping? Lattice marks? Fever?”

“*No*. For the last time, *no*. Can I go? I swear I am so exhausted I am going to throw up on someone.”

“Not yet. Pee on this.” Forrest handed her a stick of some kind of special-looking paper.

“Why?”

“You want the explanation of why I’m having to go back to old-fashioned techniques due to lack of a functional lab?”

“No.” She wanted *sleep*. She was about five minutes from laying down on the ground to catch a nap, and they could talk to her prone furry body. Except at this point, she was so exhausted she didn’t have the energy to shift forms, so she’d just end up with frostbite.

“Then you’re going to go pee on said stick. Come on.” Forrest tilted his head and headed off towards the makeshift Medical Bay he’d set up.

“Tell me your lab is almost rebuilt.” She knew it wasn’t.

“Lack of power and tech is going to mean old-fashioned while we get things figured out. But I had Medical familiarize

itself with field medicine and reduced-option medical care on our transit. A Medical Command Aptitude is about extreme limits and rationing while dealing with medical emergencies.”

She shuddered. “Sounds awful.”

“All Aptitudes are. I’ll wait here.”

She did what Forrest asked, passed him the stick, and headed back towards where Rainer was still talking with Tsu. Although it seemed Rainer at this point had resumed full-bore fretting and Tsu had traded in his anger for amusement and trying to talk Rainer down off the ledge. Arden had arrived and stood at Tsu’s shoulder with an expression somewhere between knowing concern and a knowing smirk.

“All done,” she told Rainer. “Now. Sleep. I am done.”

She was too tired to shift back to wolf form for what felt like a *long* walk to the small tent they shared with Belle, Forrest, Lily, and Lily’s pup. Belle was already there, having (from the scent), used some dry soap to get clean and now was tucked into her blankets. The tent wasn’t *warm*, but it was out of the wind and chill, and that made it divine.

“Please stop fretting,” Lachesis told Rainer in a low tone so as to not disturb Belle, although Belle was just about the easiest bunkmate in the history of bunkmates. She plunked herself down next to the blankets she and Rainer shared. The instant her ass hit the blankets, her body tried to turn off the lights.

Rainer knelt down next to her. “Did Forrest say anything?”

“That I could sleep. *Hint hint.*”

Rainer’s expression remained schooled, but his scent turned into something... was *crushed* the right word? “Ah.”

The scent pulled her brain back to wakefulness. “Why?”

Rainer picked her brush out of their small basket of supplies and moved to tend to her tangled hair. His scent swirled with *crushed* and *sadness*, a bite of something deep in them that sank into her bones. He scooped up her hair in one hand and slowly brushed the snarls and tangles out with the

other, pausing to occasionally trail his fingers over her shoulders and spine, or to kiss her skin gently.

“We’re together again,” he whispered by her ear, his scent still sadness.

She turned towards his voice.

The tent flap moved, and the breeze informed her snout it was Forrest. Rainer tensed all over. “You’re back sooner than expected.”

“Rainer,” she whispered. The tent was Forrest’s home too—he didn’t need to explain his presence to anyone. Rainer had been living by himself for too long and he didn’t get to be territorial.

“I’m not back.” Forrest walked down the narrow aisle between bed-nests and crouched down next to them. He rested his wrists on his knees. The wind had flushed the tip of his nose and ears and his fingers looked raw and chapped.

Rainer remained tense.

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?” Lachesis asked under her breath. This was preventing her nap.

Rainer suddenly embraced her, *hard*, and pressed his face into her neck. Forrest reached out and gave Rainer a pat on the arm as he told her, “Lachesis?”

“Yes?”

“You’re pregnant.”

“I’m *what*?”

Forrest nodded.

Her thoughts were sodden and uncooperative. Rainer kissed her temple while still squishing her.

“You came up positive on *NightPiercer* before the drop,” Forrest told her. “But I didn’t say anything since it would only have been a distraction. That test I did just confirmed you are still pregnant.”

She touched the blister. “But the silver—”

“Non factor. The scar shielded you from the worst of it. You’re still very early, so you already know—or should—how what that means.”

It basically meant her odds of having a miscarriage before twelve weeks were somewhere around thirty to forty percent, given it was her first pregnancy. “Have you told Rainer what it means?”

“I have. He’s an optimist. Who knew?”

She turned to face her mate. “You knew all this time.”

“I didn’t want to say anything in case you had lost it along the way.” He stroked her hair. “It might be the only one we ever conceive.”

“And here I thought you were an optimist,” she said softly.

His smile was equal parts joy and abject terror. Which reflected her own feelings. It was the same feeling—sort of—as seeing dawn for the first time.

“There a pup coming?” Belle’s voice asked from behind them.

“Seems so,” Forrest told her.

Belle crawled out of her blankets. She yawned and butted her forehead against Lachesis’ shoulder. “Happy.”

“I guess,” Lachesis told Rainer, “we have about nine moons to get something built out of this mess.”

Rainer leaned very close, expression bright as Jupiter in the night sky. “I’ll only need six. Now, you sleep. I am going hunting, and then we are going to rebuild civilization. Starting with hot water.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Merry is an independent author living in the woods of rural Alabama with her husband and two cats. She enjoys coffee, combat sports, casual games, and low budget disaster flicks.

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[www.merryravenell.com](http://www.merryravenell.com)  
(freebies, festivities, oh my!)

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# ALSO BY MERRY RAVENELL

## **Mates of Planet 25XA**

Spared By The Monster

Spared By The Monster Vol 2 - 2023

## **The Breath of Chaos Series**

Breath of Chaos

Bound By Chaos

Chaos Covenant

Gate of Chaos

Grail of Chaos - TBA

## **The IronMoon Series**

The Alpha's Oracle

Iron Oracle

Ice & Iron

Obsidian Oracle

## **The SnowFang Series**

The SnowFang Bride

The SnowFang Storm

The SnowFang Secret

## **The NightPiercer Saga**

NightPiercer

Separated Starlight

Between Dark Places

Aphelion

## **Other Titles**

The Nocturne Bride

On The Bit

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