

Ardath Rekha's Fan Fiction

Book Editions

IDENTITY THEFT

Book 1 of Many Verses



BY ARDATH REKHA

Identity Theft

By Ardath Rekha

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

Category: Fan Fiction

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1.

A Short-Lived Flight To Freedom

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Uncurling, Audrey swung her legs over the side of the bunk and lowered herself down onto the floor, careful not to make any noise. She hadn't actually undressed for bed—still too tense to

risk changing out of street clothes—and her money belt was still on under her shirt. As she slipped quietly out of the sleeping quarters, she marveled at how quickly and efficiently she'd made her escape. Had *that* part of her been expecting it all along, and been prepared?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not me.

She took a deep breath, and another bite of a peanut butter cup, and watched as the swirling stars slowed and solidified. The Star Jump was ending, having carried the ship several dozen

light years along its route. They would be nearing the outer sectors, she thought, an area of space she'd sworn she would never see again. It was a dark area of space, one that strange and disturbing stories frequently emanated from. She knew from experience that many of the stories were entirely too true, despite sounding like the kinds of tales people would tell around a campfire.

Never thought I'd pass this way again.

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

Fuck! Fuck!

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

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

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

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

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

Gotta get out of here...

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

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

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

Fuck. They're real. Oh fuck!

Audrey realized she was looking at a Necromonger.

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

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

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

captor pushed her roughly toward them.

“That’s the last. She’d almost reached the escape pods.”

“Not an impressive catch,” a new voice commented.

“These ships rarely are.”

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

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

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

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

She couldn’t remember if he’d said anything about “breeders.”

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

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

“This one goes to the Lord Marshal. She fits the profile.”

The who?

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

The floor rushed up to meet her.

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

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

2.

Object of Desire

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He could feel her eyes on him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Feeling triumphant, Riddick got down to business.

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

None. She hadn't touched a thing.

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

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

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

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

He suddenly wasn't sure.

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

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

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

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

3.

Echoes of an Unwanted Time

This can't be happening to me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack.

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

"Not what?"

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

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

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

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

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

She made her eyes open and meet his. The anger on his face was expected, but the hurt and confusion took her by surprise. It speared through her, reminding her of the fictional Riddick that she'd idolized and pined after. But that man couldn't truly exist—couldn't ever have existed—not in the leader of the darkest, most soulless army to ever cross the stars.

“I’m not,” she answered him.

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

“I’m not fucking with you. But I’m not her. She’s gone.”

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

“She’s right in front of me,” he hissed, not touching her.

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

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

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

Learning it, firsthand, had changed everything for her.

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

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

Kyra?

“Kyra?” How the hell had she *found* him?

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

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

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

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

“Kyra told you she was me?”

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

My god, she went even crazier than I thought.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I always knew I was just a joke to him.

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

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

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

...and backed away from her.

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

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

“No,” she managed. “How?”

“I was looking for *you*.”

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

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

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

“*What?*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crazy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.

The Girl Who Wasn't There

Riddick felt as though his guts had been torn open.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...including him. Especially him.

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

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

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

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

"Was she unarmed?" he pushed.

"No, but—"

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

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

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

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

Oh, fuck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.

Breathing, But Not Living

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

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

A white room?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Doe?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Damn her. Never minding her own business...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why?”

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

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

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

Too bad. Out it was coming at long last.

“Murder.”

A long, shocked silence followed.

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

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

“I see.”

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

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

“I shot her in the head.”

“Why?”

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

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

“I see.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Drugged.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I *told* you—”

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

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

“I imagine you are. It will take a while for you to recover from the blood loss and the other stresses on your body. I will arrange for your transfer to the floor of C Ward. A nurse will be by

soon with clothes, and she'll escort you there. In the meantime, is there anyone you'd like me to get in contact with?" Another expectant pause.

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.

Back in the Little Leagues?

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

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

“Which ward is this?” Jack asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exactly why was she thinking about escape anyway?

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

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

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

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

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

Raymond finished negotiating the lock for C Ward, and Jack followed her inside, into her new home. The corridors, she noticed, had been painted a “soothing” light blue. There was the

low sound of human activity, now, different indeed from the sterile quietude of the isolation wing. Voices, sound effects, the soft hum of a media screen. She passed by an open entrance to some kind of gathering room. Glancing in, she saw patients dressed just like her, all female, grouped in clusters. Some were playing cards, some were watching a car chase on the large, flat screen, and a few were milling about on their own. Several turned and glanced her way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Other drawings, elsewhere on the wall, seemed to depict some kind of shootout or massacre. Bodies were littered around a collection of low buildings, a mountain range behind them. Some

of the faces were nondescript, but a few were detailed, one or two of them even decent artistic work as though their drawer had spent hours getting them just right. Written in brilliant scarlet across the mountains was a single phrase—in *English*, Jack noted with surprise—**WE NEVR SURENDURRED!**

Okay, not very good English...

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

“Wow,” she muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack turned around. Two girls, maybe two or three years older than her, were standing in the doorway, their arms linked around each other’s waists. One of them was a petite, delicate blonde... with the meanest, coldest eyes Jack had ever seen on a human being. The other was taller, slightly chubby, with short, dark hair.

“Sorry?”

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

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

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

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

“I’m Jack.”

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

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

Oh. Oh!

“No, I’m not—”

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

“No, but I’m not into that...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How she *wished* Colette was right.

7.

You Meet the Strangest People...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No appetite yet, huh?"

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

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

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

A look of hurt came over Celia's face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is that good?”

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

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

“Nice to meet you, Jack.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cross that off the options list...

“So, what happens now?”

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

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

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

“They?”

“The orderlies.”

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

Together they headed back toward the “dorms.”

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

Friendly.

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

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

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

That was right; she was.

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

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

Everybody leaves me...

Her pillow was wet when she finally woke.

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

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

Oh boy. This must be Kyra...

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

*I sure **hope** that's Kyra...*

“Um... hi. Kyra, right?”

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

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

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

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

“I'm Jack.”

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

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

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

So she’d already seen her friends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, we do,” Jack sighed.

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

8.

Queen of the Killer's Club

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Good point.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack shook her head. “It’s complicated.”

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

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

“By accident? Like... playing with guns?” Heather’s voice was softer, a little hesitant.

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

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

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

“You know... Kyra and Colette and Stacey and Doris. The Killer’s Club.”

Jack blinked. “They all killed people?”

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

Jack shuddered and nodded. There’d been a boy like that in her school. “Are they all like that?”

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

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

“You ever heard of the New Christy Enclave?”

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

Heather nodded. “She was one of the last ones they caught after the massacre. I think I heard one of the nurses saying that she’d been hiding in the woods for almost a year when they captured her. And she’s the one who murdered Roger Fiennes.”

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

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

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

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

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

Then the trouble had begun.

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

And Kyra, apparently, had been one of them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Three?*"

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

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

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

Jack nodded. That certainly made sense to her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I wanna be Audrey again...

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

9.

Never Been to Stockholm

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

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

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

"You know about New Christy?"

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

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

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

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

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

"What the fuck is so funny?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh. *Oh*.

"Nobody told me."

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

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

Kyra studied her for a moment, the look of slight puzzlement back, and then shrugged. “C’mon.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Who brought you into the ward?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m thirteen years old. I’m here because I tried to kill myself, and yes, I meant it.”

Expectant silence greeted her. Everybody was waiting for more.

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

Nice to know doctor-patient confidentiality is so highly honored here. Oh well, what the hell? Deep breath. Why not let it out?

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

Curious murmurs spread around the circle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh shit...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No! No, that’s not what happened...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Was he?

“The girl. She means nothing to me.”

Did she really remember things the way they happened?

“She’s just a cover story.”

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

“Now just ain’t the time.”

Maybe she’d never known him at all.

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

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

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

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

Jack nodded, spitting water into the sink.

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

gonna want to hear all kinds of details about him.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

10.

Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jack's eyes snapped open and she gasped.

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

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

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

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

She'd thought it had. Certainly all of the dreams she'd had in Imam's house had been about loss. They'd starred her father, her mother, Shazza, Fry, Riddick... even, sometimes, Imam. She'd lived for months in a desolate dreamscape until its darkness became so pervasive that it seemed to shadow her waking hours as well. But those dreams, which had followed her to the hospital, had receded in the last month and now she almost never had them.

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

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

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

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

Shit.

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

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

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

The voices were approaching the door.

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

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

"Hiding from Kyra's crew?"

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

Okay, not everything here is shit.

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

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

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

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

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

In her second Group session, Adams had tried to get her to open up again, and several girls who wanted juicy details had tried to help him back her into a corner. She'd ended up heaving in the bathroom *again*, and dreading Group so much that, a week ago, she'd hidden rather than go to it. The whole session had ended up being turned into a search for her. By the time she'd

crawled out of her hidey hole, the entire hospital was seeking her and she'd ended up in front of the administrators. She was *not* looking forward to being the pick-on girl again tonight.

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

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

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

"I'm not—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It puzzled Jack a little to realize that it was a pattern she'd witnessed her whole life. From the time Matty McDaniels had stood up to the playground bullies for her when she was five, to now, it seemed like there was a steady stream of protectors, and would-be protectors, in her life. Even Riddick had taken on that role for a while. Did something about her just bring that out in people?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Uhhhh...

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

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

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

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

What?

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

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

“O...okay...”

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

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

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

“Why is that—”

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

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

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

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

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

“I have not contacted him.”

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

That’s not why you did it, is it?

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

It hurt.

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

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

“Yeah, I understand,” she mumbled.

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

“But it’s not true—”

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

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

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

Oh god... oh god...

“I’m so sorr—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Probably something I ate...”

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

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

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

“She’s so pale!”

“Her lips are white...”

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

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

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

“So, Jack, do you think you—”

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

“Yes, Heather? What would that be?”

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

Thank you, Heather. Thank you...

Jack tuned everything out and just sat quietly, taking advantage of the lack of a spotlight on her. Celia was happy to play along with the diversion, gleefully launching into a list of nightmares and obsessions and palpitations that she was suffering from. Any time the

conversation started to wind down, Heather—or, Jack noticed, *Kyra*—would stoke Celia back up. Dr. Adams never got to finish his question.

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

He was waiting for her when she finally fell asleep.

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

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

“What is it?”

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

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

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

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

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

“No, Riddick! Please!”

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

Screaming. Clutching her throat and screaming.

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

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

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

“—going on?”

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

No...

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

No...

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

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

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

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

“No, not you... him! Riddick!”

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

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

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

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

But people believed those were real...

She knew what she needed to do.

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

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

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

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

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

"He will," she moaned. "He'll find me and he'll kill me. Because they made me talk..."

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

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

"That's right," Kyra agreed. "You don't."

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

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

They *were* lies... weren't they?

11.

No Escaping Life Alive

“I can’t sign this.”

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

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

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

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

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

Yes.

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

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

She could not sign these papers.

Stall. Stall.

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

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

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

Here. There was her handle.

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

“Surely Mr. Al-Walid’s home—”

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

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

The director blinked and sat back.

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

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

You said it. Not me.

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

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

That’s what I’m afraid of. And what’s this “us” all of a sudden?

“And what about when he escapes again? He’ll know who blabbed and he’ll come after me.”

“He won’t escape.”

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

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

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

“He won’t. Not from the *Kubla*—”

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

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

“I insist.”

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

“Toombs.”

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

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

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

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

Bastard. Bastard...

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

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

The very familiar sound...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Something’s wrong.

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

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

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

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

And he’d been epileptic.

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

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

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

Please let me be wrong.

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

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

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

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

than Kyra. "This is a good one."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah. Pretty good. Funny, you'd make a good Susan McConnell."

"Who?"

"The book's heroine," Heather explained, grinning. "She's a lot like you."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Stacey's voice came from behind them. "She's a weakling and a snitch."

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

"I'm not a snitch," Jack found herself protesting.

"That's why you were up in Flint's office, huh?" Stacey's hands balled into fists.

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

Stacey blinked in surprise. "You didn't sign it?"

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

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

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

What the...?

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

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

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

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

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

They were falling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heather went limp and still.

Too still.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heather vanished beneath a huddle of medical uniforms.

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

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

“She stopped breathing,” Jack answered, still stuck on that.

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

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

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

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

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

“Huh?”

“Heather must’ve clocked you a good one,” Kyra commented. “You didn’t even feel it, did you?”

“Wait right here, I’ll get you some meds and an ice pack.” The orderly—Jack finally noticed enough to realize it was the one who had been watching the library—smiled at her and walked off. Carmouche, that was his name. She hadn’t paid attention to the names of many of the orderlies, but he was always nice to her.

A second later, her knees gave out.

“Whoa, easy.” Kyra caught her and eased her to the floor. “You gonna pass out or anything?”

Jack shook her head a little and winced as the pain around her eye throbbed into virulent life. She let Kyra push her backwards until she was half sitting, half leaning against the wall. “I’ll be okay.”

Carmouche was heading back over to them, carrying a tray. He knelt down beside her and held out a paper cup with two pills in it. “This is for the pain.”

Jack took the cup and tossed the pills into her mouth, accepting a small cup of water to swallow them down. He handed her the ice pack next, which she gingerly applied to the side of her face.

Ow... okay, that’s starting to feel a little better...

“Station One, this is the infirmary, come back.” A voice crackled over Carmouche’s comm.

“This is Station One. Go ahead.”

“Stand by, you’re going to be admitting a van from the Medical Examiner’s office in a few minutes. We have a DOA here—”

The hard fist was back around Jack’s heart, squeezing it.

“Shit, Carmouche, turn that thing off!” Kyra shouted.

Gray swam over Jack’s vision as she watched, with her one good eye, Carmouche scrambling to shut off his comm. The last thing that she heard, as the gray turned to black, was Heather’s name being spoken over it.

12.

Darkness With a Heart

A bell rang. Jack ignored it.

“Jack.”

She ignored that, too.

“Hey, Jack.”

She curled inward and huddled against her pillow.

“Oh, fuck it.”

She heard Kyra leave the room, closing the door behind her. A long, gray time passed and the door opened again.

“Okay, Jackie.” That was Nurse Raymond’s voice. “If Mohammad won’t go to her lunch, her lunch will come to her.”

She heard Nurse Raymond come over to her and the sounds of a tray being set down and arranged.

“Not... hungry.”

“Oh, no you don’t. We let you get away with that yesterday. Today you eat.”

“Don’t wanna.”

“Tough, kid.” Dry humor entered Raymond’s voice. “You didn’t let me get in trouble for not giving you the tour. Are you gonna let me get in trouble for starving you?”

For a moment, Jack almost felt a smile creeping onto her face. Then the pain struck her again. Heather was dead. Heather was *dead*.

I lose everybody I care about...

She turned over, sighing. Fighting did no good around here. She had no appetite but apparently that didn’t count for shit—

“Soup?”

Raymond smiled kindly. “Broth. Easier on you right now, I figured.”

Well, what the hell, right? Maybe this woman actually had something akin to a clue.

Jack sat up and accepted the mug. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

It was a weirdly civilized interchange. Somehow it had seemed to Jack as if social niceties were some of the things that ought to have mysteriously vanished. Everything felt raw to her, like the world of “please” and “thank you” should be far, far away. Yet there it was.

She sipped the broth slowly, vaguely aware that it was warm but unable to taste it. Raymond didn’t try to force conversation on her while she drank, and just sat quietly beside her bed. Finally Jack was done and set the cup down on the tray.

“That’s very good,” Raymond told her. “Now, tonight I want you to get up and come to the dining room for dinner, alright? If you just want more broth again, that’s fine, but please come there on your own.”

Jack sighed and nodded. She was aware of the threat Raymond was trying very hard not to make, that if she didn't begin eating on her own power again they'd have to force-feed her.

"I'll be back in a while to check on you, okay? Is there anything you need?"

"No," Jack sighed. "I'm fine. Thank you."

Raymond gave her a dubious look, clearly not buying her reassurance at all, but didn't push it. Instead, she carried the tray to the door. "See you in a little while, Jackie."

Jack nodded and waved as the nurse left the room, and then lay back down on her bed. There were two books lying on the little table beside her, she suddenly noticed. Reaching out, she picked them up, and felt her throat tighten. *Killing Mr. Griffin* and *Hatter Fox*, the "classics" she and Heather had checked out of the library just moments before everything went to hell.

She began thumbing idly through the first book.

There was a slight pause. Then Mark said, "Nobody wanted to miss watching you die."

Jack shuddered and flipped forward, as fast as she could, away from that eerie, sickening passage.

It hardly mattered. The cold gripping her came from within and no layer of outer clothing would ever alleviate it.

Jack swallowed and looked harder at the page. "She" was Susan, the girl Heather had said was a lot like her. *God yeah, a lot like me. That's exactly how I feel...*

She flipped again.

Susan closed her eyes. When I open them, she told herself, this whole room will have vanished and this dreadful woman with it. Ten years will have gone by, and I will be grown and far away in my private cabin on the shore of a lake. I will look out through my fine window onto deep, calm green, with millions of tiny ripples shining and sparkling in the sunlight, and a breeze will come, clean and sweet across the water, smelling of pine trees. I will think back and ask myself, where was I ten years ago. What was I doing? What was I feeling? And I won't even remember.

Jack closed the book. Heather had been right. Susan *was* a lot like her. And that cabin, that lake... John MacNamera had taken his wife and daughter to one much like that, maybe a year before Audrey's parents had split up. Deckard's World was full of woodsy places like that, lakes and rivers and mountains and little cabins. Closing her eyes, Jack conjured back that memory, of being Audrey, happy and secure, all right in the world and with her family, offering a handful of her father's fishing bait to the large turtle she'd encountered by the shore.

Ten years from now, she promised herself, I'll be Audrey again and all of this won't even be a bad memory. All of this will be forgotten as if it never happened. As if Jack... and Riddick...

never existed.

Heather's face swam before her eyes for a moment and she wiped away tears. Part of her wanted to forget the yawning hole Heather's death had left within her, more than anything, but part of her felt like that would be the ultimate treachery.

She set down *Killing Mr. Griffin*—there was no way she could read it now—and picked up Heather's book. *Hatter Fox*, with the girl on the cover who looked even more primally dangerous than Kyra. Would this one be safe to read? She flipped to the last page.

I miss her... I miss her... I miss her...

Oh god...

The book practically leapt out of her hands, flying across the room, and Jack collapsed on her bed. Huge sobs wracked her body and she pressed her face hard into her pillow to muffle them.

The door to her room creaked. She could only just barely hear voices over the sound of her anguish, and couldn't make out who they belonged to.

"Jesus."

"Look, you guys just go on. I'll be there in a bit, okay?"

"But you'll miss the part where he sky-dives off the bridge—"

"I'll see it another time. You guys go on."

The door closed. Through her misery, Jack knew that she wasn't alone again; someone had stayed.

Her sobs were easing. She could hear someone moving around and then the sound of something being put on her bedside table. Whoever it was, she realized, had picked up the books for her. Her springs creaked and the mattress down by her feet sank as someone sat down on the foot of her bed.

Guess I'd better face the music.

She expected to turn over and see Nurse Raymond, or maybe one of the orderlies, watching her. Instead, she found herself pinned by Kyra's slate-blue gaze. There was no mockery or belligerence in the older girl's expression. If anything, there was something a bit sad in it.

"Here," Kyra said, and held out the last of a roll of toilet paper.

Jack sat up, sniffled, and accepted the offering, rolling some paper off to wipe her eyes and nose with. "Th...thanks."

"No problem." Kyra's voice was noncommittal, carefully so. "Nice to see you finally moving around."

That almost surprised a smile out of Jack. She'd lain like the dead for more than a day, she suddenly realized, while Kyra had come and gone and had periodically spoken to her. For the life of her, she couldn't remember any of the things the other girl had said.

"Yeah, um..." Jack drew in a shuddering breath. Her voice was completely unsteady. She wiped at her eyes again. "I think they'd start force-feeding me or something soon if I didn't get up."

"Probably." Kyra sounded amused, but not in a hostile or mocking way. "And you should probably take a shower soon, too."

Jack nodded, wiping her nose again. “Yeah... sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Heather was really cool... and I know you two were close.” Kyra’s tone sounded awkward, almost hesitant. “How’s your eye?”

Jack hadn’t even remembered, until that moment, that her left eye was bruised. She gingerly touched the tender flesh. The swelling had begun to go down, but it was still sensitive. “It’s okay, I guess.”

“Good.” Kyra still looked very uncomfortable. “You know... when I first got here, Heather was my roommate.”

Jack blinked, startled. Heather had never mentioned that, the few times they’d talked about the hospital or the other girls in it. “She was?”

“Yeah.” Kyra scooted back on the bed, leaning against the wall. Now she seemed more relaxed. “Down in D Ward. I’d just been transferred here, and she’d been checked in about a week before me. You’re not supposed to have roommates down there, but things were overcrowded, so they bunked us in with each other.”

“What was she like?” Jack was having a hard time picturing Heather needing to be in D Ward.

“She was pretty messed up back then.” A wry smile touched Kyra’s lips. “They were trying all kinds of meds with her to control her episodes, but nothing was working. One or two even made them worse. Between episodes, though, she was cool. Like she was up here.”

“Were you friends?” As far as she knew, Kyra and Heather hadn’t spent any time together up on C Ward; they’d moved in very different circles.

Kyra shrugged. “I guess. Yeah. We were. I don’t remember a lot about that time. There’s a lot missing.”

Jack watched, her own anguish forgotten, as Kyra frowned and then winced. She waited for Kyra to continue speaking.

“They tell me the doctors on New Chris—I mean, New Dartmouth—used electroshock on me. So for the first month or so after the transfer... I don’t remember much. Bits and pieces. Mostly thinking the orderlies were Red Roger’s guys and trying to take ’em out again.” Kyra tried to smile it off, but Jack could see some lingering pain there. “I was really messed up. In and out of isolation, and when I wasn’t in Iso, Heather was... so for a while we barely knew anyone was sharing a room with us. Until we started getting better.”

Jack realized she couldn’t really comprehend it. From the sound of it, even if Kyra had escaped the fate that Red Roger and his men had doled out to most of New Christy’s women, she’d been *psychologically* raped by the authorities once she’d been caught. The only time Jack had ever experienced hallucinations was once, when she was nine, and a new variant of ’Enza had come to Deckard’s World. It was an entirely inadequate comparison, and in spite of herself, she was fascinated, wondering what it would be like to have seen the things Kyra had seen, what it would be like to be ruled by those sorts of nightmares. Her sniffles had finally stopped, forgotten.

“So then you became friends?”

“I guess, yeah. Not much else to do but talk. *Everything* is restricted down there. If you behave you can leave your room and walk around a little, maybe watch some vids... but it’s a really dead place. So we talked a lot. The Killer’s Club was her idea.”

That almost knocked Jack over. She stared at Kyra in shock.

A slow, almost impish grin spread over Kyra's face. She nodded at Jack and then reached over and pushed her mouth closed.

"No way. You have *got* to be kidding me."

Kyra smirked. "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"Well, every time she talked about it, she made it pretty clear she didn't—" Crap. She couldn't say that.

"She didn't like the club. Yeah." Kyra leaned back against the wall and ran her fingers through her hair. Jack was suddenly reminded, powerfully, of Shazza's long tresses. For a moment, she could almost see the wild-haired New Australian woman sitting next to her in place of Kyra.

She blinked and shook her head, and the drift of illusion was gone.

Kyra was playing with a lock of her hair, twisting it slowly around her finger. "She first started it because she had this idea it'd help me, and maybe help her, too. We'd both killed people. I'd meant to do it. She'd done it by accident during one of her attacks. She thought it'd be nice for us to make some kind of support group, since almost nobody else understood what it was we'd done."

Jack watched as Kyra held out her hand in front of her, seemingly entranced by her own fingers. Slowly, she closed them into a fist. Jack could almost feel them closing around life itself, extinguishing it.

"What it was like to take a life," Kyra continued, staring at her fist.

Even Riddick, Jack suddenly thought, had never seemed quite so frightening as Kyra did in this moment. Maybe that was just because, at that time, she still hadn't understood the true brutality of that way of living.

Kyra glanced over at Jack. A corner of her mouth twitched up in what might have been a smirk, but whether she was mocking Jack or herself was unclear. "She figured we could get over it and move on and put it all behind us, and I guess maybe that worked for her okay, because she wasn't exactly *in* her right mind when she scragged those picnickers... but it wasn't the same for me. I knew what I was doing. I'd do it again. If possible, I'd do it even slower and more painful than I did it the first time."

Jack swallowed and tried to hide the shudder that was moving through her at those words. *Just remember*, she admonished herself, *Kyra lived through the New Christy Massacre. If you watched someone kill your whole family, you'd probably say the same things about them...*

Would she, though? Antonia Chillingsworth had hung her from a ceiling and loosed *Shrylls* on her. Within the twelve-hour period leading up to that woman's death, Jack had been kicked in the back, cut with a huge knife, had a gun put to her head, hung, almost fed to a Class 1 Hostile Xenos, chased down by *another* species of Class 1, shot at, and strangled. So how come she felt so *guilty* for killing her?

Because he left me. The thought was like a punch in the stomach. *I lose everybody I love...*

Riddick hadn't even said good-bye, making his abandonment even worse than her father's.

The day her father had told her he was leaving was still carved into her mind. She'd thought things were going so well, and that a reconciliation was just around the bend. Her mother seemed to *need* him again, and only the day before she'd come home from school to find them

talking companionably in the living room. But then it had all shattered, and she still didn't know why.

"Audrey," he'd told her, as they walked back from the town square, ice cream cones in their hands. "I've got something I need to tell you. I'm re-enlisting."

She'd looked up at her father in confusion, not understanding at first what he meant. He'd discharged from the Corps of Engineers a year before her birth. Finally it dawned on her.

"You're going back into the Service? Why?"

He'd started to say something and then had stopped himself. Anyone else might have been fooled and not realized he'd changed direction, but he couldn't fool his own daughter. "They need people with my training, and... I need to do something meaningful."

"Why, the security systems aren't?" She'd loved playing with her father's schematics and knew them by heart. Sometimes, in the last year or two, she'd even helped him with them; it was the only way he'd been able to squeeze in his visitation time.

"It's not that. It's just... things have changed a lot, Audrey. You'll understand, soon."

She always hated it when grown-ups said that to her. It always meant they had no intention of even **trying** to explain themselves. That was when it struck her what he was **really** saying.

"You're going off-planet, aren't you? You're **leaving!** You're leaving us!"

It was the first time she'd ever seen that look of anguish on her father's face, that look of vulnerability, and it almost shattered her. John MacNamera was supposed to be invincible.

"I'm sorry, Audrey."

It was tempting to fling her ice cream cone to the ground and run off, but she managed not to. She wasn't a little girl anymore; she couldn't just throw a tantrum, as much as she might want to, and she knew that one wouldn't do a bit of good. She swallowed, took a deep breath, and tried to make herself be an **adult** about it. "Where are you going?"

"I'm being posted to Caldera Base."

"The **Caldera?**" The urge to throw a tantrum was back, worse than ever. "That's on Furya! That's half a **year** away by Star Jump!"

He was leaving. He was leaving and she wouldn't get to see him anymore, and he wasn't even going to tell her **why**.

"They need engineers there, Audrey. Good ones. There's still a lot of rebuilding work to do. The population's starting to recover from the Diaspora, but they can't do it without help." He turned and locked gazes with her. "I can't turn away from people who need help."

He had her there. It was the same way **she** felt a lot of the time. Her mother had called the two of them her "matched set of activists," back when she'd still called John MacNamera **her** anything. He had to go where he was needed.

But what about **her**? She needed him more than anyone.

"It won't be forever, Audrey. You'll understand, soon, why it has to be this way."

And she had, sooner than she'd liked. It was only a few days after their tearful goodbyes at the spaceport when she came home to find Alvin in her living room, her mother's hand in his, and had known the **real** score, too late to demand to go with her father—

"Hey. Jack? You awake in there?"

Jack blinked and looked up. Kyra was leaning over her, almost in her face, looking a little annoyed. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I just... I started thinking about what it'd be like to have something

like that happen to my family.”

Kyra’s expression eased. She sat back, a wry grin playing over her face. “Oh, I’ve got a pretty good idea what you’d do.”

She probably thinks I’d run and hide under a bed and cry.

“Heather had a really good idea, though,” Kyra continued. “With the support group, I mean. It was pretty cool, for a while. There was this other girl, Doris, down in the D ward at the same time as us, and she’d killed her uncle... bet you can guess why.”

Jack swallowed and nodded.

“So we hung out, and we talked about how we had a shot at new lives when we got out of here, shit like that... and then Heather got sent up to C Ward... and I got transferred about a week later... and Doris came up a few weeks after that. And we kept going for a while.”

“What changed?” Jack found she was curious in spite of herself.

A funny look crossed Kyra’s face. “Stacey and Colette showed up. Hell, Heather was the one who invited them into the group. They’d killed, and all... I guess she figured they needed it too.”

Jack tried to contrast Heather—kind, commanding, caretaker Heather—with those two and their deliberate viciousness.

“They like it too much, don’t they? They’re not looking to ‘get better.’”

The gaze Kyra fixed on her was shrewd, almost approving. “Yeah. And they wanted to know all about me. I didn’t get why at first. I didn’t understand for a long time why Heather stopped coming to the little meeting things we did, why she didn’t talk to me anymore if they were around, any of it.”

“Why?”

Kyra leaned back against the wall again. “The club was supposed to be about getting over it. Not... comparing notes and discussing technique... and all that. I didn’t notice because Stacey and Colette were never anything but nice to *me*, but I get why she wasn’t comfortable around them. Well, now I do.”

“They idolize you, don’t they?”

Kyra looked almost sad for a moment. “Yeah. They do. They want to be just like me when they get out. Like what they think I am, anyway. No wonder Heather didn’t want to be around them.”

Jack nodded. She never felt comfortable around them either. “So when did you figure it out?”

“When you got here.”

Huh?

“Me?”

Kyra smirked a little. “You got here, and Heather just took you over. And I was jealous as hell... and then I realized why she was doing that with you when she stopped doing it with me. She was starting up her version of the Killer’s Club again, and this time, she was making sure the people in it were ones who didn’t *want* to kill again.”

Jack nodded. She hadn’t known much about the deaths on Heather’s conscience, but she’d known that they’d weighed on her, and—

Wait. Oh. Fuck!

Kyra knew. Kyra knew that her story—the story that *Riddick* really *had* been the one to kill Chillingsworth—was a lie. Kyra knew that *she'd* done it. The same as Heather apparently had.

Oh fuck!

Had she actually managed to fool *anyone*?

13.

A Lot Like Me, A Lot Like You

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jack made herself say. “I never killed anybody.” The look Kyra turned on her was entirely too knowing. “Yeah, Jack, of course you didn’t.”
Fuck.

Jack took a deep breath and glanced over at the door. It was closed; they were alone. “How long have you known?”

Kyra shrugged. “If you mean, when did I realize you were lying? The moment you told the lie. See, I saw you that day. That guy visited you and afterwards you looked like one of those zombie-freaks on Colette’s Tuesday night show. White as snow.” She smirked. “And I got to know snow really well in New Christie. Next thing we know, you’re changing your story. Contrary to public belief, I *can* put two and two together.”

“Who else knows?” She hoped *someone* believed her story.

“Far as I know, I’m the only one. I think Heather knew, too. But you seem to have the staff fooled, and that’s the important part, right?”

Jack swallowed, and leaned forward. “Kyra, listen to me. *Nobody* can know the truth. Not the staff, and not anybody else here, not your friends, nobody. If the secret gets out, sooner or later they’ll figure out that—”

“That your guardian knows where he is?” Kyra’s eyes were shrewd. “That’s what it was about, huh?”

God, I hope she knows all this stuff because she’s ridiculously smart.

“Yeah. Kyra, promise me that nobody’s going to find out from you.”

The older girl smirked at her. “Remember what Stacey said the other day? ‘Snitches get stitches.’ You don’t have to worry I’m gonna blab your secrets.”

“What about her? She’s got this whole *thing* for Riddick, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, she does. But she likes the idea that he threatened you even better.”

That made Jack blink. “She does?”

Kyra’s smirk became strangely scornful. “You’ve never seen the porn she hacks off the network. She knows where all of the ‘rape movie’ sites are. There’s nothing she loves more than watching vids of big men hurting little girls. So the idea that Riddick maybe raped you just has her *all* excited.”

Kyra looked away, but not before Jack saw her sneer of disgust.

“You don’t like that about her,” she hazarded.

“I *hate* that about her,” Kyra said after a moment. “You know, I saw a lot of what happened when Roger and his men stormed the enclave. They dragged this ten-year-old girl out into one of the courtyards and these five guys took turns with her. I took out three of them before they zeroed in on me and I had to move. She was crying the whole time...”

For a moment, the dark-haired girl’s customary look of savagery was gone. She looked haunted. Vulnerable. *Human.*

“What happened to her?” Jack wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

When Kyra spoke again, her voice was as close to tears as Jack had ever heard. “When I was escaping with the others, we had to go through the courtyard. She was still in the center of it. They’d killed her... and they’d... mutilated her body. I think they did it while she was still alive.”

“No wonder.”

Kyra’s eyes flashed up at her. “No wonder what?” The vulnerability was gone, replaced by suspicion.

“No wonder you spent a week paying Roger back.”

A shudder passed through Kyra’s frame, and their eyes remained locked for a long moment. Jack suddenly realized that she was probably the first person to hear about this since Heather. Colette and Stacey might worship Kyra, she thought, but only her strength and savagery. The fact that her killings had been motivated by pain, and by love, was something they wouldn’t be able to respect. They wanted her to be a sadist, because that was what *they* were.

Jack felt like she was inside Kyra’s head. She could see it all so clearly, as if it was happening to her. Home and sanctuary turned into a bloody, violated killing field. People she knew and loved screaming, fleeing, trying to fight, overwhelmed by monsters in human form. Trying to save them, feeling each death as if it were her own. Having no choice but to flee, hating herself for not being stronger, more powerful, not being able to single-handedly save the day.

Even holding a gun, even using it to cut down attackers, couldn’t have countered the soul-annihilating feelings of helplessness—

“Stop.”

Jack came back to herself. “What?”

“Stop it. Don’t do that.” Kyra’s expression was wary, defensive.

“Do what?”

“You know. Don’t do it.”

“I was just... thinking about what it must have been like. To be at the enclave when all of that was happening.”

“I *know* what you were thinking.”

“Kyra, I promise you, I don’t think you were wrong. What you did, fighting back when they stormed in there, it’s—”

“What you would have done, too. I know. But look, just... stop. Okay? I can’t think about that stuff for long or...” She looked down at her hands, clenched tightly into fists.

“Or you want to do it all again. I’m sorry. I’ll leave it alone.” Suddenly what Kyra had said hit her. “You think I’d have done it too? Not wimped out?”

That seemed to be what Kyra needed her to ask. She chuckled, her equilibrium visibly returning. “You didn’t wimp out when you were on the *Kubla Khan*. Did you?” She leaned back against the wall, watching Jack with speculative eyes. “You remind me of Kaylee.”

“Who?”

“One of the other girls who got away, with me. She’d kept her cool all during the firefight, took out almost as many invaders as I did. But you know, afterward, it all hit her really hard, the

way it hit you. She, uh... shot herself about a week after we went into hiding. Kind of a faster version of what you tried to do.”

“She killed herself?” Jack felt her heart twist, and wondered if that was why Kyra had looked at her with scorn when they’d first met.

“No.” Kyra sighed. “She did a number on herself, but it wasn’t fatal. I had to finish her off. Otherwise it was gonna take her hours to die.”

“God, I’m sorry, Kyra.”

Kyra’s smile was a bit forced in response. “How about we change the subject, okay?”

Jack nodded. “So, uh, how do we make sure that Stacey and the others don’t catch on about Riddick?”

Kyra’s smirk was back. “That’s easy. We make her believe what she *wants* to believe anyway.”

“How?”

“Well, you let her corner you, and you tell her all about how Riddick did all kinds of horrible, nasty things to you, and give her something to dream about for months. It’s what she wants to be true anyway. Tell it right and she won’t question it.”

“I can’t, Kyra. If that gets out, he could end up with a reputation as a pedophile and if he goes back to prison with that—”

“*Damn*, Jack. He must really be *something*, the way you keep trying to protect him.” Humor flashed in her eyes. “But don’t worry. Stacey just wants to believe that stuff. She doesn’t want to share it with the world. You know what she said about snitches. Telling anybody would be snitching to her. She just wants to imagine it while she gets off, if Colette isn’t around to get her off.”

Jack stared at Kyra in wonderment. “And here I thought the New Christies were supposed to be sexually repressed or something.”

Kyra shrugged again. “Maybe. I don’t rightly know. I was, what, twelve when it all went wrong. First time I got my period was in the psychiatric ward after they caught me, and I had no idea what the hell it was until they told me. At first I thought I’d just been used by one of the guards or something, like what I’d seen happen to friends of mine. I guess the Fathers thought if I didn’t know about that stuff, I’d stay innocent and pure or something.” She sneered. “I’ve seen what that gets you. And as for God, after what he let them do? I hate the son of a bitch.”

I absolutely believe in God... and I absolutely hate the fucker. Riddick had said that to Imam. It had been one of those times when Jack was deliberately lurking supposedly out of hearing range, listening. Nobody had ever seemed to notice how good her hearing really was, in spite of the fact that it had saved Carolyn Fry’s life... or at least postponed her death. Jack had made a point of being nearby, listening in, whenever important conversations were going on. She’d known by then that adults were going to hide things from her, supposedly for her own good, and that her survival and freedom depended upon knowing what they were up to. Any of them might have gotten it into their heads to abort her journey to Furya, unless she stayed a few steps ahead of them.

It was how she’d learned about the eclipse cycle, how she’d found out that Johns was planning on stifling Riddick once they left the planet, and how she’d discovered that Johns was

planning on offering her up as a Judas Goat to save his own skin. And it was how she'd learned that Riddick felt exactly the same way about God as Kyra.

"You know, you're a lot like him."

"What, I'm a lot like God?" Kyra gave her a joking sneer.

"No, sorry, you're a lot like Riddick. He's got a real hate on for God, too."

The older girl snickered. "Maybe he's my *soul* mate."

Jack found herself chuckling, too. "He's definitely not Stacey's, that's for sure. Seriously, I think he'd like you."

"That'd be pretty wild. Hey, out of curiosity, where'd you learn how to shoot?"

"Huh?"

"Well, you blasted off Shrivelsworth's—"

"Chillingsworth."

"Yeah, her. You blasted her head clean off. You can't tell me that was the first time you'd ever shot a gun."

Jack grinned and shook her head. "My dad taught me. I guess he always wanted a son to go hunting with, but all he got was a daughter who could shoot *clay* pigeons but had hysterics when she killed a *live* one."

"Hmm. Well, you know, I hunted a lot when I was in the mountains after the standoff ended... but that was for food. Survival. You probably could do it without crying if you were hungry enough."

"Maybe," Jack admitted after a moment. "But just running around out there killing for fun? Not my thing. So I stuck to the target range after that. It was one of the things my parents fought about anyway. My mom didn't even want me *handling* a gun."

"Came in handy, though, didn't it?" Kyra's smile was almost approving.

"Yeah. How'd you learn?"

"They started teaching all of us how to use the guns about... oh, a week into the standoff. I think they knew things were going to get bloody." Kyra gave Jack another wry grin, meant to conceal the twist of pain beneath. It almost did, but Jack still felt like she could see beneath the other girl's skin now. "So I went from bulls-eyeing target circles, to blowing off men's heads, to hunting deer and rabbit. One time I got a goose."

Kyra suddenly winced and put her hand over her mouth.

"What?"

"I just realized... I think that was one of the tame geese from the enclave. They'd follow you around if you gave them corn..." Kyra's voice drifted off for a long moment and then she cleared her throat. "Fuck. When I get out of here, somebody's paying for that. You know what I'm gonna do, Jack?"

"No, what?"

As she talked, the distress in her face gave way again to a calm, determined expression. "I'm gonna become a bounty hunter. Gonna go after the kinds of sick shits who do things like in Stacey's vids. If they're lucky, maybe they'll still have their balls when I turn them in for the bounty."

"Oh, Kyra, no."

"Why not?"

It took Jack a moment to compose her thoughts in answer to that. “Look, maybe a lot of bounty hunters *are* good people, I don’t know. But I’ve met a bunch now, and they’re just in it for the money. They’ll use you up for a percentage. Johns—that’s the guy who caught Riddick—he threatened a bunch of little kids to get Riddick to surrender. Killed some of them, too. You don’t want to be with people like that.”

“Well,” Kyra sighed, “it’s either people like them, or something worse, Jack. You may be the type to do the whole domestic life thing, I don’t know... but I already know I’m not. Red Roger took everything I ever knew from me. And he woke up something inside me that these docs can’t get out of me. When I leave here, I know where I’m going to end up, what I’m going to end up doing. I might as well do it in a way that the law won’t come down on me for, you know?”

“It’s just such a bad idea, Kyra. There are other things you could do. Military, or security, or something, but becoming a merc—”

“Military won’t take me, I already checked on that. Nobody wants the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain in their ranks *except* merc outfits. Don’t worry about it, though. I know the score. I’ll be careful.”

“Don’t trust any of them.”

Kyra gave her a mocking smile, but there was no hostility in it. “Jack, *I* don’t trust *anybody*.”

Someone knocked on the door at that moment. It opened, and Nurse Raymond stepped in. Her eyes and smile widened as she entered.

“Well, look who’s up! I guess that broth did the trick, didn’t it?”

Something sure had, Jack thought. She glanced over at her roommate and felt like a secret smile, visible only to the two of them, passed between them.

“Yeah, I’m feeling better, I guess.”

It still hurt. She dreaded going to the dining room and seeing Heather’s painfully empty seat. But she felt a lot stronger now, and she knew who to thank for it.

“Much better. Thank you.”

14.

The Dark Side of the Soul

Dinnertime, Jack knew, was not going to be easy.

She was dreading walking into the dining hall and seeing Heather's empty seat. She was dreading sitting close to it. Although her talk with Kyra had helped her feel a little bit better about what had happened, she knew that confronting this particular proof of Heather's absence from the world was going to hurt like hell.

Kyra must have known it, too. Jack could feel the older girl's eyes on her as she entered the dining room.

*Okay, deep breath. Let's— oh, you little **bitch**.*

Two seats were vacant at Jack's table: hers, and Celia's. Celia was sitting in the spot that had belonged to Heather.

The chatter in the room went completely silent as she approached the table, her eyes fixed on the little drama queen. She could see Celia getting paler as she approached, but not doing the smart thing of getting the hell out of that chair.

"Hey, Jack." The girl's voice cracked just to the scared side of perky.

Jack couldn't speak. Her hands were clenched tightly into fists, but the rage she felt was blocking all of the words she might say.

"So, you hungry? I know I always have trouble eating after something bad happens—"

I, me, me, me. Everything in Celia's world was always about *her*. Jack realized she was shaking. Not with fear. Not *hardly* with fear. With murderous rage. The last time fury so dark and intense had coursed through her, Antonia Chillingsworth had ended up headless.

"That's not your seat." She didn't even recognize her own voice when it grated out.

Celia blinked, and went a little paler. "C'mon, Jack, nobody's using it anymore, and anyway, it's right next to Maura, you know—"

"You have *no* business in that seat. That's Heather's seat." It sounded crazy, and yet it also sounded perfectly sensible. Heather had only been dead for two days, and already Little Miss Wants-the-Spotlight was stinking up her chair...

"Jack," Celia said, as if she was talking to a small child. "Heather's dead."

Around them, girls smarter than Celia were clearing away from the table.

"Get out of that chair." Jack's fury was so consuming now that her voice couldn't reach above a whisper.

Celia glanced around, perhaps finally realizing that she might be in trouble. Or perhaps not.

"No."

"Get... the *fuck*... out of that chair!"

"It's *mine* now. I have seniority at the table and I'll sit in it if I want. You're hardly one to complain, since you're the one who killed her."

Murmurs had been going back and forth in the background; the silence that fell after Celia's words was deathly.

“What did you just say?” In her own ears, her voice was strangely breathless. Time seemed to be moving in slow jerks, the way it had when she’d wrenched herself out of Imam’s grasp and begun scrambling for Junner’s discarded gun. Cold was cascading through her limbs, tightening her belly, and there was a strange, almost weightless sensation in her chest.

Her foot barely felt the ground as she took another step forward.

“Everybody saw what you did. Heather would still be alive if you hadn’t—”

The enraged scream inside of Jack’s skull was so loud that she never knew whether she’d made noise aloud, too, although later her throat *did* hurt. She didn’t hear the chair slam into the ground, either. Her hands were around Celia’s throat, shutting out the vile words. Celia was clawing at her arms.

*You fucking, lying little bitch! She was my **friend!** You wouldn’t know what a friend was if you even **had** one, you worthless piece of shit! All you’re any good for is wasting people’s time with your bullshit dramas! You want the spotlight? It’s all yours, you bitch, you can **have** it!*

As she struck Celia’s head against the floor for the third time, she realized that everything she was screaming in her mind *was* pouring out of her mouth. Letting go of Celia’s throat, she slapped the girl hard, once, twice—

A vise-like grip came around her wrist as she brought her hand back for the third slap, and then she was being pulled back away from Celia. More hands came around her and her last glimpse of the of the other girl, before moving bodies obscured her, was of a sodden, sobbing mess curled in a fetal position on the back of Heather’s chair.

The wall slammed into Jack’s back, knocking the wind out of her. The howling tempest of her rage still roared in her ears, blocking out all sound, but Kyra’s face was before her, tense, mouthing the word “Enough!”

Two orderlies, the largest on the floor, appeared, one of them pushing Kyra out of the way and forcing her to release Jack’s wrist. Jack saw the syringe too late to try to dodge it and felt its sharp sting in her throat.

The world dissolved into darkness.

Sterile white greeted her when she woke, but her mind remained muzzy, not clearing for a long time. Whatever had been in that syringe was strong. She couldn’t think. Bits and pieces of thoughts and feelings, and memories, would come to her, but flit off before they could assemble into any kind of coherent order.

Audrey lay still, waiting and, when bits of thoughts came to her, wondering why she felt such powerful sadness and loss... and even more powerful guilt and shame. Something dark and horrible was inside her, gnawing at her, and she couldn’t fathom what it was.

What happened? Why do I feel like this?

Slowly, so slowly, small chains of coherent thought began to assemble. There was a girl. A girl named Jack. And Jack had done horrible things, things so terrible that she shied away from contemplating them.

But she knew she needed to look.

Murder. Jack was a murderer. And a liar who had betrayed two dear friends.

Who was this girl? How did she know her?

Memory tugged at her. A woman in a beautiful dress was lying, sprawled, on a floor, a handgun discarded beside her. The coppery stink of blood filled the air. Bits of blood, gore, and hair were everywhere. Audrey forced herself to look harder at the dead woman.

Oh god, she doesn't have a head...

A man was slowly rising to his feet, his movements faltering as if with pain. He had his hand on his upper arm, blood seeping between his fingers. He was huge, darkly handsome, his lips pressed together in a grim, pained line. Dark welding goggles covered his eyes as he looked directly at Audrey.

"Awfully uncivilized thing you just did, Jack."

Oh god, no...

Audrey looked down and saw the shotgun in her hands, her finger still loosely on the trigger, smoke wafting from the end of the barrel.

No...

She knew who Jack was.

No...

She was Jack.

"Nooooooooo!" The scream ripped its way out of her already-raw throat as she fought against the restraints holding her down. She sobbed, panting, as the rest of her memories began to flood back. The planet. The eclipse. Death upon death upon death. Riddick. A strange memory of him gently taking the gun from her hands and holding her—when had that happened?—before vanishing from her life forever. The tub, and her blood curling through the water. C Ward. Kyra. Heather.

Heather.

Oh, god... did I kill her, too?

Heather bucking and writhing in her grasp, the way Balto had... no, she'd been scared, but it had been familiar to her, until the moment when Heather had stopped breathing. But...

*She'd pushed down on Heather's chest, frantic, and had felt something **crunch** beneath the heel of her hand.*

Was that when she'd killed Heather? Was Celia right? Was it her fault?

It took a long time for the tears to ease. The calm of pure despair finally came to her as she realized that, if she *had* killed Heather, she could never be Audrey MacNamera again. If she'd killed Heather, she'd murdered Audrey, too.

Many more long hours passed before Nurse Raymond came to take her back to C Ward.

Silence fell when people saw her. Silence and stares. She headed awkwardly down the hall, for her room, and slipped inside it. She wasn't even sure what time it was, whether it was day or night. She'd figure that out when the bell rang for the next meal.

Kyra entered the room moments later, sitting down on her bunk and watching her from across the room.

"You're back." A hint of a smile quirked across Kyra's lips.

"Yeah."

“Wasn’t sure if you would be or not. I got a little worried they were going to decide to put you in D Ward or something.”

Jack shuddered a little. Maybe D Ward was exactly where she really belonged.

“How...” She swallowed. “How’s Celia?”

Kyra shrugged. “She’ll be fine. She’s got some impressive bruises, and she was carrying on something fierce until they took her to the infirmary, but she’s not nearly as bad off as she’s pretending to be.”

Relief, and a little annoyance, washed over Jack. “Oh. Good.”

“You’ve got the whole guilt thing going again, don’t you?” Kyra’s eyes on her were shrewd. Guilt. There it was. Guilt was what separated Jack from Audrey. Maybe as long as she still cared about things, as long as she still wanted to make things right, Audrey was still in her.

But oh God, caring *hurt so much*.

“Kyra, uh... I have a question.”

“Sure.”

“Did I kill Heather?”

“What? No way. Look, just because Celia said that, and the administration is trying to hang that shit on you, doesn’t mean it’s true. You didn’t. They just don’t want to admit the meds she was on might have done it.”

“The *administration*? They’re saying I—?”

“The administration is full of shit. I overheard some of the orderlies bitching about it. *They* all know it’s a lie and they’re pissed because most of them like you and know how hard you took her death.”

“But Kyra, are you sure that I didn’t do it? She stopped breathing and I couldn’t hear a heartbeat, but when I tried to do CPR I felt something crack—”

Kyra held up her hand. “I figured you were gonna ask that, so I did a little research about CPR on the terminal. Most of the guidelines I found said that, when you’re doing it right, you’re pressing so hard on the breast bone that you might break some of the person’s ribs.”

Broken ribs? Was that what the crunch had been?

“Those guidelines also said that if that happened, you shouldn’t let it stop you,” Kyra continued. “It’s normal, and it happens a lot. So no, you didn’t kill Heather by trying to do CPR on her, even if you did feel something break. Sounds like you were doing exactly what you were supposed to.”

Jack sagged down onto her cot, suddenly feeling boneless. *I didn’t do it. It wasn’t my fault. It wasn’t my fault...*

“Why are they trying to pin it on me?”

“Are you kidding? She was on an experimental drug that’s trying to get through clinical trials. She said something about a week before you got here about how the drug should be on the market in a few more months if everything goes well. Having it turn out to kill patients?” Kyra put her arms behind her head as she leaned back against her garish wall. “That’s pretty much the definition of everything *not* going well, wouldn’t you say? It’s a cover-up.”

A cover-up. They’d pin the death on some thirteen-year-old girl who was already certified as mentally unstable, and nobody’d have to take the consequences of a beautiful, wonderful person

dying horribly. And in a few more months, even more people could start dying from the drug as it hit the open market—

Fuck that! Audrey shouted from within her, in pure Jack dialect.

She shoved herself to her feet.

“We’ll see just what kind of price tag *Mister Flint* has,” she snarled, flinging open the door and stomping out of the room. She ignored the resumption of the stares and whispers as she stalked over to Carmouche, at the desk by the C Ward main doors.

“I want to see Flint.” She tried to keep the rage out of her voice, but his eyes widened a little.

“Jack, what is it?”

“I want to talk to him. About Heather. Now.”

She waited while he made the call, leaning against the wall and glowering at anyone who looked at her, until Nurse Raymond returned to escort her upstairs.

As they passed through the A Ward locking system, her heart began to race again. She hadn’t imagined it. They were using her father’s system, the X31-B. She knew everything about its specs—she’d even helped her father do the final drafts during one of his visitations—and it’d be easy to get around. She began paying attention to where the cameras were located.

They were using the standard camera models that came with the package, but they’d opted for the “economy mode,” with fewer cameras than were really recommended. Jack began mapping out the cameras’ “blind spots” in her mind.

Remember this. Remember all of this. It’s making a forty-second sweep. Walk across the hallway just right and you’ll never appear on the screens—

“Are you okay, Jack?” Raymond asked her.

Jack forced herself to focus. “Not really.”

Her memories and thoughts of her escape plans, she knew, would forever be tainted by the anguish and rage of Heather’s death. The two would be inextricably linked. Thinking about this moment would evoke the details of the security system, and also the pain. The way any time she thought about her report on the missing Star Jump ship called *Tenth Crusade*, it evoked the smell of her father’s broken air conditioner.

Okay, put it aside for now. Pay attention again after you’ve dealt with Flint. She let Raymond lead her to Flint’s office.

The hospital administrator looked up at her, giving her a perfunctory smile that never reached his eyes. “Yes, Jack, what can I do for you?”

Jack sat down in one of the empty chairs. “You can stop lying about me to the people investigating Heather’s death.”

As the door closed behind her, she thought she heard an approving snort from Raymond.

Flint’s brows went up. He clasped his hands on his desk and leaned forward a little. “I’m not sure I like your attit—”

“I really don’t care what you like. You’re telling people that my actions during Heather’s seizure were what killed her, and we both know it’s a lie. Her heart stopped. I tried to give her CPR.” Grief tried to overwhelm her and she ruthlessly shoved it back. *Later. After.*

“Jack, you have no idea how delicate this situation can be—”

“Sure I do. And nowhere near as delicate as, say, three years from now, when the drug gets pulled *back* off of the shelves for its high fatality rate, it coming to light that you allowed

patients in this hospital to be experimented on, and tried to cover up their deaths.”

This was the most dangerous card in her hand, and she knew it. What happened next depended on exactly how dirty Flint really was... and how greedy he was. The spark of fear that appeared in his eyes told her what she'd hoped. He was in it for the money, not to get caught up in deep corporate dirt. She knew it the way she'd known that Johns would offer her up as a sacrifice even *before* he'd made his proposal to Riddick.

“Jack, think about what you're—”

“I know what I'm saying. And I'm going to offer you a choice. An easy one. You can keep telling the investigators that I'm responsible for Heather's death if you want, and run the risk that, when the truth eventually comes out, your career gets ruined. Or you can get your share of the bounty on Riddick from Toombs.”

Score. Flint stared at her in speechless awe. Finally his lips moved. “How...?”

Jack leaned forward, locking her eyes with his, remembering everything her father had told her about how to negotiate to win. “It's not important. I'm not wrong, am I?”

He just stared at her.

“Here's the deal. You tell the investigators you were wrong. Heather's death was caused by the seizure, so whatever caused the seizure was responsible. I was just trying to help. It's the truth, anyway. And in return, I'll sign those papers when I check out of the hospital. If my name is any way connected to Heather's death, though, I'll never, *ever* sign *anything*. Which means Riddick's bounty doesn't go up, and our friend Toombs won't have any reason to give you a share of it.”

She gave him a while to think about it. He pulled out some files, leafing through them for a long moment. Anguish crossed his face.

Is that Heather's file there? Maybe there's hope for you yet, Mr. Flint.

“She was doing so well on it...”

Yes, that was Heather's file.

Flint looked up at her again. “Do you promise, Jack, that you'll sign the statement?”

“Mr. Flint, I promise. The day I leave here, you'll have a paper with the truth about Riddick, and my signature on it, right there on your desk. You have my word.”

Flint sighed and seemed to deflate. “Very well. I'll... set the record straight. It's probably for the best, anyway. There are two other patients who were about to start on the trials, and...” He gave himself a little shake. “Just remember, I'm going to hold you to this.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Flint.” Jack suddenly wondered if this might result in her release being accelerated. How long would Flint be willing to wait to have those papers in his hand? Well, the sooner she got into A Ward, the better. Then she could walk out of this place and vanish.

She paid close attention to the cameras and the hallways as Raymond walked her back, beginning to map out her route in her head. Soon she'd be free of this place. And then, hopefully, she'd be free of *Jack*. She didn't know who this hard-boiled, relentless bitch was, but the sooner she could go back to being Audrey, the better. She didn't like Jack. Jack killed people. Jack beat people up for being idiots. Jack blackmailed people. Jack was like Riddick, and like Kyra. Jack needed to be ended.

Just as soon as I'm free of this place, she thought, as she re-entered C Ward. Until then, Jack had her uses. But it would be Audrey, not Jack, who reached Furya and her father.

“So, what have you been up to?” Stacey appeared at her side.

She pasted on a smug grin. “Threatening Mr. Flint.”

“You’re kidding.”

Jack just shook her head and grinned, moving on. She remembered what Kyra had told her. Soon she needed to let Stacey corner her and tell the lie about how horribly Riddick had treated her. But now was *not* the time. She’d blubber later.

Kyra was still in their room. “So?”

Jack flopped down. “I’m off the hook. Hey, Stacey was almost *friendly* with me just now. What happened?”

“Are you kidding? You beat the crap out of Celia. That gave you some genuine *cred* with her.” Kyra chuckled. “In fact—”

The bell rang.

“Perfect timing,” Kyra said with a grin. “I’ll just show you. C’mon, it’s dinnertime.”

Jack let Kyra lead her to the dining hall again, once more dreading the horribly empty seat she’d see there. She stopped, shocked, in the doorway.

“Impressive, huh?” Kyra said, leaning against the wall. “It was my idea.”

The room had been rearranged. Completely rearranged. All of the tables had been moved to different locations, and all of the seats had been swapped around, too. Some of the girls were moving into similar groupings as before, but a lot of them had changed tables as well.

There was no sign of which spot had once been Heather’s. No sign whatsoever.

“I heard Carmouche saying they’re going to do this from now on if there’s a death on the floor. He really liked the idea.”

Jack looked over at Kyra, the absurd, Audrey-like urge to cry filling her. There had to be some way other than tears to express her gratitude, surely. “You did this?”

Kyra nodded, looking smug.

“Thank you.”

Kyra grinned and took her elbow again. “C’mon.”

Jack followed her, realizing that most of the other Killer’s Club girls seemed to have grouped at a table that had two empty chairs, side by side. One for Kyra, she realized... and one for *her*.

She sat down at the table, expecting at least one of its resident badasses to object to her presence, but received only friendly smiles. Welcoming smiles. “You’re one of us, now” smiles.

Yes, Audrey thought, the moment she got out of this place, Jack had to die.

15.

What Hides Beneath the Skin

“Do we have to?”

Kyra glanced over at Jack and raised an eyebrow. “Not if you want to tell her no.”

Jack shuddered at that. The idea of telling Stacey that no, she *didn't* want to spend the afternoon hanging out in the room of a violent psychotic who took offense easily, somehow just wasn't appealing. “Okay, fine...”

“Relax. She's just glad to be back out of isolation and needs human contact. She's not going to go after *the real story* in front of everybody.” Kyra smirked a little; there was condescension in the smirk but Jack sensed it wasn't aimed at *her*. “She wants to hear that privately.”

Only two days earlier—and Jack was still puzzling out what had happened, because it made no sense to her—there had been a sudden, violent altercation between Stacey and Celia. Celia had ended up with a bloody nose and a split lip; Stacey had been dragged off the floor screaming enraged obscenities at the girl. Nobody Jack talked to, though, knew what—or who—had started the fight; both girls were apparently claiming that the other had.

Now Stacey was back, craving a little Killer's Club company... something that apparently now included Jack. Reluctantly, she climbed off of her bed, shooting her nonchalant roommate a dubious look. After all of her efforts to avoid being alone with Stacey lately, she was now going to be visiting the girl's room.

“Fine, just don't leave me alone with her, okay?”

Kyra shrugged. “I won't, but you know, sooner or later you're going to have to tell her the story. You can't avoid it forever.”

“I just...” Jack had found, in the last week, that being honest with Kyra was remarkably easy. “I don't know *what* to tell her. I mean, I'm a *virgin*. I've never *been* with a guy, much less been raped by one. I don't know what to say that's not... really obviously fake. She's gonna *know* I'm lying.”

Kyra nodded, her expression becoming serious. “We'll work on your story later, okay? But right now we'd better get over there.”

Suppressing a shudder, Jack followed Kyra out of their room and down the hall. Stacey, she recalled, roomed not with Colette but with a smoldering, taciturn girl named Omphalé, whose crime had qualified her for Killer's Club status but which had never been explained. Ahead of them in the hall, Jack could see Colette heading into a room, followed by *her* roommate, Xi Hin. Kyra headed for them.

Jack had grown used to the sight of Kyra's “artwork” on their walls; the plain light blue expanse that greeted her took her by surprise. Then she turned.

Oh. That must have been Omphalé's wall.

It was rather like another version between the dichotomy of her side of the room and Kyra's. Where Omphalé's side of the room was plain and pristine to the point of sterile, Stacey's side was jumbled and garish. The wall over her bed was covered by an enormous collage of pictures.

Moving closer, awed, Jack realized that most of them were pictures of very savage-looking men. The killers Stacey admired and hoped to emulate, she realized... including Riddick.

Riddick.

Jack had only seen his face in her dreams and imaginings, in the course of the almost-half-year since he'd vanished. Now it glared down at her off of Stacey's walls. In virtually every shot, he looked enraged with her, staring at her with mute accusation.

Not me. He's not mad at me. It's just the way he looked when they took his picture... he was mad at them.

There was no reason to think Riddick knew or cared where she was or what she was doing, or what she was claiming in her attempt to throw people off of his scent. Just because *she* felt guilty about it didn't mean *he'd* blame her.

Still, looking at him on the wall above her, she felt like a traitor.

Why? He never cared about you. If he had, he'd have stayed to say goodbye.

"Check out who's in love with your wall, Stace," she heard Colette saying.

Stacey's snicker, behind her, wasn't entirely unfriendly. "Or one person on it, anyway. Hey Jack, wanna start your own collection?"

"Huh?" She looked back at the blonde girl, confused.

Stacey's eyes were glittering with a sort of malicious amusement. This, Jack realized, was her *friendly* mode. "I've got some extra pictures of Riddick I didn't put up, if you want them for *your* wall."

"No, that's okay," Jack replied automatically, even as a pang of longing moved through her.

Damn it, I need to get him, and that whole time, out of my system.

"You sure? I've even got a picture of him from back when he was busted his first time."

That made Jack blink. "Really?"

"Heh. *Thought* you'd be interested..." Stacey pulled a thick folder out from under her mattress and opened it up, leafing through it. Watching with the other girls, Jack felt a wave of nausea move through her as she saw what most of the pictures in there were.

Kyra had been right. Stacey had a *thing* for depictions of rape. How the hell had she managed to assemble a collection like that—images of large men sexually assaulting small, childlike women—in C Ward?

Kyra's breath against her ear sent a chill through her; or perhaps that came from what she was seeing. "They don't take them from her," the older girl murmured too low for the others to hear, as if reading Jack's mind. "She'd just get more and they say as long as she still has them and wants them, they know she's not well yet. I heard one of the nurses saying that when she's ready to voluntarily give them up, they'll know she's responding to treatment."

Jack nodded, a little shakily. The images were revolting in the extreme, and surely Stacey's possession of them was illegal. Back on Deckard's World, Audrey's cousin Rob had had his own collection of pornos—which had offended her at the time but now seemed almost *wholesome*—and he'd told her that he had to buy them secondhand or steal them from his father because he couldn't legally buy them from a store until he was eighteen. Stacey was sixteen at the most; how was she even *getting* this stuff?

"Here it is!" Stacey crowed triumphantly as she pulled a page out of the pile. "Check out your *boyfriend*."

A few of the girls giggled. Jack reached out, unable to resist her curiosity, and took the page. It was a mug shot; Stacey had printed it out in color. Riddick—very young, maybe only four years older than *her* in the picture—was staring at the camera with an inhuman sort of rage on his face, holding up a numbered placard with his shackled hands.

He has hair.

Jack had always wondered what Riddick would look like with hair, and now she knew. Close-cropped and tightly curled, the hair hugged the crown of his head. She found herself wishing she could touch it, feel its texture under her fingers instead of just paper—

“Yeah, it’s *definitely* love,” Stacey snickered, making the other girls laugh, and Jack realized with a flush of embarrassment that she’d been touching the picture.

Shit, just like that fangirl dweeb Joslin back home, with her actor pictures... I’m pathetic.

“So c’mon, Stace, spill,” Colette was saying. “What happened? What’d that bitch Celia do?”

“Nothing.” There was laughter in Stacey’s voice.

Jack looked up from Riddick’s picture, confused. Celia hadn’t done anything? Then why...?

Stacey was looking archly around at the other girls. “There’s this game me and my friends used to play in my old school, when somebody pissed us off. Any of you ever played it? How you destroy someone’s reputation without getting in much trouble yourself?”

Several of the other girls in the room looked confused but were nodding.

“Can’t say I ever got to play those games,” Kyra said. She had her game face on, her *I’m tougher than all of you combined* face that Jack had begun to understand was a false front. But she alone, of everyone in the room, had a history of enough social isolation to get away with admitting ignorance of such things. She could ask what the others couldn’t without losing face.

Jack, however, already had a sick feeling about what Stacey was going to say. If she wasn’t mistaken, she’d seen it done to some kids back home.

“Okay, it’s like this,” Stacey began. “If you don’t like some bitch, and you get into fights with her all the time, sooner or later the teachers decide it’s your fault. If you get all your friends and go teach her a lesson, same thing; *you’re* the ones who are ‘ganging up’ on the little cow and she’s all *innocent*.”

“Right, that makes sense,” Kyra said.

Because that’s exactly what you’re doing, Jack added silently.

“But if you and your friends take turns—one of you gets into a fight with her one day, another one of you gets into it with her a few days later—yeah, you each get sent to a detention once, but *she* gets sent every time, and it’s not long before they decide that she’s fighting with so many different people, she must be the one starting it. Now *she’s* the troublemaker, not you. And nobody will believe a word she says anymore.”

Yeah, it was what Jack had seen done in her school; Ahmed, a perfectly nice boy who had gone from being bully-fodder to being a fall guy and scapegoat. Someone had even hidden their cigarettes in his locker one time when word got out that a random locker search was imminent; he’d constantly been in trouble, and Audrey had earned an asskicking of her own when she’d gone to the teachers and told them that she’d seen those cigarettes being stashed by Missy Barnstable before the search, proving it by opening the locker herself. Deckard’s World was more than a little Muslim-hostile, thanks to too many encounters with fanatical members of the New Taliban during its early colonial days. Ahmed and his family had ended up moving away a

few months later, something that had made her parents argue about whether they were raising their daughter on “a racist planet.” It had been one of the nails in their marital coffin.

“...all going to take turns with her, huh?” Colette was saying.

“That’s the idea,” Stacey replied, her voice smug. “Jack and I have already gone, so one of you needs to be next. Wait a day or two, and start it when there’s nobody around to say *she* didn’t start it. Who’s up?”

“I am,” Xi Hin said. “Always wanted to kick that little bitch’s ass.”

Jack felt sick to her stomach. Celia was a pain and a drama queen, but there was no way she deserved *this*. She looked back down at the picture of Riddick in her hands, trying to focus on it instead.

His eyes are brown, she thought with wonder. They seemed to smolder with rage in the picture. Obviously this was long before his shine job, long before he evolved from the furious man in the picture to the ominously contained predator she’d met in the wreckage of the *Hunter-Gratzner*. She could see hints of what he’d become, but it was almost like looking at a completely different man.

“Damn, girl,” Colette said, nudging her shoulder. “You’re like, totally in love with Riddick. You’re even worse than Stacey.”

“I’m not.” Jack could see that none of them believed her. “Where’d you find this picture?”

Stacey smirked and Jack realized that now all of them believed, more than ever, that she was completely gone on the guy. “Pulled it out of his file on the Universal Merc Registry.”

I need to check that. I need to see what they know, and what they’re saying about him.

“I didn’t realize we could access that.”

“You can’t.” Stacey looked extraordinarily smug now. “I can, though.”

“How?”

Omphalé chuckled and spoke for the first time since Jack had come in. “We have staff accounts.”

“You have *what*?” How the hell had they managed to hack into the staff computers?

“Remember Dan Tavey, the orderly who was sacked a few months ago for being too friendly with patients?”

Jack shook her head. “Guess he was before my time.”

Omphalé snickered. “Well, he was a pretty good fuck, and one time, I got him to trade me some access so I could check in with my boys back home. And while I was in there, since he was pretty high up in rank, I created a few new accounts and hid them from the general roster. When he got sacked, I couldn’t use *his* account anymore, but they didn’t find the other ones. We can go anywhere we want.”

That, she realized, explained how Stacey was getting her hands on porn, too.

Jack felt a strange hunger begin burning inside of her. Access to the Merc network, to flight schedules, to all the things she couldn’t look at now without possibly giving the hospital too many clues about her identity... nothing had ever seemed so important to her. With that access, she could plan out her escape even better, timing it for just the right moment so she could catch a flight offworld. She could ensure that her escape was successful, that she had a route to Furya and her father.

I need that.

But how could she get one of the girls to—

Oh. Oh!

She already had a bargaining chip. Stacey wanted to hear stories about how Riddick had sexually abused her during her supposed captivity; now she could set a price for the tale. Staff account access in return for her tale of woe; Stacey would help facilitate her escape.

Then I can go back to being Audrey and forget I even met a sick creep like her...

“Jeez, talk about a love-hate relationship. Stare any harder at Riddick and you’ll burn a hole through that paper, Jack.”

Fuck. She’d been letting her feelings show. Her feelings about *Stacey*, though, not *Riddick*. Still, she could use it; it fit with what she wanted Stacey to believe.

“I uh...” *I need out of this room. I don’t know how Kyra stands it.* “I need to be alone for a while... you guys mind if I bail?”

“No problem.” Stacey was smirking again. “Take the picture with you. It’ll help.”

Rob, she recalled, had used exactly that tone when talking about taking his dirty magazines into the bathroom.

“Thanks.” Jack headed for the door quickly, afraid to meet Kyra’s gaze. She hoped that she’d stayed long enough to be friendly, to not mess things up, but she needed time away from the sick hypocrisy of it all. It was too big to swallow; she was choking on even a tiny sip of it.

Back in her room she waited and thought, spiraling her plans around each other.

She needed to lie about Riddick to escape. She needed to get in Stacey’s good graces enough to get access to the false staff accounts, in spite of how much Stacey frightened and disgusted her. Once she had access she could plan. She could figure out escape windows, work out the route from the hospital to the spaceport, make sure that nobody was anywhere near finding Riddick based upon anything she or Imam had said, make sure her father would still be on Furya when she got there, everything.

All of this had taken so long, she thought. *Was* taking so long. She’d been twelve, going on thirteen, when she ran away. It had taken her a month in cryo to reach Vasenji Station, a week before she’d boarded the *Hunter-Gratzner*, another twenty-two weeks in cryo before the crash; about a week on the planet and on the *Kubla-Khan*, and then a month in cryo before Riddick had dropped her off with Imam on Helion Prime and vanished without a trace. Three months of darkness before her attempt, and almost two months trapped in this place.

More than a *year* had passed since she’d run out on her mother and Alvin. It had only been about six months for her, but she was biologically thirteen, and back on Deckard’s World her fourteenth birthday was coming up. Her mother probably believed she was dead by now.

The thought made her feel nauseated again.

It was supposed to be so simple. From Tangiers Prime she would have had a two-month hop to Furya; she would have been there right now. Instead she was trapped in this place, conniving as Jack to manipulate people who disgusted her into helping her escape. This was what *his* influence had done to her.

I have to get out. I have to get out.

She looked up as Kyra came into the room and shut the door. The older girl sat down on her bed and regarded Jack with a steady gaze.

“I’d give you shit for leaving early, but actually that kinda worked out.”

Jack felt relief move through her; Kyra wasn't angry. "How?"

"Well, Stacey's now convinced that Riddick mindfucked you good. You're all set up there. You won't even have to go into much detail and she'll buy it."

"But that's the thing, Kyra... I don't know *any* detail. And those pictures she has are—"

"Really disgusting. I know. I hate it when she brings them out, too." Kyra grimaced.

"Why do you hang out with her?"

Kyra rose and went over to the door. Opening it, she leaned out into the hallway and looked around for a moment. Then she closed it again and turned back to Jack. "Two reasons. The first is... you don't get to pick your friends in a place like this. You want to survive, you run with the biggest and the strongest. Most of the girls in the Killer's Club think that's me, but it's not. It's her, because she's the one who has no conscience. As long as she likes you, thinks she understands you, hell, even *looks down* on you... you're good. If she gets it into her head that you might be looking down on her... you're fucked. If I let her know what I really thought of her and her kind, they'd see to it I never left D Ward again."

Jack blinked, trying to comprehend it. Stacey was tiny; how could Kyra fear someone as tiny as her?

It's not her size. It's her influence. She's an instigator. She owns Colette and Omphalé, and she wants to own Kyra and me, too. As long as she thinks she can, we don't have to deal with her enmity. If she realizes she can't, though, we're dead meat.

"I see." She flashed Kyra a sympathetic look. "And the other reason?"

"You may not have noticed, but... these are the kind of people I'm going to be hunting once I leave here and sign up. People just like them are going to be my bounties. I figure I'd better get to know them now. Who knows, one day I might even be the one bringing Stacey herself in."

A chill moved through Jack and she stared at Kyra in wonder. "You're really going to do it, aren't you? Even after what I told you."

Kyra nodded, a grim expression flitting across her face. "Someone has to put them away. If I can even save one girl from what I— saw..."

Her words trailed off and she went back over to her bed, sitting down and rubbing her forehead. Then she looked up at Jack and gave her a wry smile.

"The trick is to give them what they think they want. Do the Tough Girl routine. Let them think you're one of them. Let them think they're in control. Get what you want, and get away clean. If I can get up to B Ward they won't be able to touch me, because the nurses? The ones I heard talking about Stacey's porn stash? They say she can't get up there until she throws it away. But you didn't hear that, okay?"

Jack nodded. "No way do I want her up on B Ward."

Kyra grinned. "Planning on going for it yourself, huh? By the way, I'm *not* going to pick a fight with Celia. Because I already know you're going to ask me not to, and anyway, if I did, B Ward would be that much farther away."

A funny feeling moved through Jack and she heard herself speaking. "We could try to get there together."

Kyra got a startled look on her face, and then nodded. "Yeah. But you're still going to have to tell Stacey your story before we go, you know."

“I know. Anyway, I’m going to charge her for it. I want access to those staff accounts. So that’s going to be the price for my story.”

“Setting a price tag. I’m impressed.” Kyra’s voice was admiring. “That means, though, you’re gonna need to really spin a good tale.”

“Yeah, and that’s the problem. I’ve never even had sex... how am I going to convincingly describe what it feels like to be *raped*?”

Silence greeted her comment. She looked up, and Kyra’s eyes were on her, wary and weighing. They stayed that way, eyes locked, for a long, long moment.

“What I’m about to tell you,” Kyra finally began, “I never, ever said. You never heard it from me. It never, ever happened. Pay attention because I’m only going to ever tell this once. Okay?”

Jack felt chilled again, but nodded. “Okay.”

Kyra began speaking, and continued until the bell for dinner rang. By that time, Jack had no appetite. She picked through her meal, managing to eat little bits of it, and noticed, when she finally rose from the table, that Kyra’s own plate was almost untouched, too. Fortunately the other girls at the table seemed oblivious.

Sleep that night was a long time coming.

No wonder Kyra was so bent on her desire to get involved in law enforcement even if she’d chosen its seediest side. No wonder she didn’t trust *legitimate* law enforcement, either. No wonder she spent all the time she could practicing combat moves, and no wonder she was so determined to come across as the toughest of the tough. Jack knew, now, what lay behind it, what had been done to her. By Red Roger and his men. By orderlies in her first psychiatric hospital. By a whole parade of men who should have been trustworthy but had used her like a toy, and then used her reputation—as a religious nut and then as a nutcase—against her.

At three in the morning, Kyra fast asleep across the room, Jack slipped out of the bedroom and hid in the bathroom for a good, long cry. Kyra’s story had broken her heart. She knew, now, exactly what to tell Stacey when she spun out her lie, and knew that she’d cry again as she told it. Stacey would think she was weak when she saw the tears, not knowing that they were for someone else.

What am I going to do? she thought as she washed her face and crept back towards her room.

She was going to escape this horrible place, as quickly as she could, but now she had a new problem.

She couldn’t leave Kyra behind... could she?

16.

Spinning the Tangled Web

When Jack finally fell asleep at last, she dreamt, strangely enough, about Star Jumping.

She was ten years old again, hard at work on her history report. Audrey MacNamera routinely brought home high marks on her schoolwork, to the point where it had become expected of her. It wasn't merely that she was intelligent; she threw everything she had into her assignments. As an only child who lived on a street with few other children, most of them too old or too young to be interested in playing with *her*, she had time to devote to schoolwork that most other children chose not to.

Also, it meant she didn't have to think about her parents' unfolding divorce.

Audrey had tried everything she could think of to stop it, but nothing had worked. She didn't have much to bargain with—how could she swear to get better grades, for instance, when she was already top of her class? She'd offered to do more chores, start hunting with her father again, go without an allowance—*anything* to bring her father home, but the answer was the same every time. It wasn't about her. She hadn't done anything wrong. Her parents just couldn't live together anymore.

Funny. It felt like it was *all* about her. Wasn't she the one paying for whatever had gone wrong? Didn't that mean it *had* to be her fault somehow?

So she'd thrown herself into her history report, about the Lost Colony Ships, with more enthusiasm than ever before. Most of it was finished, and she was beyond proud of it, but she'd hit an enormous snag. After half a week of fretting, she'd gone to see Mr. Reilly.

Mr. Reilly taught Audrey's year and had approved the scope and subject of her report only after some argument, telling her that it was an extremely ambitious topic. Now, with some trepidation, she had to go to him and ask for some help. She'd run up against an enormous wall, perhaps the very wall he'd been warning her against.

After the room cleared of her classmates, she approached his desk nervously. He smiled as he looked up and saw her. He always had a smile for her; several of her classmates accused her of being the Teacher's Pet. She didn't see how that could be true, though. All she did was study; it wasn't like she sucked up to him or anything.

"Yes, Audrey? Did you want something?"

She took a deep breath, pulling one of the chairs over in front of his desk. "I need help, Mr. Reilly."

He frowned. "What with?"

"My history paper. I'm having trouble."

"That was a very ambitious topic, Audrey. I'm not surprised. After all, the fifteen sublight ships alone are—"

"Oh, that part's done." She felt her cheeks heat up when he stared at her in disbelief. "It's the three missing Star Jumpers that are causing the problem. I've found out the basics about the

ships themselves, but... there's nothing about how Star Jump drives work, or why those ships would have gone missing."

Mr. Reilly's face cleared, an understanding smile appearing. "Ah. That's not surprising. I should have told you that you'd have trouble with that."

"Really? Why? Was I looking in the wrong place?"

He shook his head. "Not much is known about Star Jump drives. How they work is a closely-guarded secret of the Quintessa Corporation, and has been for hundreds of years now. I can tell you what I do know, though. First, do you understand the problems with light-speed travel?"

Audrey frowned. She thought she *sort of* did. Maybe. "Um... I'm not sure. I know it has something to do with relativity?"

Mr. Reilly got up and moved over to the board, writing an equation on it.

$$E=mc^2$$

"This equation is where it starts, Audrey. The 'E' refers to the amount of energy needed to move an object. Then the 'm' stands for mass. Specifically the mass of the object."

"What's the c²?" So far it made sense to her.

"C-squared. That is the square of the velocity you want the object to travel at. For example, if you wanted the object to travel at a speed of ten units, your c-squared would be one hundred units."

"Okay. I think that makes sense."

"And if you wanted the object to travel twice as fast, a speed of twenty units, your c-squared would be what?"

"Four hundred units," Audrey said after a moment of thought.

"Yes. Now, what does that mean?" He waited, giving her an encouraging look.

Audrey thought about it, and then suddenly it hit her. "You'd need four times as much energy, to go twice as fast."

"And to go three times as fast?"

Realization hit her. "Nine times as much energy."

Mr. Reilly smiled at her and nodded. "So, do you begin to see the problem with traveling faster and faster?"

"Yeah, um... after a while, you'd need huge amounts of energy just to go a little bit faster?"

"That's exactly right. Now, how could you begin to compensate for that?" He watched her expectantly.

It came to her after a moment. "Reduce the mass?"

"Yes, Audrey, and that's exactly why, when you're looking at the speeds of things, smaller particles can move faster than larger ones. The smallest particles of matter of all are photons, which move at the speed of light, and no larger particle has ever successfully moved that quickly. And as larger particles *approach* the speed of light, a very unique phenomenon occurs for them." Mr. Reilly leaned forward, warming to his subject. "Time slows down for them."

"It does? How?" She had to admit she was fascinated. She'd read fantasy stories about time travel, but the idea that, outside of fiction, the very *speed* of time could somehow be controlled

was... *exciting*.

“Well, you see, time—as we know it, anyway—is something we perceive in terms of motion and causality—”

“What?”

“The connection between an event and the effects that result from it. Cause and effect. Those things only move in one direction. You can’t smash a vase and then undo it, for example.”

“Yeah, okay.” She’d learned that one the hard way when she was nine.

“Most of the time, though, when we talk about measuring time, we’re really talking about measuring *motion*. The movements of the hands on an old-fashioned clock, the beat of your heart, the decay of particles in an atomic clock... it’s all about how things move. Now, as you speed an object up, it takes more and more energy for it to move any further, right?”

“Right.”

“Now think about how that would effect all of the particles within that object. So much energy is needed just to keep it moving forward, that less and less is available for its other movements. If you were in a ship, going faster and faster until it got near the speed of light, every atom and molecule within the ship, including all of the ones in you, would begin to move more and more *slowly*.”

Audrey contemplated that for several long moments, while Mr. Reilly waited.

“So... my heart would beat more slowly, and the ship’s clocks would go more slowly...”

“And all of your nerves would fire more slowly. You wouldn’t even notice that you’d slowed down because to your slowed-down eyes and brain, everything would still seem to be happening at a normal speed.”

“Because everything in the ship would slow down the exact same amount? So that’s why they say that you’d only age an hour but you’d come back to find everybody else had gotten old?”

“That’s exactly right, Audrey. And that was a huge problem, when Earth first started sending out ships. The nearest neighbor star was more than four light-years away, and most of the stars with real potential for colonization were much further out. To get ships to them in a reasonable amount of time meant they had to get as close to light-speed as they possibly could... which meant that the crews of the ships, in many cases, knew that by the time they got back to Earth, everybody they knew would be long dead.”

Audrey contemplated that for a moment. What a harsh, horrible time that must have been, people launching themselves out into a bleak and empty-seeming void with no idea what would be on the other end of their journey... and no way back if things went badly.

Like Kyra and the New Christy Enclave... The schoolroom melted away and she felt like she was hovering over the mountains, gazing down at the bloody disaster as it unfolded. A girl with dark, wild hair was huddled on top of a building, shaking as she aimed a rifle down towards a group of men. Screaming floated up towards her, and cruel laughter. She slowly began to squeeze the trigger, unaware of more, crueler men moving up behind her on the roof—

*“Never gonna be free of you, I kill you and kill you and kill you and you just won’t stay dead, why won’t you fucking **die** already, damn you?”*

Jack’s eyes snapped open.

The room was lit with the dim simulation-daylight that signaled morning. Kyra wasn't in her bed. She was huddled by the wall, by the invisible line of demarcation between her side of the room and Jack's.

She was drawing.

Jack could hear the squeak of the felt-tip pens Kyra used as they were pressed into the wall, pressed hard and fast. Something was very wrong, she realized. She climbed out of the bed and moved over to Kyra's side for a closer look.

Roger. Kyra was drawing Red Roger... and herself. Whereas in all of the other pictures of Roger, he'd been helpless and at her mercy, this time the reverse was true. He had her by the throat, his other hand groping inside her shirt, a cruel leer on his face. Her knuckles, on the marker, were white, and she was staring with fixed attention at the drawing.

"I kill you and I kill you and I kill you but you won't... leave... me... alone..."

Did she even know she was talking?

"Kyra?" Jack said, keeping her voice low and soft.

"You never get out of my head... why won't you get out of my head..."

"Kyra, it's me, Jack... he's not here. He's dead. He can't get you." Would the older girl listen to her?

Kyra went still, and slowly turned to look at her. There didn't seem to be any recognition in her eyes. "What?"

Shit! Realization struck her. The horrible tales Kyra had told her the night before had awakened the old demons for her. Was that what happened? Could just talking about past darkneses bring them back?

Would she *ever* be able to go back to being Audrey if that was the case? Or would Riddick and Chillingsworth haunt her forever?

"Red Roger's dead, Kyra. You killed him."

Kyra's face contorted in anguish. "You don't *understand!*" She flung the pen down to the floor in emphasis. "I killed him and he keeps coming back! He keeps getting back in my *head!*"

Jack reached out, catching at Kyra's upper arms. "We'll get him out, okay?"

"*How?*" Kyra sounded panicked.

Shit, I can't let the other girls, especially Stacey, see her like this! This is my fault, she'd be okay if she hadn't relived this stuff to tell me about it... I don't know what to do to get her back to feeling strong—

That was it.

Kyra had given her something important the night before. She could do the same. Whose strength, after all, had she turned to again and again, after the crash? Whose power had reassured her like nothing else could?

His. Riddick's.

Kyra had given her knowledge; she could give her that power.

"I'll show you, Kyra, but you're going to have to let me draw. Is it okay if I change your picture?"

Kyra nodded, still looking oddly helpless, her usual composure still shattered. Jack reached down and picked up the discarded pen. It was black, the red one resting on Kyra's bedside table. Jack knew she'd end up using them both. Walking over to her own table, she picked up the

picture that Stacey had given her the day before. Drawing Riddick would be easier with a “model.” She set to work.

Kyra rocked and muttered behind her as she carefully drew Riddick into the picture, standing behind Red Roger. Jack realized she was proud of the likeness she was achieving; Riddick’s face looked very real and recognizable to her. She kept working, now drawing his arms.

“Who is that?” Kyra finally asked.

“Riddick.”

“Your Riddick? What’s he doing?”

“He’s killing Red Roger, too. To make him *stay* dead.” She didn’t know if it would work, but maybe it’d be an idea that Kyra could hold onto. Maybe the idea that, when Roger tried to get back into her head, there was something else that would kick him out again, no matter how weak *she* felt... maybe it’d help her. She carefully drew Riddick’s hands, one gripping Roger’s hair tightly while the other brought a blade across his throat.

“He’ll stay dead? He won’t come back?” Kyra’s voice was almost *needy* as she asked.

I hope I’m right about this. “That’s right. He won’t come back.” Jack began to change the expression on Roger’s face, as well as she could, from a gloating smirk to a look of fear and pain. Then she went to work on Kyra’s face, changing the terror to relief.

“I could never get him to stop coming back, he just kept coming back over and over...” A note of relief had entered Kyra’s voice.

God, I hope this works. “He can’t now.” She walked over to Kyra’s table and picked up the red marker, and returned to the wall. In a moment, Roger’s throat was spraying blood where Riddick’s knife touched it, but none of the blood landed on the image of Kyra. “He’s dead.”

“He’s dead...” Slowly, a strange smile spread over Kyra’s face. “He’s dead! I killed him and now Riddick killed him too and he’s finally *dead!*” She lunged at the wall, smacking her hands onto it on either side of the drawing. “You’re *dead*, you son of a bitch! You can’t get me any more! Not ever again!”

Damn. Jack hoped Kyra would be back to herself a bit more before it was time to go to breakfast. This was getting a little spooky.

But the tension was finally leaving Kyra’s frame, the pinched and harried look easing off of her face, She let out a deep breath, and glanced over at the picture of Riddick. “What’s he really like?”

“Who?”

“Riddick. What really happened after the *Hunter-Gratzner* crashed? To everybody.”

“Wow... that’s a long story.” Jack glanced at the clock. They only had an hour until breakfast now... maybe half an hour until the Killer’s Club came looking for them. “Tell you what... how about I tell it tonight, after lights-out? When nobody else is around.”

After all, it would fly in the face of everything she intended to tell Stacey today.

Kyra looked at her weighingly for a moment and then nodded. “Yeah. Maybe it’ll give me some *good* dreams. What’d you dream about?”

Why the hell was the Theory of Relativity making Jack blush?

“A lesson a teacher gave me back at my old school.”

Kyra’s eyebrow went up.

“Oh god, no, nothing like that!” Jack found herself laughing. “It’s just I’m such a great big geek. It was all about the science of space travel and other stuff like that. Crazy, boring stuff.”

“Crazy is never boring.” Kyra smirked as she opened her dresser drawer and started pulling fresh clothes out. “You wanna see something?”

“Sure.” Jack walked over to Kyra, studying her for any lingering signs of her earlier distress, but the older girl seemed to have shaken it off completely. As she watched, Kyra took out a thick pair of socks that had her name scrawled on them in permanent marker.

“We’re not supposed to ‘own’ clothes here, but they decided I needed to have a few things that are totally mine. After I did this to a whole bunch of them, anyway. So these are my socks... and...” She touched the unusually thick soles and a small blade sprang out from the seam. “...my knives.”

Jack gasped. Kyra had a *knife* in the ward? How the hell...?

“They had an electrician from outside in here a while back. He wasn’t all that careful about his tools. I swiped two of his spare cutter blades when he had his head in a panel and nobody was looking.”

“Holy shit. Better you than Stacey.” Jack’s mind was reeling. What did Kyra expect to need knives for?

“That’s for sure. Those thick soles are a perfect hiding place. They also fit in the mouth but that’s kinda risky.” Kyra definitely had her equilibrium back, along with a pleased-cat expression on her face.

“What do you need them for?” She figured she’d better ask.

“Not much, here... this place is pretty decent.” Kyra put the socks away. “I promised myself I’d never get caught by some perverted fuck again, you know? We didn’t have guys like Carmouche at my last hospital, you know... guys you could actually trust to treat you like a human being, and who’d help you if you needed it. So I planned on helping myself as much as I had to.”

By having lethal defenses if she needed them. After the stories she’d told last night, Jack couldn’t really be surprised. “Yeah, I get that.”

Kyra started gathering up her clothes. “Riddick’s like that too, isn’t he? Like Carmouche. You didn’t need a knife because he *was* your knife.”

Something inside Jack’s chest twisted at that, as she began gathering up her own clothing. “Pretty much, yeah, until he ran out on me.”

“What are you going to do when Flint figures out you don’t really know where he is, and won’t sign those papers?”

Moment of truth. Jack realized she’d come to her decision while she slept. She turned and looked Kyra square in the eyes. “I won’t be here when he does.”

Kyra’s movement towards the door of their room came to a dead stop. For a moment, the two girls stared at each other, until the silence became so strong that it seemed to fill Jack’s ears. Finally, Kyra spoke. “You have a way out of here.”

Jack nodded, picking her words carefully. “We get up to A ward, and I can handle the rest. I know a back-door through the security.”

“So, what... you’re planning on just sashaying out?” Kyra seemed to have missed the significance of the *we*.

“Yeah,” she said, trying to keep her response nonchalant. “You wanna come with?”

Kyra shook her head, not in a gesture of *no* but rather one of *I can't believe it*. “How the hell are you gonna manage that?”

People were stirring in the hallway outside. Jack stepped closer to Kyra, lowering her voice. “I know a back-door through the security system they're using. I've used it before. And I know how they have the cameras timed. Seriously. We get up into A Ward, and we can waltz out of there any time we *want*.”

“There's no way it can be that simple,” Kyra whispered back.

“Maybe not. That's why I'm also gonna get a staff account from Stacey. I'm still working out all the details, but I figure we've got a little time, right? Nobody goes straight from C Ward to A Ward overnight. You want in?”

Slowly, *finally*, Kyra nodded. “I want *out*. I want out of this fucking hole, and away from all of these people. Too fucking many of them...”

Jack nodded, wondering where Kyra would want to run to when they got out. Would she really go merc? Maybe she'd head off to some backwater planet where she could live out in the woods like a wild woman, the way she had before she was finally caught. It made her wonder, all over again, where Riddick had gone, and how he was living. Was he vanishing into crowds, blending in with the people around him... or had he taken off for some barely-habitable world to live like a wild *man*? She really didn't know. He'd handled himself well enough with people, but he'd been quick to disappear, too. Again it struck her that Kyra was more Riddick's kind of person than she was. She might have shaved her head to express her crush through emulation, but Kyra... Kyra was the one with a seed of the same darkness in her.

The darkness was a part of Riddick that Jack had *never* tried to emulate. When she'd heard stories about him, she'd shuddered and tried to ignore the tales about his killing ways, focusing instead on the spectacular escapes he'd engineered. Her father had loved recounting those, especially when he was working on revamping a security system that Riddick had beaten. If there was any way Jack wanted to be like Riddick, anymore, it was that: his facility for escaping from places everyone thought inescapable. Kyra could take on the rest of him, if she wanted.

“Deal. We'll talk more about that tonight, too, okay?” Voices were approaching, familiar Killer's Club voices.

“Okay.” Kyra nodded and started moving for the door, just as Stacey knocked and then opened it.

“There you two are! C'mon before all the little brats use up the hot water.”

They headed, en masse, for the showers. Most of the other girls in the ward tried to avoid showering at the same time as the Killer's Club; Jack sure had back before they'd swallowed her up. Now she was one of them, though...

...And now it was time to make the most of what that meant.

Kyra gave her a significant glance as she headed for Stacey after showering. The girl was dressing, preening at her reflection in the mirror. It occurred to Jack that Stacey was really very beautiful, but in much the same way that cobras were beautiful. What would Stacey do once she was released? Who would she do it to?

“You need something?” Stacey's eyes, technically, were beautiful too, or should have been, crystal blue with lush eyelashes... but they were the coldest, cruelest eyes Jack had ever seen in

her life.

“Yeah,” Jack made herself reply. “After breakfast... I wanna talk to you about some stuff. Meet me in the library?”

She glanced around at the other girls to indicate that none of them were invited to the little tête-à-tête she had in mind.

Stacey smirked. She *obviously* knew what Jack wanted to talk about. “Yeah, I can do that. Gimme about an hour after breakfast and I’ll be there.”

An hour. Perfect. Carmouche would be on duty in the library; she could take care of something else she needed in the meantime.

Watching carefully all through breakfast, Jack caught the little bits of clues she’d need. Xi Hin was going to go after Celia right before lunch, probably while she’d still be telling Stacey her manufactured story about Riddick. She pretended not to care and was careful not to look Celia’s way; she doubted the girl would listen to a thing *she* had to say, anyway.

But things were coming together in her head. She could see the escape route forming. Now all she had to do was walk it.

After breakfast she went back to her room and picked up the two library books, giving Kyra and the other girls a friendly wave as she passed them again and wiggling her books to show her mission. There’d be no question in anybody’s mind later, if she did this right, that she was totally innocent. If she did this right, Celia would soon be out of their reach, and they’d never realize she was responsible for it.

The library was virtually deserted and, as she’d hoped, Carmouche was on duty. She carried her two books over, *Hatter Fox* on top. That had been the one Heather had chosen for herself on that final day; oddly enough, the titular character made Jack think a *lot* of Kyra. One of the images from the novel, Hatter trapped in a dog cage, kept haunting Jack, and she wondered if anything like that had been done to Kyra at her last institution—

Focus!

“Here, I need to return these.” She gave Carmouche a genuinely tremulous smile. It was still a little hard to talk to him without being reminded of Heather’s death. She’d been kind of surprised that she’d been able to read the books at all, but part of her had felt like reading them would actually bring her closer, in some strange way, to her lost friend.

“Thanks, Jack, I’ll get these signed right—”

She leaned forward, aware that nobody else was in the room and wanting to take advantage of it. “Celia’s going to get attacked again,” she whispered.

Carmouche started to pull back, alarm and awareness that he was inside the acceptable proximity borders between an orderly and a patient on his face, but he froze as her words registered. “What? When?”

“Xi Hin’s going to jump her a little before lunchtime.”

He frowned. “Xi Hin? Why her?”

She’d committed herself; the Killers Club girls would kick the shit out of her if they ever found out. She’d just have to go all the way.

“They’re doing this for entertainment, okay? I flipped out at Celia and now they’re just keeping it going because they think it’s *fun*. And ’cause if she keeps getting into fights all the time, it’ll go on *her* record instead of *theirs*. Look. *You* can’t stop the fight... it can’t be anybody

they think I've talked to today, okay? But *stop* the fight, and for god's sake, get her up to B Ward where she belongs."

She could see him figuring the rest of it out. Celia wasn't violent, not really. She was melodramatic as hell and probably talked a good game, but when it came right down to it, she wasn't even self-destructive. A trendy cutter, maybe... maybe even a *real* cutter who really needed the self-mutilation for something other than truckloads of sympathy, but she wasn't going to hurt anybody else and she wasn't going to kill herself. And C Ward was going to chew her up if she didn't get out fast.

Yeah, Carmouche got it. Jack stepped back from his desk and headed for one of the educational terminals. She'd catch up on her studies while she waited for Stacey to arrive.

Three orderlies passed through the library while she waited, and Carmouche got into hushed conversations with two of them. Jack hoped she'd get her staff account, and be familiar enough with the system, before anything appeared in it where Stacey might see. That sudden thought chilled her. An all-out war with Stacey would be a disaster.

Speak of the devil...

She entered the library alone and headed straight for Jack. They were far enough away from the orderly's desk to speak in privacy, especially with the place almost deserted. Curiosity, and a sick hunger Jack didn't want to contemplate, dominated her face as she took the empty chair.

"So, what's up?"

First rule of negotiation, at least according to her mother: start from a position of strength. Ask for what you want as if it's your native right.

"I want one of those staff accounts."

Stacey's eyebrow arched. "Those are pretty heavy-duty. I don't just toss those around to everybody, you know."

Of course not. "But you can get me one, can't you?"

Cold blue eyes narrowed a little. "I *can*... what's in it for me?"

She had to know already. But this was how the game was played, and Jack could play it. She had no choice. These wheels needed to get in motion, unless she really wanted to walk out the door of this place by betraying Riddick.

"Maybe..." She took a deep breath and frowned, pretending that the subject she was bringing up was hurtful and traumatic. Like Rachel had told her, she could look like a trapped fawn with enormous ease; it was time to use that to her advantage. "...I... could tell you about..."

"Riddick? You want a staff account in return for your story." Stacey's smile had become predatory.

"...yeah." Jack's voice was small and sounded rough in her ears as *real* anxiety started to surge. What if this didn't work? This *had* to work. Everything depended on it working... what if she fucked up and Stacey didn't believe her... or didn't *deliver*?

"You got a deal. But your story'd better be good. C'mon... we'll go to my room and you can tell me the story there." Stacey started getting out of her seat.

"The account first."

The other girl's eyes narrowed. "Don't trust me?"

“I just... I wanna know it’s made. Lots of people I thought were gonna be nice to me... y’know... weren’t.”

Like Riddick, if you’re catching my implications.

Stacey’s superior smile was back. “Okay. I can do that.”

She turned around and started punching things up on the terminal by her chair. After a few moments, she sat back with a smile and wrote something down on a piece of paper. “Okay, you’re in. This is the address of the screen you need to call up, and all of the commands you put in... and your user name and password. Which I’ll give you in my room, once you start talking. Okay?”

That’d do. It’d have to. “Okay.”

“Lemme just back out of here and then we’ll— well, *fuck*.”

Jack felt a chill move through her. “What?”

“They’re transferring that little bitch up to B Ward. What the fuck? She gets in two fights, and she gets to go to B Ward? This is so unfair.” Stacey slammed her fist down on the table.

Carmouche glanced up from his desk. “Everything okay, Stacey?”

“Yeah,” she ground out between clenched teeth. “Everything’s fine. Sorry.” She shut her terminal down with a gusty sigh. “Well, that just fucked my day. Your story’d better be good, Jack, because right now I could just... argh! Who the hell decided she was ready for B Ward?”

Me. But Jack couldn’t say that to her. She took another tack instead. “Who?”

“That fuckin’ Celia. She’s going upstairs, god damn it.” Stacey rose to her feet. “They had a transfer order up. She’s probably already heading up there. And we had it all worked out, too... shit.”

Jack climbed to her feet and followed Stacey out, glancing nervously at Carmouche. He’d moved fast. She hoped he’d been discreet about what he actually knew. If not, she hoped that her staff account would let her hide things from Stacey.

Definitely going to be “studying” after lunch. And moving as fast as she could to hide any handles she’d left sticking out.

Stacey led her back into her room, back to where the images of dangerous, brutal men dominated an entire wall. Riddick glared down at her from that wall, along with a few dozen other hardened criminals, his expression accusing. What she was about to claim he’d done, the lies she was about to tell, would be the worst sort of treachery.

*I have to do it. It’s not like anybody’s going to take her claims seriously if she **does** repeat the stories. Hearsay of a crazy girl? Yeah, right. Better her than Flint. Better her than Toombs.*

“So, c’mon... spill.” Stacey flopped down on her bed and gave Jack a sullen glare.

Jack took a deep breath, aware that now she was Stacey’s sole source of entertainment for the day. *Make it good. Make it real.*

“I...” She sat down on Omphalé’s bed and took a deep breath. “Do you want the whole story? Or just... the stuff he did to me?”

“Hmmm...” A hungry smile twitched at the corners of Stacey’s mouth. “How long had you been with him when he started hurting you?”

Jack took another deep breath. *Okay... gotta keep these facts straight in my head. He caught me alone in the settlement, before the eclipse, while the others were running tests on the skiff.*

Caught me alone, figured out I was really a girl... and made me pay for it. Just gotta keep the "facts" straight...

She began talking, weaving her false tale of threats and taunts and sexual assault, feeling sick to her stomach. There wasn't any act. As she spoke, the emotions she wanted to convey to Stacey became real and immediate to her. Fear, not of Riddick, but that Stacey would see through her. Horror, not of Riddick's supposed acts, but the very real acts she was drawing her descriptions from, that had been committed against Kyra. Nausea and anguish, again for Kyra's sake and for the sake of every girl who'd ever really lived through this. As she spoke, as Stacey's expression became more and more enrapt, she started to feel something else as well... understanding even better why Kyra wanted to become a merc and hunt the kinds of criminals who would really do these things. Even understanding a little why the mercs who thought Riddick was one of that kind would treat him the way Johns had, using bit and blindfold and billyclub against him as though he was a rabid animal.

Her tears were real. The pain twisting at her as she spoke was real. Everything was real, except the story itself that she was telling. That, and that alone, was a lie... but Stacey would never know.

It was a lie...

...wasn't it?

17.

The Player and the Game

Jack ran out of Stacey's room at top speed, heading for the bathroom, the precious slip of paper with her staff account information clutched tightly in one hand. She ran flat-out, as though pursued by the natives of a world with too many suns and too much darkness. She still almost didn't make it.

It was only when she was already heaving that the full weight of the *déjà vu* settled on her. Weeks ago, after her first group therapy session, she'd flung herself into this very same stall. Then she'd been struggling to make people believe the truth about Riddick. Now... lies. She'd been telling horrible, nauseating lies that had driven what was left of her breakfast right back out of her.

If he knew what I'd said, he'd hate me so much...

It was over, she realized, as she forced herself to her shaky feet. Whatever chance she'd had of one day meeting Riddick again, renewing their friendship, indulging her fantasies... was over. She'd never be able to look him in the eye, not after betraying him like this. Even if he never knew, *she* would. She'd destroyed it, all of it. There was nothing left; nothing more. Richard B. Riddick was out of her reach forever, and she'd never have the right to look for him.

Jack had betrayed him. Jack had to die. Audrey would leave here and resume her life, but Jack had no right to live on anymore, within or without.

But first, she had to get out of this place.

Stacey's door was still closed when she left the bathroom. She tried not to think about what Stacey was doing behind that door, let alone what the vicious girl was imagining as she did it. Instead, she walked resolutely back to the library and the vacant terminals.

It had felt like she had been talking forever, but the clocks said it hadn't been all that long. Lunch was still two hours away. She could hear the sounds of a popular movie playing in the main recreation area. She recognized the opening credits theme and knew it was one almost everybody had been waiting to see. Abu and Lajjun, still trying to pull her out of her downward spiral, had taken her to it during its first week in theaters, a scant month before she cut her wrists.

The library would probably be deserted. Maybe she could get her ass covered even before lunch.

Carmouche had gone off-duty and been replaced by an orderly that Jack didn't recognize. That wasn't ideal. The woman was tall, slender but muscled, her medium-brown hair tied back. She was reading one of the old, thick, Victoria Holt novels from old Earth and *seemed* absorbed in the text, but her posture reminded Jack somehow of Riddick at rest: contained peril that could burst forth at any moment. Jack wondered if the orderly normally worked on D Ward. Most of her nametag was blocked by the book she held, but it ended with "-AN."

Pretending to ignore the orderly, Jack walked over to the terminals as calmly and resolutely as she could—*act like you belong and people will believe you belong*—waiting to be

challenged, but she wasn't. Either the orderly bought the act or just didn't care either way.

Then again, everybody on the staff seemed to think they had all of their patients sandboxed on the computers. The truth was anything but.

Whatever else could be said about her, Stacey *had* come through. The login worked. Even better, as the staff menu opened up, Jack recognized its layout immediately.

Her father had helped design it. He'd shown her how it worked. And best of all, she still remembered the law enforcement override that he had helped build into it. Any law enforcement agency that had the command on file could get in. *She* could get in. On a level that the other girls had no idea existed.

I might not even have to wait to make my move until I leave C ward, she thought with shaky amazement.

Before she did anything else, though, she needed to make sure that she had control of the Celia situation. Stacey would be preoccupied for a little while longer... she hoped... and that would give her enough time to make sure that neither she—nor any of the other Killers Club girls with purloined admin accounts—could ever find out that it was Jack's intel that had led to the girl's transfer.

Snitches get stitches, she reminded herself. *Those would be hard for Audrey to explain.*

She pulled up the transfer notice and read it carefully. No signs of her handiwork there. Next, however, was Celia's file.

There it was.

Based on confidential information from a fellow patient, we now know that Celia has been targeted for group bullying by a clique in the C ward nicknamed the "Killer's Club." Given her relatively clean record and overall progress, we are moving her to B ward to ensure her safety.

That wouldn't do at all. Only members of the Killer's Club had been in the room when Stacey revealed her plan, and only Jack was an unknown quantity to them. If any of them read it, it would be instantly obvious that the patient in question was her.

Let's just fix that, shall we?

Jack rewrote the paragraph, changing the wording carefully so that it would still sound like something an adult, a professional, had written. Finally she was satisfied.

Based on similar prior incidents, we believe that Celia has been targeted for group bullying, possibly by a clique in the C ward nicknamed the "Killer's Club." Given her relatively clean record and overall progress, we are moving her to B ward to ensure her safety.

That, she finally thought with a sigh, was as good as she could make it. Now she just needed to make sure there were no handles in her own record... and do a little sanitizing of any information that could be used to track her once she bugged out.

Her record still listed her as Jane Doe 7439. That was a good sign. If they were trying to pin her identity down, nothing had come back yet. She moved to the most recent entries in her chart

first. Would they have mentioned the incident?

Damn. Of course they did. And they have no idea how porous their system is...

Not that the code was porous, of course. Her father didn't *do* bad work. It wasn't his fault that one of the orderlies had been so lax about security, or that none of the features to detect and prevent that kind of breach that had been enabled. And she might just clean up a few more things once she launched the law enforcement back door.

But first, there was an entry to fix—and carefully—before any of the Killer's Club girls thought to take a look.

In spite of the fact that Miss Doe was the first to get into a fight with Celia Wyndham, she has obliquely expressed remorse for the act by warning us that Miss Wyndham is now the target of systematic bullying. The previous concerns about her closer association with the Killer's Club may be unfounded.

She definitely couldn't risk any of the girls seeing that.

It took her almost a half hour, and a dozen unsatisfactory attempts, to find wording that would work. Not far off, she could hear the movie getting more and more car-chase and explosion heavy. Although few girls ventured into the library at any time, she couldn't risk any of Stacey's friends looking over her shoulder while she worked on this. Satisfied at last, she saved the new paragraph.

Miss Doe's instigation of the systematic bullying of Celia Wyndham seems to confirm our previous concerns about her growing association with the Killer's Club. She should be monitored closely for any signs of remorse for her actions.

Much better, she thought. Now she was the Killer's Club's newest accomplice, not their snitch.

She read through the rest of her record carefully, looking for any notes that could potentially connect her to Audrey MacNamera once she went on the run. Someone had identified her accent as common to Deckard's World. She deleted the line and found three more references to Deckard's World—all speculative, but still—that needed to be deleted as well. The movie ended as she saved and closed Jane Doe 7439's files. Nobody had come in yet; the orderly who had taken over from Carmouche appeared to be engrossed in her Victoria Holt novel and happy to ignore her.

Perfect.

Backing out to the administrative main menu, she launched the special login for law enforcement, holding her breath until its distinctive menu appeared. Now for the important moves.

She changed her staff account so that it was top-tier, with access to everything, and checked that the other Killer's Club accounts—easy to identify now that she could see who had created each account—had been on the same tier that her own had been. She was relieved to see that

none of them would have had greater clearance than she had; she didn't need to dig back into her file, or Celia's, to make sure that she hadn't missed anything she hadn't had access to. When it suddenly occurred to her to check Stacey's file for references to her, she was relieved to see that there were none.

She only got to spend a few more minutes poking around on the law enforcement level, gleaning passcodes and information about lockdown systems, before she heard voices approaching. Her screen was back to normal—the screen of an ordinary patient—before Xi Hin and Omphalé walked in.

She suppressed a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Jack,” Xi Hin said, her voice very nearly friendly. “You haven't seen a certain drama queen around, have you?”

Jack glanced nervously at the orderly, who was continuing to ignore them. The woman turned another page in her novel, seemingly oblivious to their conversation. *Or she's really good at pretending not to listen...*

She decided to at least pretend to go with the latter.

Making her glance at the orderly a little more obvious, Jack motioned Xi Hin and Omphalé to move further away from the front desk with her. Both girls looked intrigued as they followed her.

“She's gone,” she whispered, once she was sure that even an astute eavesdropper would be out of range.

“Gone?” Xi Hin blurted. Omphalé shushed her. “What do you mean, gone?” she continued in a whisper. “It's my turn to—”

That earned her another shushing from Omphalé.

“Stacey told me earlier,” Jack whispered, glad that she didn't have to be the originator of the news. “Sent up to B Ward.”

“Why?” Omphalé whispered, her expression shocked. Stacey had been enraged, but Omphalé just seemed confused. The plans for tormenting the girl had probably just been a diversion to her, and not the serious business they'd become for Stacey.

Jack shrugged. It was better not to leave too many handles out by knowing too much. “That's what she wanted to know, too.”

Xi Hin turned and sat down at the nearest terminal—Jack's—and logged her out before logging into *her* staff account. After a moment, she swore. “They figured us out, looks like. Sounds like Stacey's not the first one to play that game here.”

Omphalé gave Jack an askance look and whispered something to Xi Hin, who started typing up a new query.

Bet I know what they're going to check...

Omphalé's amused snort confirmed it. “They say you instigated it all, Jack. Stacey's gonna be pissed that you're getting all the credit.”

Jack walked over and read the doctored passage over Xi Hin's other shoulder, taking her time before reacting. Let them think she was a slowish reader. Let them think she'd never read that paragraph before, much less written most of it. “Looks to me like that's *blame* I'm getting, not credit.”

“Po-tay-toe, Po-tah-toe.”

Inwardly, part of her wanted to curl into a ball and shiver for hours. She had come dangerously close to earning the lifelong enmity of the cruelest and most brutal girls in the ward. If Stacey had decided to dig into the reasons for Celia's transfer *before* hearing Jack's story, or if the other Killer's Club girls hadn't been distracted by an action movie...

I'd be in pieces, or maybe just in D Ward... and I'd never get out of here.

"You okay?"

She glanced over at both girls. "Yeah, sorry. I, uh... told Stacey some stuff she wanted to know about... uh... Riddick... and..."

She swallowed. Thinking about that recitation in Stacey's room made her feel ill and guilty all over again. No faking needed.

The girls' faces were almost sympathetic.

"Hey," Xi Hin said after a moment. "I bet the therapists'd say it's good you're facing that stuff head-on. You know, admitting the truth."

She and Omphalé nodded at each other with the sage expressions of old veterans at therapy.

"I guess," she replied, and the lunch bell rang.

Food had no appeal to Jack. She sat quietly at the table, picking at the unappetizing contents of her plate, while conversation flowed around her. She avoided even glancing in Stacey's direction. It was hard to look Kyra's way, either. Those had been *her* ordeals she'd been describing. She just hoped that Kyra was right about Stacey, and that the stories would never spread. Having Riddick's reputation tarnished with Red Roger's crimes on Canaan Mountain would be a disaster.

I need more time in the system, she thought to herself. The sooner she could get out of this place, the better, before even more of her soul was compromised. She needed codes. She needed to sanitize Kyra's records, too, so that her friend would also be harder to trace. There were a thousand moving parts and she needed to line all of them up—

Everyone was getting up. The meal was over.

"I'd ask how it went, but I guess I know," murmured Kyra as they rose. "You okay?"

Jack looked over at Kyra, wishing she had even half the armor and aplomb the older girl possessed. Knowing what she had endured just made her all the more impressive.

I have to get her out of here.

"I will be," she managed after a moment. "I need to get more time on the library terminals. Can you cover for me? Keep people from wondering what I'm up to?"

Kyra nodded, although she seemed to be wondering why it was so important. When the other girls in the Killer's Club headed for the recreation room, she kept them distracted while Jack slipped away.

The romance novel enthusiast was still on duty in the library. Jack picked a different workspace, selecting a table with two terminals facing away from both the duty desk and the entry. On one, she began leading a set of false trails, using her patient account to browse pages that related to interests she'd never had as Audrey MacNamera. On the other, she logged in to her improved, highest level staff account and made some further changes to her patient record, deleting entries about her prior browsing history and the subjects she'd pursued. In their place, she added records connected to the new sites she was browsing. Jane Doe 7439, she had

decided, liked to read about neo-Cajun cuisine, watched New Creole cooking shows, liked to listen to zydeco music, and never made anything above a B- on her schooling modules.

While another cooking show started on the terminal beside her, she switched over to the law enforcement account and began setting up a master passcode that would let her go through all of the facility's doors... undetected. Via Ghost Mode.

"They don't understand what they're asking for," John MacNamera had grouched at her two years ago, leaning back on his couch and blowing out a frustrated breath. "This 'Ghost Mode' is going to blow up in their faces one day."

Audrey had sat quietly. Her father would explain without her asking. He always did. She had glanced down at the specs he was working with. There it was: Ghost Mode. She scanned over the instructions for using it, filing them away in her memory.

It was very fortunate that nobody in the hospital had any idea just how good her memory *was*.

"Eidetic" was the term her mother used with her. She only had to read things once to remember them clearly and precisely. And her mother had sternly explained, after she got into a fight with one of her cousins about which of them was remembering an event "right," that what she could do was extremely rare, a gift that she hadn't done anything to earn, and that it was rude to show it off and unkind to expect others to have it.

Which, fortunately, meant that long before she left Deckard's World and began her run, she had become an old hand in concealing the full extent of her knowledge and recall. Nobody *expected* a kid to remember everything, down to the tiniest detail, so nobody—except possibly her parents—ever realized that she was *faking* it when she got less-than-perfect marks on a quiz or test, or claimed not to remember something that had happened when she was three.

Now, however, sitting at the terminal, she could still see the instructions for "Ghost Mode" in her memory, and still hear her father grumbling about the mistake the security firm was making.

"When this mode is attached to a security code, no records are generated when the code is used," he'd explained after a moment. "Sure, that's great for a situation where you think someone high up is compromised and you don't want them to know they're being investigated, or the police are on the way... but I can think of a million ways it could be abused."

"What are you going to do?" Audrey had asked him.

"I can't take it out. We can't have one package for clients who want Ghost Mode and another for clients who don't. The code's too integral." Her father had sighed. "But we can make two sets of documentation. Only the clients who *request* Ghost Mode will get instructions on how to enable it."

But it was always there, asked for or not, enabled or not. Now Jack keyed in the instructions for making her newly-minted security codes "Ghost Mode," hiding them from the general administrative registry as well. She'd chosen a number combination that no one else used. Now it would open any door on any of the floors and there would be no record that the doors had opened at all.

Sure, she could have gone through the doors using any combination of the administrators' passcodes—they were all in her head now—but this code had a further advantage: she could share it with Kyra, and her friend would only need to remember one number.

She spent the next hour—while a middle-aged woman, on the screen next to her, quietly droned on about the best jambalaya recipes—studying the camera layouts and timing on the stairs between C Ward and A Ward, and the layout of the ground level. She had the escape route picked, the timing worked out, and everything memorized when she heard voices approaching. By the time four girls entered the library, she seemed to be doing poorly on an algebra quiz while listening to singers from centuries earlier admonish listeners: “Don’t Mess With My Toot-Toot.” She got a few funny looks, but nobody seemed to suspect anything.

They’d never heard her listen to music before. They’d never know that she listened to anything but zydeco. Now, though, there would be witnesses to the fact that this was Jane Doe 7439’s music of choice. Everything in her record would point to a colony on the opposite side of the Helion system from Deckard’s World.

We can leave whenever we want, she reassured herself. *As soon as I clean up Kyra’s records so she’s harder to trace.*

That, she decided, would be her next stop once she was alone again.

Score one for zydeco music. The girls, muttering about how weird she was, left quickly with their books. Once they were gone, she logged back in as a top admin and got back to work. She opened up Kyra’s file—

Oh. Shit.

A cold chill flowed down her back. Her fingers shook as she typed. She didn’t dare change much—the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain was, after all, the facility’s closest thing to a celebrity patient—but she changed what she could.

This was bad. This was very... *very* bad.

Her decision made, she switched over to the duty rosters and made subtle adjustments that would ensure a nice, wide open gap in coverage, all along her planned escape route, between 2 and 3 am. Scrolling through the daytime duty roster, she found the anomaly she was looking for. She switched back over to the law enforcement account and looked at the orderly’s records again.

It was even worse than she had thought.

Fuck. She glanced up at the seemingly-oblivious woman at the front desk, wondering whether she was just killing time or paying closer attention to everything than it seemed.

It wouldn’t matter. It couldn’t matter. She couldn’t *let* it matter.

She shut down the terminals when the dinner bell rang, and walked out of the library as calmly as she could, trying not to let it be too obvious that her skin was trying to crawl right off of her body.

She forced herself to eat her entire dinner. It was dry and tasteless in her mouth, and most of her attention was spent on keeping it down. From the few comments she could make herself focus on, everybody thought she was still out of sorts from her morning conversation with Stacey. She squirreled away a few rolls when nobody was looking.

For later.

The woman was gone when she returned to the library, replaced by one of the regular evening-duty orderlies. Jack felt a tiny amount of the tension leave her spine as she worked. It only took her another two hours to get everything in place. Her hands shook a little as she shut

down the terminal, spent a few minutes pretending to be a germaphobe and wiping down all of the terminals she had used that day, and left the library.

Normally she showered in the morning, but she felt like she stank of fear. After a quick shower, she killed time cleaning the room she and Kyra shared, wiping down every surface that she might have touched at any point. Would anybody bother dusting for fingerprints? She wasn't sure, but she didn't want to risk it. While she waited for Kyra to return for Lights Out, she ran over the plan again and again in her mind, rehearsing each step of the way, each possible complication.

It would work. It had to.

Finally Kyra arrived, saying goodnight to Colette and Xi Hin before she entered their room.

"You've been the talk of the Club," she said with a wry grin. "Not that Stacey's sharing the story you told, thank God, but it bought you some legit cred. Especially with you being the insti—"

"Don't let anybody give you meds tonight. If they do, fake swallowing them. Spit them out when nobody's looking."

"Okay...?"

Jack walked up to Kyra, getting close enough that she could breathe the next words and her friend would still hear them, but nobody else possibly could. "We're leaving tonight."

Kyra went still, staring at her in surprise and wonder. "Tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" It was to her credit that she didn't even ask *how*, given that Jack had previously said they needed to get to A Ward first.

"There's a transfer order in for you. For tomorrow at noon."

"*What?*" Kyra whisper-hissed in astonishment.

"Somebody decided you're well enough to stand trial. They're shipping you back to New Dartmouth. And the mercenary in charge of taking you there is already here, pretending to be an orderly."

"But—"

"Doesn't matter. We're going tonight. 2 am. Don't go to sleep."

Someone knocked on the door.

As if controlled by the same set of puppet strings, Kyra and Jack retreated to their beds in tandem. "Come in!" Jack called.

The Victoria Holt-reading orderly stood in the doorway. Her name tag, no longer obscured, confirmed everything Jack had already learned about her.

E. Logan

They didn't even bother giving her a fake name...

The false orderly, a woman Jack now knew was really named Eve Logan, professional bounty hunter, entered the room with a smile that was just a hair too wide to be authentic, carrying a tray with pills on it. "Time for bed, girls!"

Neither one of them were normally scheduled for bedtime sedation. Their eyes met for the briefest moment. Then Kyra was all smiles, reaching for the cup the merc was offering her.

Jack accepted hers, fumbling the cup long enough to keep Logan from noticing that Kyra was pocketing her pills instead of putting them in her mouth. *She* was glad that her cousin Rob had gone through a “close-up magic” kick and had insisted on teaching her several variations of the Vanishing Quarter. Eve Logan left a moment later, undoubtedly convinced that both girls would soon be sedated heavily enough that neither one would be up before noon.

Kyra gave her a haunted look as the lights were lowered. Jack nodded. She had set a timer in the system. The lights would come partway back up at 2 am exactly, right as their door unlocked and all of the orderlies would have assignments to be nowhere nearby. Eve Logan, she knew, would be asleep in the administrative guest building by then; if she woke up for any reason, she’d find her door and comms mysteriously locked and unresponsive until daybreak.

Glancing over at Kyra, barely visible in the dark, Jack had a feeling that both of them would still be wide awake when the lights came up.

18.

The Game, Afoot

By the time the lights rose at 2 a.m., Jack's nerves were screaming at a fever pitch. She and Kyra sat up simultaneously.

Jack walked over to Kyra's side so she could keep her voice to a whisper. "Anything you want, grab now. Once we walk through that door, it's going to lock behind us and nobody will be able to open it until Lights On."

Kyra gave her an impressed look, walking over to her drawers and grabbing the two pairs of socks she had told Jack about: the ones hiding her knives. She gestured to her pajamas. *Do we need to change?* was her unspoken question.

Jack shook her head and motioned toward the door. The only thing *she* had chosen to take was a small cloth, which she planned to use to keep her fingerprints off of everything. She'd already erased her fingerprints from her files this afternoon, retracting two outstanding database queries at the same time, but there was no point in leaving them new samples to collect. Their room had already been thoroughly wiped down.

The lights dimmed back off as Kyra opened the door, exactly according to plan. Jack followed her out, closing the door behind them and giving it a gentle, testing push. It had locked. She took a deep, shaky breath, aware that Kyra was watching her in the dim light, and led the way toward the door out of C Ward.

The halls were empty and silent, with no sign of the usual guard staff that would normally be on duty. On the very rare occasions when Jack had needed to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, someone had always been nearby and watching. Not now. It was more than a little spooky.

Jack knew exactly where all of the staff probably was right now, exactly where her faked orders had sent each of them at 1:45 and how long it would take them to complete the tasks they believed they had been assigned... but there was always the possibility of error, of some annoyed or bored person deciding "let's not and say we did" about an assignment, someone being so efficient that they would manage to get done well ahead of schedule, or someone procrastinating. Her nerves screamed at her that, any moment, she and Kyra would be caught before they had even left C ward. It took all of her effort not to launch into a flat-out run for the door.

She made herself keep walking, steadily and carefully. She had budgeted them plenty of time. As long as they weren't seen, they should be all right.

They had reached the door when she heard voices around the corner, grumbling about the stupid task she had assigned them and arguing over whether it really had to be done *right this moment*. Kyra gave her a stricken look.

Deep breath.

Her cloth-covered hand was surprisingly steady as she punched in the Ghost Code. The security light flashed green and, with a soft click, the door opened before her. She motioned

Kyra through.

And then, they were in the stairwell. She closed the door as softly as she could, releasing the breath she was holding as the security light switched back to red.

Two more doors greeted them. One, to Jack's left, opened on the stairway down to D Ward and the isolation wing, while the other, across from the door she had just closed, led upward to B Ward and the levels above it. Like a twisted airlock, the landing itself was just a waiting area, a security measure to prevent... well, to prevent exactly what she was doing.

Next to her, Kyra looked as taut-wound as she felt. An aura of danger was coming off of her, similar to the one that she had felt coming off of Riddick months ago, as he prepared to flood the skiff with fire suppressant. The older girl had switched into battle mode.

Jack didn't, as far as she knew, *have* a battle mode, but she could feel her own mode switching on, the one that had let her power through exams and crack her way through research sources. The one that she had used when she was leaving Deckard's World, to make her way through both familiar and new security systems. Her focus had gone needle-sharp.

"Nobody can get into the stairwell now, not as long as we're in it," she murmured to Kyra. "I need you to remember this number chain. 7-4-3-3-4-2-5. Put it in any keypad and whatever you're trying to open will open. Repeat it back."

Her voice the tiniest thread in the silence, Kyra responded. "7-4-3-3-4-2-5."

Jack nodded and punched the code into the door that led up to B Ward. She ushered Kyra through, made sure it locked behind her, and began climbing the steps. She could hear Kyra almost-silently repeating the numbers beside her.

Most of the keypads had letters on them. She wondered if Kyra would notice that the code was spelling out Riddick's name. Didn't matter. That had been her own private joke. She was, after all, pulling a Riddick here, breaking out of a place that was supposed to be too secure for such breakouts.

She wondered if her father would be mortified by what she was doing.

She had, after all, cut through virtually every safeguard he had ever designed, because she knew the designs as intimately as if she had created them herself. That, she realized, was one handle she would have absolutely no control over: if anybody spotted that the compromised systems had a designer in common, John MacNamera, who had a missing daughter her age...

It didn't matter. Not now. There was nothing she could do about it, anyway.

They had reached the door to the next landing. Jack entered the code again. Green. They passed into the B Ward vestibule.

Below her, she knew, things would be returning to almost normal. Aside from her room with Kyra remaining locked until Lights On, few other anomalies would remain as long as nobody tried to go *up* from either C or D Ward. If D Ward called for backup for any reason, the orderlies on C Ward would know and could respond, and the reverse was true as well. Only a few minutes had passed so far, but they were on schedule, and the disruption was still minimal, negligible, hopefully both unnoticeable and unnoticed.

She punched the Ghost Code into the door for the A Ward stairway and ushered Kyra through. The older girl had remained silent and hypervigilant, seeming to understand the stakes every bit as well as—and perhaps even better than—she did.

And now, Jack thought as they climbed the stairs toward A Ward, B Ward was returning to a level of normalcy... as long as nobody needed to go up.

They passed through the A Ward doors two minutes later. Now all of the wards could go about business as usual, slightly more isolated from the outside world than they realized, but otherwise normal except for one locked and very empty room.

The last flight of stairs, used by both the girls' and boys' wards, was as ghostly-silent as the previous ones, but it felt somehow more momentous. At the top, she would no longer be controlling most of the cameras, after all. She wouldn't need to.

They reached the door at the top, and she put her hand on Kyra's shoulder, feeling the tiniest flinch beneath her fingers. She kept her voice to the thinnest thread of a whisper.

"Okay. This is where you want to do exactly what I do, exactly when I do it. If I walk, you walk with me. If I stop, you stop too. I know how all of the cameras on the main level are timed. If we do this right, we won't appear on any of them."

"What about the cameras in the stairwell? And below us?"

"I put them on a loop."

Kyra looked stunned. "How?"

"I set it up this afternoon. Short loops of the cameras, seeing nothing, from recordings made about this time last night. So the light would be the same. The loops started when I punched in the code to leave C Ward. When we walk through this door and it locks behind us, they'll go back to actually recording what's happening now."

"You couldn't do the same with the ones up top?"

"Not with most of them. Many of them are moving. And this level has actual windows. Furniture. Things that get moved around from day to day. A loop from another night would be more obvious. But it's fine. They'll never see us. You ready?"

She could feel Kyra steeling herself next to her. "Let's do it."

Once more, Jack punched in the Ghost Code. The door's click echoed through the stairwell as it opened, but nobody from the lower wards should hear it. She hoped.

Most of the people who worked on the Admin level worked there in the day. The nighttime staff was a skeleton crew, much as the orderlies on the Third Shift were a third in number of either of the two day shifts. A handful of security staff and a few janitors were the only occupants, and almost all of them had been assigned to the two upper floors for the next hour. Jack glanced at the chrono in the hallway.

2:15.

Their silent, careful ascent had taken fifteen minutes, mostly because of how cautious she was being.

Jack closed the door behind them. She rested her hand on Kyra's arm as she watched the movement of the cameras closest to them. One stationary camera stared right at them, but saw nothing. It would continue to loop on nothing until she punched in the Ghost Code again, away from its reach.

Once she was certain of where she was in the timing, she squeezed Kyra's arm and began walking. Not toward the exit.

Kyra gave her a confused look but kept up with her, halting when she stopped abruptly and then walking again with her once the cameras were looking away again. When they reached Jack's destination, she gave Jack another quizzical look.

Jack wished she could put more concrete meaning into the smile she gave Kyra in return, as she punched the Ghost Code into the door of the Women's Locker Room and ushered her through.

The lights came on automatically as they entered, and Jack closed her eyes against the sudden brightness for a moment. Behind them, the locker room door closed, locked, and became impervious to all codes except the Ghost Code until their exit.

"What's this for?" Kyra whispered.

"We can't go out in our PJs," Jack whispered back with a grin. "It'd be dead obvious where we escaped from. Locker number 223. The nurse who uses it has your shoe size and is maybe a size bigger than you in pants and shirts. She's on duty down on D ward right now, so her street clothes should be in there. Her shift won't end until after they realize we're gone."

"What's her combination?"

"Just use the code I gave you. It works for all the locks."

Kyra gave her another impressed look and walked over to locker number 223. Jack walked over to 347 and popped it open. Her choice was an orderly on B Ward, who was tall enough that her pants wouldn't show Jack's ankles.

The chrono read 2:25 when they finished changing, and 2:35 when Jack finished going through the night shift lockers for spare cash and wiping prints off of everything she and Kyra had touched. There wasn't a huge amount of money, but there didn't need to be. She had other plans for that. But cash was always useful, and its absence might distract law enforcement, briefly, from the real nature of what had happened tonight.

"One more stop and then we're on our way out."

She could see that Kyra was already feeling antsy. Freedom was so close, after all, why delay it? But this was necessary.

They reached Director Flint's office, unseen, at 2:40. Twenty minutes left until the diversionary activities she'd assigned the staff ended on the levels below them, fifty until they ended in the admin levels. Jack intended to be out of the building before 3 am, but she had built in the extra time, just in case.

His office was much as she remembered it. She glanced over the papers on his desk, quickly, spotting the transfer orders for Kyra, awaiting final signatures. Helion Prime, it seemed, had a real *thing* for hard copies rather than digital, probably thanks to the whole AI Rebellion that had happened on Helion Six a decade earlier. Lajjun had told her about that one day, when she'd asked why so many of the things that were automated on other worlds—or, at least, on Deckard's World—were done manually. The people of Helion had a huge distrust for computer minds.

Which, come to think of it, probably explained why so many of the higher security features on her father's systems had been switched off. In all probability, the hospital and local law enforcement didn't even know Ghost Mode existed on their systems.

She moved to Flint's file cabinet. Its keypad control was susceptible to Ghost Mode; she'd made sure of it a few hours ago. The files, well organized, included hard copies of everything

known about her and Kyra. She pulled their files out and closed the cabinets.

The decision, to go full-on Scorched Earth, had come to her when she was almost done preparing for their escape. At 3:30 am, the instructions she had left behind would wipe the last year's worth of backup data stored by the hospital, in both its secondary and tertiary locations. Meanwhile, a small collection of its data, about Heather and other patients on her deadly medicine, would be forwarded to several local media outlets. Most of the current, live records would be undamaged by the purges, but two files would be irretrievably corrupted: hers, and Kyra's. With their hard copies lost as well, it would be hard for the hospital to reconstruct most of the details they had amassed about their two missing jailbirds... especially given the heat that would hopefully come down on them almost immediately with the news about the potentially lethal drug being handed out to a dozen patients.

"Wipe down anything I've been touching, please," she said to Kyra, as she moved to Flint's physical Inbox.

Kyra nodded, pulling out one of her special socks from the pocket of her new pants, and running it thoroughly over the file cabinet. Jack flipped through the Inbox until she found the packet she was looking for. It would have arrived shortly after midnight—the courier had been instructed to deliver it between midnight and 1 am—and so no one except the front desk would have seen it.

Inside, a dozen cards, ostensibly reward gifts for high-performing staffers, waited to be activated. Jack logged into Flint's terminal, in full Ghost Mode, and activated them, one eye on the chrono. It was 2:50 once she was done. She divided the cards into two piles, pocketing half and holding half out to Kyra.

"Funds for our travels," she whispered. "There's a muni transport card in there, and money for food and clothes."

Kyra's expression was a little awed as she took the cards.

The last time Jack had staged a bug-out—back when she'd left Deckard's World to go after her father—she hadn't had these kinds of resources, and she'd found herself desperately wishing for them. This time, she was going to make sure she didn't have to learn from the same mistakes twice. The hospital might not even notice how light their petty cash account was until after they finished dealing with all of their more pressing scandals, by which time—she hoped!—the last traces of the path the money had taken would be wiped away.

"We're almost ready," Jack said. She slid her file, and Kyra's, and Kyra's transfer papers, into the empty envelope. Then she opened up Director Flint's printer, pulling out a loose piece of paper and nodding for Kyra to wipe the machine down. She set the paper on Flint's desk and inscribed her final message to him.

I promised you that I would tell you the truth about Riddick before I left.

I always keep my promises, so here it is:

You will never, ever find him.

—Jack B. Badd

Kyra laughed softly beside her.

She *had* promised that the truth would be sitting on his desk when she left, but that part was one she needed to break. It would be too easy, too obvious, and would give the game away too quickly. She folded the paper, twice, and opened the drawer that had contained her file. She tucked the paper into the now-empty hanging folder that bore the label Jane Doe 7439, closed the drawer, and gave it a final wipe-down.

It was 2:55.

The stuffed envelope tucked under one arm and a smaller envelope in her hand, Jack opened the door to Flint's office. He rated a stationary camera, which had begun looping when she and Kyra had left the women's locker room. It would continue looping until she put in her next code. With Kyra waiting beside her, she timed the nearby cameras in their sweeps, and then began walking purposefully toward the front desk. Kyra kept pace silently. Jack was suddenly aware that Flint's decorative letter-opener, a bit of metal styled like a miniature antique sword, was now in Kyra's right hand.

Well, why not? So far, everything had gone according to plan, but there were no guarantees.

She could make out the bank of monitors at the front desk, showing moving and static shots from around the hospitals. The timing was completely randomized, but she knew that nothing had appeared to break the desk guard's boredom.

Well, until now... She put her hand on Kyra's shoulder, stopping her by a door with a keypad. Taking out her little cloth, she keyed in one penultimate code.

It wasn't 7-4-3-3-4-2-5. Not this time. Instead, she keyed in a new Ghost Code, switching from the quiet escape scenario to her Scorched Earth plan: 4-3-2-8-4-3-7.

HEATHER

And all hell began to break loose.

The monitors on the front desk dissolved into static. Then the lights died, plunging the complex into total blackness for ten seconds before emergency lighting activated. Throughout the hospital, Jack knew, a very convincing simulation of a blackout was unfolding. To everyone else within the building, it would appear that the emergency generators had switched on, powering essential systems.

Except that none of the cameras were recording anymore.

Except that some of the locks that were supposed to automatically unlock in an outage appeared to be stuck. And others, that were supposed to automatically lock down, were wide open.

Such as the freight entryway, just out of the direct line of sight of the front desk, and right next to her.

She pushed it open and ushered Kyra through, closing the door quietly as she heard the front desk guard trying to reach for backup on his comm.

Too bad the comms system was completely offline, now, too. All he'd get in response would be static.

Low red light bathed the short corridor she and Kyra hurried down. At its end, she simply pushed on the waiting, disarmed door. It opened onto a driveway with **LOADING ZONE** marked on it in Helion Prime's four primary languages.

Heather's body, she suddenly realized, would have taken this exact route when it left the hospital.

"Come on," she murmured to Kyra. "We're almost all the way out."

"There's more?" Kyra asked, keeping her voice soft as she jogged beside her up the driveway.

"Just the gate. Then we'll be out. Gonna take us about five minutes to reach it."

It took less than that.

With the gate almost in sight, Jack pulled Kyra to the side of the driveway and motioned for her to get low, creeping forward next to the hedge that lined both sides of the drive. She could hear the gate guard cursing, unable to raise either the outside world or the main building. The gate stood partway open, frozen in that position, seemingly having malfunctioned upon the start of the blackout.

"We can make it if we run," Kyra murmured.

"We're not going that way," Jack told her. "C'mon."

The hedge had a small break between one bush and the next, and a cobbled pathway emerging between the two bushes. Jack pulled Kyra down the path, to a small human-sized gate that appeared in the wall. Through the bars, she could see the virtually deserted parking lot beyond it. Only one vehicle was parked there; only one visitor was staying overnight.

She keyed Riddick's name into a security keypad for the final time, and the little gate opened.

"When you go through, go left and stay close to the wall so the guard on the main gate can't see you," She told Kyra in a whisper.

Kyra nodded and went left. Jack closed the gate and followed her.

Now, behind them, the security system moved into its endgame, simulating a whole slew of minor malfunctions that expanded to include the guest facility—mostly—and the outer grounds. The lights over the parking area flickered and died. Most of the guest facility lost power as well. But not Eve Logan's rooms. Nothing happened within them to disturb her rest... Jack hoped.

Enveloped in full darkness now, Jack grabbed Kyra's hand and pulled her into a run, through the vast emptiness of the parking lot and toward the driveway beyond.

"Is somebody out there?" a man's voice called from behind them.

A moment later, Jack heard a window roll up.

"What's going on?" a woman called.

Fuck. Eve Logan, awake. Jack squeezed Kyra's hand and ran flat out for the driveway.

"We got no power down here! I can't even call anybody! Can you?" the gate guard shouted to Logan.

Jack and Kyra reached the driveway and sprinted up its length as the guard began sweeping his flashlight around the lot. Kyra had begun to outpace Jack, but waited for her at the edge of the road.

"Where the hell are we?" she asked. "I thought we were in a city!"

"More like its outer suburbs," Jack told her. "Don't worry. Logan can't get out of her room for about another fifteen minutes, tops, and by then..."

The headlights for the muni bus appeared as it rounded the corner and approached. Jack stepped up to the bus stop and touched its call button. This, she knew, was how most of the staff

got to and from work.

“...we will be long gone. Get out the muni transport card I gave you.” Jack already had hers in her hand.

Kyra fumbled for it, almost dropping her other cards, but then had it in her hand as well. Jack wasn't sure what she'd done with Flint's letter opener, but doubted she'd actually let go of it.

Jack opened the smaller envelope she'd been carrying and pulled out the final two items she'd ordered along with the money cards. “Here,” she told Kyra, clipping a GUEST tag from the hospital onto her shirt. She clipped her own on just before the headlights from the bus illuminated them.

The driver barely gave them a second look once he'd glanced at their tags. The muni transport cards worked. Jack sank down into one of the bus's seats, Kyra beside her, struggling not to give into the urge to shake herself to oblivion.

“Four stops from now, we get off, and get on the train. We're taking a detour into one of the shittiest parts of town to get rid of our files and change out our clothes. Hope you still have your knives on you,” she murmured to Kyra, low enough to keep the bus driver from hearing.

Kyra's nod was tight, but the look in her eyes was warm in a way that it had never been before. Jack had been aware that, at some point in the past, she had earned Kyra's respect, but that had changed.

Now, she realized with a strange lurch, she had earned something even stronger.
Admiration.

19.

Forgive Me, Gina

Jack had only managed to get three hours of sleep the night before the breakout. When the sun finally rose on her and Kyra, a surreal veil was beginning to drape itself over her perception of the world. Fortunately, her plan was working without a hitch. She felt like she could probably sleepwalk her way through it. In fact, she probably did at times.

Too little sleep could impair even her phenomenal memory. Later, she would recall much of the rest of that night and the next day in little fragments, moments that stuck out from the parts of the journey that had played out exactly the way she had visualized.

Explaining to Kyra, in whispers, that the bus driver had strict instructions not to let any passengers without staff or guest passes board at the stop by the hospital...

...Kyra suggesting, on the bus, that they should go a few stops beyond the train station and double back, so that the driver wouldn't know they had taken the train...

...Kyra, fully uncaged at last, climbing two trees and a scaffold so that she could drape a leafy branch over the security camera monitoring the station...

...finding someone's lost baseball cap, for a team called the Helion Hellcats, on the way out of the next station and putting it on, while Kyra teased her that she'd probably get head lice from it...

...walking through one of the seediest, roughest neighborhoods they could find, their money cards hidden deep in their smalls, a wallet with the two hospital guest passes bulging conspicuously in her back pocket, and feeling the moment when someone brushed past her and the wallet was gone, exactly as she had intended. A second later, a yelp and a voice swearing, "that bitch *cut* me!" while Kyra smiled serenely...

...crumpling up the papers from the hospital files and feeding them, a few at a time, to a trash can fire that had burned low before they got there, while Kyra read over the notes in her file before adding them to the flames...

...calling out to two working girls on their way home, as the sky lightened, asking if they wanted to make more money in five minutes than they'd made all week by swapping clothes...

...how jarring Kyra looked with a short, blonde bob, after one of the working girls also sold them her wig...

...taking another train ride, their trail hopefully broken, to the spaceport, while Kyra tried not to shrink away from the stares their outfits were drawing...

...yet another costume change after hitting one of the 24-hour stores situated around the spaceport, now into the same kinds of coveralls that Jack had observed a dozen workers wearing on their commute into the station...

...passing a group of kids right around their age, dancing and freestyling for coins from passing travelers and feeling a wistful longing to stop and get to know them better...

...finding a data kiosk that she could log into, turned away from most of the cameras...

That was when Jack came fully awake again, her focus snapping back into place. It was almost ten in the morning.

By now, she figured, the pandemonium her Scorched Earth plan had created would have been mostly brought under control. It would have receded slowly, simulating various system failures for several hours before allowing the systems to be restored more than an hour after shift change would normally have occurred. By the time the day crew could even get into the building, any patients who had slept through the chaos would be awake and expecting breakfast... and their morning meds. None of which would have been prepared during the crisis.

If they were lucky, the purely human bedlam that would have resulted from *that* would only now be coming under control. And if they were *really* lucky, nobody would have bothered to check in on how two heavily sedated patients, who were expected to sleep past noon, were faring while there were so many more immediate concerns.

It would be especially ideal if nobody realized anything was amiss in their room until it was time for the custody transfer. But Jack was a realist. More likely—and especially given her personal history of hiding in unexpected places to avoid group therapy sessions—the ward was being searched, top to bottom, and within the next hour the search might begin to spread outward.

Sitting at the data kiosk, Jack felt herself relaxing just a little as familiar menus appeared. Apparently the government of Helion Prime had contracted for a lot of the products her father's old firm had designed. The hospital, law enforcement, and now the spaceport...

A moment later, she had logged into the law enforcement back door and was configuring their next moves.

“Who taught you how to do this?” Kyra whispered, watching the screen intently.

Jack liked Kyra. She trusted her. But, she realized, not quite enough to actually tell her the truth. “I ran with a guy, Paris, for a while. He was a smuggler.”

Every word she'd just said was, technically, true. It just wasn't the real answer to Kyra's question.

Kyra, however, seemed content with the answer, nodding and going back to watching as Jack pulled up maps and schematics, memorizing them and setting up subroutines for the security system to run when she put in her ghost codes. She wouldn't do anything dramatic, not here. Drama would ground all the flights, and they were trying to get offworld. Instead, things would be subtle, insidious, minor glitches that rectified themselves mere minutes later. Much like her original escape plan for the hospital before she realized nothing short of total chaos would give them enough of a head start.

Finally she felt ready. She'd picked their ship, cleared the path, and even arranged for a few things they would need. When a courier approached them ten minutes later and asked her to sign for a package, she inwardly sighed with relief. Now they had everything.

“One day,” Kyra said, attaching the ID tag that identified her as J. Houlot, electrician, to her coveralls. “You get a staff account for *one day*, and this is what you do. And I thought *Stacey* was scary...”

Kyra grinned at her to soften the words, the admiration in her eyes reassuring Jack that, in this case, “scary” was a compliment.

“Says the girl who climbed thirty feet in the air to disable a camera,” Jack teased back. That was something she’d never have had the guts to do, herself. Her tag identified her as P. Finch, systems tech. With AI systems completely outlawed on Helion, computer technicians were fairly commonplace. No one would question them.

And, given how haggard she and Kyra were beginning to look after being up all night, no one was likely to think they looked too young for the job. She hoped.

“So what’s the plan?” Kyra asked, keeping her voice soft. The spaceport was noisy, and the acoustics in the main departure terminal were terrible, but they were still taking no chances.

“There’s a ship scheduled to depart this evening, the *Scarlet Matador*, that will take us to Tangiers Prime.”

“Why Tangiers Prime?”

“Its spaceport is five times the size of this one,” Jack explained. “We get there and we can go anywhere.”

“Won’t that make it obvious that we’d try to go there?” Kyra asked, her expression keen.

“Normally, but I left clues in my file to suggest I’m from the Bayou Nebula and might try to go back there. It’s in the opposite direction, and the ship going *there* leaves an hour and a half after the *Matador*. Hopefully that’s the one people will be watching.”

Kyra chuckled. “You really plan ahead. So why the maintenance worker costumes?”

“We’re going to board the *Matador* through the service corridors an hour before passengers are scheduled to start boarding,” Jack explained. “That’ll be at 4:30 pm. I saved spaces for us. Officially three cryo tubes are malfunctioning, and we can even say we were dispatched to look at them if anyone asks. So any last-minute passengers won’t be able to reserve them. They’ll be ours.”

“I don’t know. I hate the thought of being in cryo if anybody catches up with us.” A worried frown creased the older girl’s forehead.

“Me too. You don’t even *know*.” The hour she’d spent trapped in her tube, during and after the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash, might have counted as one of the most terrifying of her life, if that whole damned planet hadn’t decided to engage in a progressive game of one-upsmanship. “I’m going to set our tubes to wake us up the *moment* anything goes even a little weird, and—if everything goes normally—two hours before the crew is scheduled to wake up. We’ll be ghosts.”

Kyra’s uncertain look faded, and she nodded. “I guess that’s as good as we can get, right? So now what?”

“Food. I planned on bringing some of the dinner rolls from last night with us, but I forgot the damn things. I really need something to eat.”

The two girls grinned at each other and went in search of a long-overdue breakfast.

Small as the spaceport might be compared to other worlds, the place was still enormous. They stopped in a few shops after eating, buying bags that passed for the kinds of gear bags technicians would carry, filling them with basic necessities: toiletries, a change of clothes, items of that nature. Jack found herself an auburn wig, in a small boutique, and swapped out her “Helion Hellcats” cap for it, adding to her disguise. Then they began to wind their way through the crowds toward their destination. Helion was a peaceful and prosperous world, untroubled by political strife and terrorism, and its spaceport reflected that; non-passengers, meeting or seeing

off friends and family, could walk almost all the way up to the gates before any security screening commenced.

Which, Jack realized as her heart lurched, meant so could mercenaries on the hunt. Her arm flashed across Kyra's midriff, stopping the girl in her tracks.

Two familiar figures were studying the departure lists ahead of them, right where the hallways divided.

"So, which do ya reckon they'll try to take?" Toombs asked in a raspy drawl. "The *Bon Temps* or the *Scarlet Matador*?"

Eve Logan, standing next to him, shook her head in annoyance. "How the hell should I know? My mark isn't exactly a worldly type."

"So let's dope it out. Which one do you think *he'll* want to take?"

Kyra pulled at Jack's arm, drawing her over to some empty seats near the mercs. They sat down, backs turned to Toombs and Logan, listening carefully.

"You really think *he's* with them?" Logan asked.

"Are you kidding? Who *else* coulda planned that escape?" Toombs demanded. "This has Riddick written all over it. Bastard walked right in and snatched them from under our *noses*."

"Doesn't seem like his usual M.O. to me," Logan objected.

"Oh *really*? And why's that?"

"Nobody's dead."

Toombs's only response was an annoyed grumble.

"So why the *Bon Temps*?" Logan asked after a moment.

Unlike Toombs, who had pronounced "Temps" as if he were talking about short-term workers, Logan pronounced it the French way, almost rhyming it with "Bon." That earned another grumble from her companion.

"The Jane Doe's from there," Toombs told her. "He probably thought he was hot shit, scrambling their files and stealing the hard copies, but he didn't get her browser records from yesterday, when you were hangin' out in the library. Girl was all up in her favorite shows, *The Cookin' Cajun* and *Bayou Dreamers*, fergodsake. You had to hear 'em."

"I heard some. She wasn't anything to me back then except my mark's roomie."

"So you gotta know she's from the Bayou Nebula."

"Sounds like you've made up your mind."

"Sounds like I have."

"Tell you what," Logan said after a moment. "Your reasoning is sound, but just in case, how 'bout I stake out the *Matador* while you're staking out the *Bon Temps*?"

"Don't you be thinkin' of cashin' in on all three of 'em without me. You need me. Riddick eats little girls like you for breakfast."

"Is *that* what he's doing with them?"

Toombs let out a raucous laugh. "You got a sick turn of mind. I like it. Okay. Fine. I take the *Bon Temps*..."

This time, he deliberately pronounced it correctly, his tone mocking.

"...and you take the *Matador*, and if either one of us sees somethin' we call the other."

"Sounds like a plan."

Jack risked a peek behind her. Toombs and Logan had parted ways and were walking toward their respective departure gates. As Jack watched, Logan sat down on a bench that gave her a prime view of all of the foot traffic that would approach the *Matador's* gate. Fifteen feet behind her, the security screening station was open and processing early arrivals. Another ten feet past her, on her right, was the service entry that Jack had planned to use.

There was no way to reach it without walking right in front of Eve Logan.

“We can’t go in through another corridor?” Kyra asked, when Jack told her the problem.

“Each maintenance corridor is for one gate only. They don’t connect up.”

“Why?” Kyra asked in exasperation.

“Probably in case quarantine has to be called.” Jack’s mind was racing. They needed to get past Logan without her seeing. They needed her attention focused elsewhere. And they couldn’t do anything dramatic —

Oh.

Oh hell yes I can.

The plan bloomed in her mind and she almost laughed out loud. She glanced at the nearby chrono. They had time. She could make it happen.

“Come on,” she told Kyra, shouldering her bag and retracing their steps.

Aside from one collision with a distracted-looking man — “I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you there!” — nothing slowed them down. Kyra didn’t even notice until they were almost back at the spaceport entrance that Jack now had a fancy-looking comm unit and a snakeskin wallet.

“Where did you get — ? You know what? Never mind.”

One more stop, in a greeting card store, and Jack was ready. She pocketed her ID tag, prompting Kyra to do the same, before pushing through the outer doors, instantly feeling relief when she spotted the freestylers still performing.

“Hey kid!” she called out to the obvious ringleader of the group.

The kids tensed. Their leader, however, puffed up on the spot.

“What, you think you some rent-a-cop? Think you gonna roll us? Who you callin’ a kid anyway? You look like you twelve!”

Jack grinned and rolled her eyes. “Ease up. I’m not here to chase you off or anything. Damn, even gettin’ a degree don’t help. People still think I’m a little kid. I’m gonna be gettin’ carded when I’m fifty. Shit.”

The kids laughed, relaxing.

“So you ain’t here to roll us, what you want?”

“You wanna make some money helping me out?”

The ringleader smirked. “Depends on what kind of help you need.”

“Okay, it’s like this,” Jack began. She hoped Kyra would play along with the wild ride she was about to take them on. “My brother Travi is a grade-A douchebag sometimes. I love him, but it’s the truth. Douchebag. Anyway, he fucked up on the royal the other night and now his fiancée is pissed at him and, like, threw the ring at him and told him she’s taking off for the Janus systems. Like, seriously, he’s totally unworthy of her but we all love her and want them to stay together. I mean, I’d trade him in for her in a heartbeat, you feel?”

The kids listened, their expressions still a little dubious.

“Yeah, and?” their leader prompted.

“So she’s got her ticket and everything, and she blocked his comm number, and all of our numbers. And *he’s* off feeling sorry for himself because he’s that doofed, you feel?”

The kids nodded.

“So I figure, she’s not gonna talk to me, if I walk up to her she’ll walk right off, maybe get security to roll *me*, but maybe if she gets a kind of... singing *telegram* that she thinks is from him...”

“You want us to do our thing for her?” The leader asked, his eyes lighting up.

“Yeah, and give her this.” Jack handed over the card. Covered in hearts and frills, with a sappy message inside and an even sappier inscription, done in her best imitation of her cousin Joey’s handwriting:

Please forgive me.
I never meant to hurt you.
You are my world and I’m lost without you.
Call me.

She’d even added a comm number, using the Al-Walid household’s number but with the last three digits changed. If Eve Logan tried to call it, she’d end up speaking to someone who had no idea what was going on.

The group’s leader grinned and accepted the card, along with the wad of cash Jack had taken out of the snakeskin wallet.

“I’m gonna record it all,” she said, brandishing the hapless traveler’s comm, “so when she *hopefully* tells my brother she forgives him and thanks him for it, he’ll know what it is he’s supposed to have done. But she can’t see me, okay? She’ll rabbit if she sees me.”

“Okay, we’re in. Who is she and what does she look like?”

“Gina Stansfield,” Jack told them, and then described Logan to them in detail. It was a level of detail that only someone intimately acquainted with a person—or someone, like Jack, with eidetic recall—could manage. She knew that she had sealed the deal with it. Then she gave them directions to the place Logan had staked out.

The little troupe crackled with energy as they led the way back to Logan, chattering about dance move combinations. Jack let a bit of distance build. Stopping at a random door, she keyed in one of her Ghost Codes. For the next ten minutes, nothing in the vicinity of the *Matador’s* gate would be recorded. And the randomized loops at the security desks would omit those cameras altogether. There would, sadly, be no record of what was about to happen.

Logan was so focused on scanning the crowd that she had looked at, and mentally dismissed, the entire troupe before they suddenly had her surrounded.

“This song’s for you, Gina!” The leader boomed, catching the attention of everyone in the causeway.

The kids were damned good. Along the way, they must have planned out which routines they intended to use. They ringed Eve’s bench, moving in remarkable synchrony as they danced, spun, flipped, and wove together an eight-part harmony backup tune for their leader.

“Baby I was wrong,” he belted in a stunning tenor, “So listen to my song...”

Pulling out the stolen comm and holding it in front of her face, Jack approached the group with Kyra behind her, blocked from Logan's view.

“Gina don't you know
You're up in my soul
There's nothin' I won't do for love
And babe, you're all I'm thinkin' of...”

Still pretending to record the performance, Jack circled wide, not even trying to go near the *Matador's* gate, keeping her face hidden and her body interposed between Kyra and Logan. The kids were drawing a crowd.

“Come back to me Gina
You know I'm always yours...”

People were clapping and cheering. If Jack had really been recording the performance, their bodies would now be in the way. She finished circling, standing in front of the maintenance door. Glancing over at it, she punched in the code and ushered Kyra through.

The door closed as the group's leader presented Logan with the card. “Travi says he's sorry for how he hurt you. Please call him, yeah?”

The crowd erupted with applause as the door clicked shut.

“You... are... *insane*.” Kyra whispered, a mile-wide grin on her face.

Jack reattached her nametag, gesturing for Kyra to do the same, but was unable to suppress a grin of her own. “Come on. We're twenty minutes behind schedule.”

But the rest ended up being all too easy. An hour later, hidden away in a utility closet by the cryo-lockers, they got to listen to embarking passengers griping about the mercenaries who had insisted on looking each of them over before they were allowed to board. The hardest part was liftoff, which they had to endure with less padding than the other passengers, but even that couldn't dent their sense of giddy triumph. Jack had spent the pre-boarding time programming their tubes and the special security routines that would apply to them; once all of the passengers and crew members had gone to sleep, it was finally their turn. The “defective” units turned on for them immediately.

Kyra had never worked a cryo tube, so Jack helped her in and got her settled, feeling like an old hand. Climbing into her own tube and settling in, she snickered at the image of Eve Logan surrounded by the freestylers. She had already disposed of the stolen comm, but part of her wished she had really recorded the performance.

As sleep claimed her, she could be forgiven for thinking that the worst was finally behind her. But it would be a very long time before she would forgive herself for it.

20.

Level Five

Jack had been in cryo before. Even before she ever climbed into a cryo-tube, she knew how they worked and what, in theory, to expect. The reality, however, was always a little jarring.

Cryosleep had taken more than a century to perfect, to find just the right cocktails of ingredients to add into human cells to make them resilient against the freezing process, to keep them from cracking and shattering. The ultimate result had been a formula that slowed, but never completely stopped, the internal processes of the slumbering body. There was, however, a weird side effect: synaptic rates sped up rather than slowing down.

Most cryo-chambers administered sedatives carefully calibrated to ensure that their occupants remained in a peaceful dream-state while frozen. But occasionally things could go wrong. Riddick had told Jack that he had been conscious for almost the entire voyage of the *Hunter-Gratzner*. Its twenty-two week journey before the crash had felt, to him, like twenty-two years. He claimed, when she asked, that he spent most of the time meditating. Certainly, he had come out of it remarkably sane; most people whose tubes malfunctioned spent years in therapy, and some never left psychiatric care again.

Antonia Chillingsworth had planned to put him in a similar state, permanently. Perhaps that was why Jack had felt so uncomfortably *un*-guilty about shooting her.

Jack's cryo-tube worked perfectly, leading her into a world of benign dreams. Most of them were so soothing and innocuous that she wouldn't recall them later. Somehow, though, she ended up back in Mr. Reilly's classroom, replaying their discussion about the Lost Ships she was researching, and the fundamentals of faster-than-light space travel. He had just explained to her how little time would pass for people on the fastest sub-light ships, but how much objective time would still be lost. But Audrey knew that people could now cross dozens of light years in a matter of weeks, objective time. She just didn't understand where the breakthrough had come from.

"How did they solve the problem?" Audrey had asked him. None of the books had explained it very clearly.

"Astrophysicists always posited the idea of wormholes, places that served as shortcuts through space," he said. He walked over to one of his cupboards and removed some items: two balls, a length of string, and a short straw. "If these were the two stars you wanted to travel between..."

He set the balls on opposite ends of his desk.

"And this was the distance between them..."

He stretched the string between them, in a straight line. Looking around his desk, he grabbed a tape dispenser and taped the ends of the string to the balls.

"The wormhole would be a place where time and space folded up and a shortcut appeared."

He set the straw on the desk. Then, holding the balls, he drew them together until each one touched an end of the straw. The string, between them, was no longer stretched tight, but had

relaxed into loops and squiggles.

“How could they *do* that?” Audrey asked.

“It wasn’t something they could do, not at first. Wormholes are rare and hard to find. Wormholes that exist where you conveniently need one are even more rare. Emergency revival. And then the founder of the Quintessa Corporation patented the Isomorpher.” Mr. Reilly frowned. “Not the best name for it, in my opinion.”

“What does it do?”

“You’ve heard of the Many Worlds Theory, right? We won’t cover that in detail for a few more months.”

“A little.”

“Our three dimensions—four, if you count time itself—are only the first of roughly ten dimensions. Now, if we were two-dimensional beings, we would live on a plane, and only move through that plane... like this piece of paper. That would be our whole world.” He set the paper on the table. Then, he picked up a stack of papers and set them on top of it. “And there would be an infinite number of other two dimensional universes outside of the world we know. Level five incident detected. The same is true within three, and even four—and even more—dimensions. Parallel worlds, *perpendicular* worlds, do you understand what I’m suggesting here?”

“So, like...” Audrey took two pieces of paper from the pile. “If I were right... *here*... in my two-dimensional universe, there’d be another universe that had a spot that was exactly the same place as where I was, in my two dimensions, but was in a different place in the third dimension... so there’s another universe in exactly the same spot where I’m standing now... but it’s separated from me by being elsewhere on a higher dimension?”

She could barely find words for what she was trying to puzzle out.

“Yes. Even when you’re standing perfectly still, you’re moving through a succession of three-dimensional spaces courtesy of time, the fourth dimension. Advance revival protocol initiated. And our spacetime moves through five-dimensional space. And that five-dimensional space moves through six-dimensional space... and so on... with parallel spaces existing on every level.”

“The sliding doors thing?” she asked with a gasp.

“Very good. Infinite possibilities, room for infinite choices to play out. Some of those parallel universes would be very similar to each other, almost identical. Others would be radically different. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-nine seconds. So Joren Kirshbaum—that’s the Quintessa Corporation’s founder—suggested that the wormholes we wanted, leading between different star systems, might not exist in *our* universe, but they would exist in plenty of other universes.”

That part, at least, made sense. “Okay, yeah. But how would we get to them?”

“That was what his patent was for. It’s... very incomplete. He filed it and made it proprietary, but exactly how the Isomorpher was built and programmed is something he never actually revealed and no one’s successfully reverse-engineered. The gist comes from quantum physics. When you get down to the extreme subatomic level, you no longer have particles. You have ‘strings,’ and the strings ‘vibrate’ at specific frequencies.”

Audrey nodded. Her parents had once watched a vid series that had discussed that topic. Now the vid made a little more sense to her.

“Kirshbaum proposed that each universe had its own frequency set,” Mr. Reilly continued. He had warmed to the subject, probably because he had the full attention of his audience of one. Most of Audrey’s classmates were fairly inattentive. “He found a mathematical model that could predict the frequencies that the other universes, the ones with the specific wormholes he was looking for, would vibrate at on the quantum level. Emergency revival. His machine would latch onto the frequencies that that other universe, and ours, had in common, and use them as a gateway to help objects transfer between universes, taking on the rest of the other universe’s frequencies and temporarily resonating with it instead of ours. They could then pass through the wormhole and, at the other end, transfer back to our universe.”

“And it worked?” There was so much in there that felt like guesswork to her.

“It’s the basis for the Star Jump drives we use now. Trust me, it *still* sounds crazy to most physicists... but you can’t really argue with the results.”

Audrey walked over to Mr. Reilly’s supply closet and brought out two more balls and a bright yellow pushpin. She walked over to his desk with them. She smoothed out the ball and string arrangement so that the original balls were on opposite sides of the desk once more, and then rested one of the new balls next to each of them. She inserted her pushpin into one of the original balls.

“So if I’m here...” She touched the pushpin. “And I wanted to get here...”

She leaned over and touched the ball on the opposite side of the desk.

“...the Isomorpher would move me...” She transferred the pushpin to the ball next to the first one. “...to here, which is in the same fourth-dimensional space we occupy but elsewhere in a higher dimension... and which has a wormhole...”

She held the straw up to the ball.

“...connecting it to here...” She walked to the opposite side of the desk and pressed the other end of the straw to the ball resting next to the one attached to the string.

“That’s right. Level five incident detected.”

Audrey removed the pushpin from the second ball she’d inserted it into, miming it traveling along the short length of the straw. “So I’d only have to travel this far to get there...” She inserted the pin into the ball at the other end.

“Exactly. Advance revival protocol initiated.”

“And then the Isomorpher would move me from that point back to...” She removed the pin from the ball connected to the straw, and inserted it in the final ball, connected by the string to the very first ball. “...here.”

“Yes. And instead of having to travel sixty light years, you would only have to travel, say, the length of an average solar system. One hundred astronomical units is still a lot, but there are more than sixty-three *thousand* astronomical units in a *single* light year. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-eight seconds. So, while you’d still need to build up some speed to cover that distance, it’s not nearly enough to have to deal with time dilation.”

The numbers were enormous enough to boggle Audrey for a few minutes. Then an odd thought occurred to her.

“But how do they figure out which universe to find the wormholes in?” she asked. She couldn’t imagine how any theoretical model would be *that* accurate.

“That’s the part no one knows. The patent doesn’t specify how the Isomorpher runs the calculations. It just claims that’s one of the proprietary things it does. And nobody else has ever figured out how. Emergency revival. Level five incident detected. Which is why every Star Jump drive in the Federacy is made by the Quintessa Corporation.”

“Including the three that disappeared?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes. And here’s what you’re not finding in the books, because nobody wants to be the one to write it down where they can be sued for saying it.” Mr. Reilly sat down, leaning back in his desk chair. “The big theory is that the three that disappeared got lost in other universes. Advance revival protocol initiated. They ‘isomorphed’ over to them, but couldn’t get back. Most Star Jumpers don’t make just one jump, after all. So, for example, the *Tenth Crusade* was supposed to make four jumps. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-seven seconds. Maybe, after one of those jumps, it couldn’t reconnect with the frequencies of our universe. Maybe it got stuck between two of the other universes, even.”

“Stuck between?” Audrey tried to imagine it: a ship straddling two whole, separate universes the way a child might straddle a fence. Or had it vanished into the fence itself?

“That’s happened several times to ships that *didn’t* disappear, too.” Mr. Reilly told her, his expression sober.

“It has? What happened to them?”

“Well…” Mr. Reilly shrugged. “Again, we don’t really know all *that* much. But the Quintessa Corporation can’t gag everybody. Emergency revival. Level five incident detected. But imagine you’re in two worlds at the same time. One’s fine, it’s normal… but the other one’s on fire.”

Audrey shuddered. That was a horrible image. “So the people on board died?”

“Sometimes. One ship’s passengers came out of cryo and seemed to be hallucinating, describing animals that the ground crews couldn’t see but all the other passengers could.” Mr. Reilly’s expression sobered. “Then one of *them* got *attacked* by an animal, or something, right in front of the ground crew. Torn apart by a creature that nobody, except the other passengers, could see or hear. Quintessa couldn’t cover *that* up. After a few more incidents, it even got an unofficial name: threshold syndrome.”

That, Audrey thought, was a good name for being caught in a space that was neither one universe nor another, but both at the same time.

“So is that the main theory about the three missing Star Jumpers?” she asked after a few minutes of quiet thought. “They never made it back from the other universes, or only made it partway back?”

“It is. But it’s something most people don’t want to acknowledge, and something the Quintessa Corporation doesn’t want people talking about.” Mr. Reilly studied her dejected expression for a moment before continuing. “I can give you some links to articles about it. But you will have to be careful about what you use and how you cite them. Most of them are highly speculative. Advance revival protocol initiated. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-six seconds.”

Audrey had been gathering up her things, armed with all the information she needed to finish her report, when a new question occurred to her.

“Why didn’t the Quintessa Corporation use what they could do to just find alternate Earths humanity could settle on? Wouldn’t that be a million times cheaper?”

“It probably would be,” Mr. Reilly told her, putting on his coat. “But something seems to happen, the longer people stay in other universes. Most of the cases of threshold syndrome happened after really long jumps. That’s part of why most Star Jumpers take several shorter hops instead, these days. Maybe, the longer you’re in another universe, the more it changes you. Emergency revival. Level five incident detected. Advance revival protocol initiated.”

He kept talking as he locked up the classroom and walked her outside. Sunset was approaching, and the light had taken on a molten gold, almost orange, quality.

“There are rumors—the Quintessa Corporation really tries to stamp these out, but they keep coming back—that some frequent Star Jump travelers stop being entirely *human*.”

“What are they instead?”

“I guess you’ll find out,” he suddenly said, turning to fix Audrey with an intense gaze. “Won’t you, Jack?”

She flinched. This was not how it had played out in reality.

“You need to wake up, Jack. Right now. Because it’s happening. Crew will wake in fourteen minutes, fifty-five seconds.”

The golden light of late afternoon was changing, turning blood red. Lightning flashed somewhere close by, strobing the air. Some strange bird was screaming in a nearby tree, long and keening. Jack—no longer Audrey—wanted to run but she couldn’t. She suddenly couldn’t move at all.

“Wake up *now*, Jack,” Mr. Reilly told her before he melted away.

Her eyes, she realized, were open.

She was in the cryo tube. Sensation and motion were returning to her body. She focused on the readouts, trying to understand what was going on, part of her still wondering where Mr. Reilly had vanished to.

EMERGENCY REVIVAL
LEVEL FIVE INCIDENT DETECTED
ADVANCE REVIVAL PROTOCOL INITIATED
CREW WILL WAKE IN 14 MINUTES 54 SECONDS

Level Five Incident... that had been the code phrase that the Quintessa Corporation had used to label threshold syndrome incidents. Jack realized that the screen in front of her had only just switched on a few seconds earlier, while skeins of time had spooled out in her dream state. Her tube, and Kyra’s, were both programmed to revive them a minimum of fifteen minutes ahead of the crew’s tubes.

She forced her hand to rise and pull the release, sending up a last minute prayer that, whichever universes the ship was straddling, none of them would be on *fire*.

The air was chilly and stale. Definitely not burning. She bumped into the tube across from hers and ricocheted back toward her own. Gravity hadn’t kicked in yet. Grabbing onto her tube, she hauled out her bag and awkwardly slung it over her shoulder, the move sending her into a

slow spin. It took her a precious minute to stop the spin, close up her cryo-tube behind her, orient herself, and kick off again toward Kyra's tube.

She was still two cryo-tubes away when Kyra's tube burst open and the older girl flew out, gasping. She grabbed Kyra's bag for her and closed the tube.

On the off chance that they survived whatever had gone wrong, after all, she didn't want there to be any clues that they had been on board. Weeks ago, she had programmed both cryo-tubes with instructions to sanitize and reset themselves once vacated and shut, and then delete all records that they had ever been occupied.

"Hurry," she said, awkwardly swimming through the air toward the utility closet where they had hidden during the launch.

"What's happening?" Kyra didn't sound entirely awake yet. Jack wondered if either of them really was.

"We're in a lot of trouble. I'll explain after we get back out of sight."

Gravity was slowly asserting itself. No longer completely without control, both girls were able to make use of its low setting to leap moonwalk-style toward their destination, at the far end of the aisle of occupied tubes. They reached the utility closet just as gravity normalized and Jack heard a cryo-tube opening one aisle over, where the crew had been sleeping.

They got out of sight just before the crew began emerging. Jack jammed the utility closet handle and hoped that, if anybody tried to open it, they'd assume that its non-functionality was just another symptom of the emergency.

It was hard to make out what the crew members were saying to each other. The muffling effect of the door between them was bad enough without the way that they were talking over each other, quarreling as they went. From what Jack could manage to make out, most of them were vehemently arguing against the possibility of a threshold incident.

Jack could almost see their point. Nothing *felt* off at the moment. But then, they were still in space. Aside from the wormholes, there wasn't much that was likely to differ across the universes chosen by the Isomorpher, at least within the near-vacuum of space. Jack wondered what might happen when they made planetfall.

The voices receded as the crew headed for the flight deck.

There was a comm terminal in the utility closet, one Jack already knew was susceptible to her ghost codes. As the voices receded, she found it and opened it to all active and passive comm frequencies, in "muted" mode. She needed to hear what was happening.

"So, what the hell is going on?" Kyra whispered.

"Our ship's Star Jump drive fucked up," Jack told her, trying to condense Mr. Reilly's lesson down into as few words as possible. "Star jump drives work by taking us through wormholes in other universes and then bringing us back to our universe. Our drive didn't bring us all the way back. We're stuck between universes."

The play of expressions on Kyra's face was, in the dim light, astonishingly vivid. Confusion, enlightenment... horror.

"*Tangiers System Control, this is the Scarlet Matador on secure channel 9157-B, come in, please,*" the Captain said, registering on both the outgoing radio channel and the passive flight deck monitor.

"*Scarlet Matador, this is Tangiers System Control, go ahead.*"

“We are on long-range approach but our ship is registering a Level Five Incident. Can you confirm?”

There was a pause.

“Scarlet Matador, our long-range sensors are picking up unusual energy field signatures around your vessel. Level Five Incident is confirmed. Are you experiencing any anomalies at this time?”

“None so far,” the Captain said. *“Please advise of containment protocols.”*

Jack pulled up the Tangiers System orbital schematics, finding the current location of the *Matador* on it.

Oh, thank God, she thought disjunctedly. They had almost reached their destination before disaster had struck.

It could have been so much worse, she realized. The journey had been long enough that there had been some two dozen Star Jumps involved. If the Level Five had occurred at any other transition point, they would have been forced to divert to whatever outpost existed within range—and at least one always had to be—the way the *Hunter-Gratzner* had.

And that had been catastrophic.

The *Hunter-Gratzner* hadn't experienced a Level Five Incident, but it had emerged from its Star Jump into some kind of meteor storm that had swiftly riddled it with stellar bullet holes. And although there had technically been an outpost nearby, it had been deserted for more than two decades thanks to an ecosystem that was hostile at the best of times, and purely lethal every so often. Loss of contact with that outpost, Jack had come to understand, had resulted in the shipping lane's reclassification as a “ghost lane” and its removal from mainstream usage. In the wake of the survivors' testimony that she and Imam had supplied, he had told her that that particular Star Jump route was likely to be discontinued permanently, its standby outpost world declared uninhabitable. No other cut-rate vessel would ever make use of it.

If the *Scarlet Matador* had been further out on its jump itinerary, and had been similarly forced to divert to an outpost, the best *possible* outcome would have been that she and Kyra would have been discovered and arrested as stowaways. Worst case, it could have turned into another *Hunter-Gratzner*.

But the *Matador* had made it all the way to the Tangiers system. It was a tiny mercy, but she held onto it nonetheless. Things had only gone pear shaped at the very end of the journey.

Normally, she realized, the crew wouldn't have awakened for another day. She had set the cryo-tube controls to wake them up a full two hours ahead of the crew—under *normal* circumstances—and had mandated a minimum fifteen-minute head start for any emergency revivals. The Level Five must have been detected the moment they isomorphed back into their home universe. They were only just inside the system's Oort cloud.

The comms pause stretched out for several minutes before the voice on the other end finally spoke again. *“Scarlet Matador, you are being given new landing coordinates. You will not dock at Tangiers Station B. It is not equipped for this situation. You will need to land on Tangiers Prime itself. Your specs indicate you have planetfall capacity. Is your crew trained and certified to perform a landing?”*

“We did on Helion Prime, yes,” the Captain replied, a hint of annoyance in her voice. *“We can do it here too.”*

*“Good. Do **not** wake your passengers. We are bringing you down near our best hospital complex and will transfer them to it prior to opening their tubes. Strict quarantine protocols will be observed.”*

“Understood. I assume we will be quarantined, too?”

“Yes. Please submit a list of people to notify on your behalf and forward a copy of your passenger manifest and each passenger’s next-of-kin data. You are to maintain radio silence on all channels except this secure channel. Keep your comms open to us at all times and inform us of any anomalies you encounter.”

“Will do. Any idea what we might be about to experience?”

There was another pause. *“None, Ma’am. This is the first Level Five Incident on this endpoint of a Star Jump. We have no idea what might be across your threshold.”* The voice, which had been clipped and precise until then, softened. *“I’m sorry. I wish we knew what was going to happen.”*

“You and me both. Scarlet Matador out.”

There was a long, pregnant pause in the flight deck.

“Son of a *fuck*,” one of the crew members snarled.

“Well, everybody,” the Captain said after another moment, “we’ve got a day to kill. Joe, turn those fucking alarms off before I purge them, would you? We all know what’s going on now.”

The high, keening alert, which had been the strange birdcall in Jack’s dream, finally went silent. The strobing ended at the same time. A moment later, the lighting in the utility closet switched from red to bluish white.

“Anybody got a deck of cards?” someone on the flight deck quipped.

Jack looked around the closet, trying to decide how likely it was that the crew might come their way in the next few hours. It’d be just their luck if it housed decks of cards and other supplies a crew killing time would suddenly conjure a need for.

One day. She had one day to figure out how they were going to dodge not only the *Scarlet Matador*’s crew but the emergency personnel on the surface... assuming that nothing on the other universe’s version of the surface, itself, didn’t try to take them out. Her plans were falling apart. In spite of everything she had learned from Mr. Reilly, years ago, this was a scenario she hadn’t thought to plan for.

Maybe because she couldn’t figure out *how* to plan for something this fucked up, she fumed to herself.

“We are *so* fucked,” Kyra muttered beside her.

Jack couldn’t think of a single argument against that assessment.

21.

Matador Falling

“Here,” Jack told Kyra, handing her a protein bar she’d stowed in her bag. “Breakfast.”

She pulled out one for herself as well. In all honesty, she had almost no appetite. The stress of the new situation, the new crisis, had stolen it away. But they needed to eat. They needed their wits about them if they wanted to maneuver their way through this latest disaster.

The speaker on their comm panel indicated that the crew had stayed on the flight deck for the moment. They were arguing, with little enthusiasm, over how long they were likely to have to stay quarantined once they landed.

Nibbling at the protein bar, Jack stood up and looked around the utility closet, taking in its contents and estimating how likely it was that the crew of the *Scarlet Matador* would decide any of it was important during the next twenty-four hours. After a moment, she sighed with a small amount of relief.

Most of the items on the shelves, beneath their protective webbing, were things for a port crew to use to clean up and recondition the cryo tubes between uses, and to tidy up the cryo deck once all of its occupants had debarked. There were some spare comm panels and other bits of hardware, some hazmat jumpsuits and helmets, and a handful of scanners—Geiger counters, toxic gas detectors, others she couldn’t identify at all—but very little else.

Jack grabbed a bin of comm hardware and pulled it down for a closer look. After a moment, she began assembling some of the pieces.

“What are you making?” Kyra asked in a whisper.

“Video screen,” Jack answered, unwrapping a screen unit and settling it in its housing. “So we can see what’s on the ship’s cameras.”

Once she realized that Kyra was interested in what she was doing, she kept up a soft running commentary as she worked. She never mentioned that it was her father who had showed her how pieces like these fit together, hinting instead that this was another thing Paris P. Ogilvie had taught her while she was “running” with the smuggler. But she explained what each part was for, what each connection would do, as she assembled them. Finally, she was ready to plug it into the comm panel.

There were dozens of cameras placed throughout the ship, more than Jack had expected. She went through their pre- and post-launch feeds first, strategically erasing any footage that she and Kyra had appeared on. Once that was done, she began examining the feeds from right before the emergency revival had been triggered.

“What are you looking for?” Kyra asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. I want to know more about what went wrong.”

Nothing seemed to change, anywhere on board the ship, during the half hour leading up to the moment she burst out of her cryo-tube. She erased the footage of her and Kyra, up to the moment when they had vanished into the utility closet.

Maybe, she thought, the Isomorph Drive would have something useful in its logs. She pulled them up, and sighed. Most of the records were identical.

2517.03.18.21:15:30 ARRIVING AT FIRST JUMP POINT.
2517.03.18.21:15:33 ISOMORPH DRIVE ENGAGING. ACCESSING U137. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.
2517.03.20.15:32:02 ISOMORPH DRIVE DISENGAGING. RETURNING TO U1. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.
2517.03.20.15:32:37 NO ANOMALIES DETECTED. MOVING TO SECOND JUMP POINT.
2517.03.20.19:15:21 ARRIVING AT SECOND JUMP POINT.
2517.03.20.19:15:24 ISOMORPH DRIVE ENGAGING. ACCESSING U23C. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL...

The log went on like that. Some of the jumps lasted two or three days, while most lasted only a few hours. Jack scrolled down to the final Star Jump.

2517.04.12.18:25:22 ISOMORPH DRIVE ENGAGING. ACCESSING U322A. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.
2517.04.16.20:43:04 ISOMORPH DRIVE DISENGAGING. RETURNING TO U1. ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.
2517.04.16.20:43:39 ANOMALY DETECTED.
2517.04.16.20:43:42 ISOMORPHIC OVERLAY IN PROGRESS. ATTEMPTING TO CORRECT.
2517.04.16.20:43:45 CORRECTION FAILED. REATTEMPTING.
2517.04.16.20:43:48 CORRECTION FAILED. REATTEMPTING.
2517.04.16.20:43:51 CORRECTION FAILED. ANALYZING STRING FREQUENCIES.
2517.04.16.20:43:54 STRING FREQUENCIES FLUCTUATING BETWEEN U322A and U1. LEVEL FIVE INCIDENT CONFIRMED.
2517.04.16.20:43:57 QUINTESSA CORPORATION NOTIFIED. DATA PACKET DISPATCHED. ADVANCE REVIVAL PROTOCOL INITIATED.
2517.04.16.20.45:48 REDACTED
2517.04.16.20:47:27 REDACTED
2517.04.16.20:58:57 CREW REVIVAL COMMENCING.
2517.04.16.21:03:58 CREW REVIVAL COMPLETED.
2517.04.16.21:08:15 INSTRUCTIONS FROM QUINTESSA CORPORATION RECEIVED.
2517.04.16.21:11:32 ISOMORPH DRIVE DECOMMISSIONED.
2517.04.16.21:11:33 ISOMORPH COORDINATE DATABASE WIPED.
2517.04.16.21:11:34 SYSTEM STANDING BY.

“Well, shit,” Jack muttered, after reading it over a third time.

“What does it mean?” Kyra asked.

“Um, okay... so the last Star Jump for this trip was kind of long, looks like. It started four days ago and ended today.” Jack pointed to the first two lines in the final log segment. “The

Isomorpher took us into ‘U322A,’ I’m guessing that’s the number they assigned to the universe with the wormhole where they wanted it... and then today it tried to bring us back to ‘U1,’ which is—”

“Our home universe. Got it.” Kyra nodded, reading the log over her shoulder again.

“So about thirty-five seconds after we were supposed to be safely back home, the system detected that something was wrong.”

“The isomorphic overlay?”

“Yeah. I’ll bet it was getting readings that matched both universes.”

“So then it tried to fix it?”

“Yeah, three times. And when it didn’t work, it did some kind of quantum-level analysis that confirmed we’re physically in both universes at the same time.”

“So then it declared this ‘Level Five Incident’ thing?”

“Yeah, and sent an alert out to the corporation that makes the Isomorpher, with all of the data, looks like.”

“How come it took another fifteen minutes to wake up the crew?”

“Cause the system had instructions that it had to wake us up first. See those two redacted entries? That’s when I closed my cryo-tube and then closed yours. It redacted the logs of our revival, just like it was told to.”

“Damn, it really took us that long to get from the tubes to this closet?”

“We were pretty wobbly. But here’s the crazy part. The Quintessa Corporation seems to have sent instructions back to the ship’s mainframe, while all that was going on, ordering it to decommission the Isomorpher and wipe its database. That’s stuff you’d think accident investigators on the surface would want access to.”

“That’s crazy—hey! Look what just happened to those entries.”

Jack blinked. While the two of them had been talking, the entries had changed drastically.

```
2517.04.16.20:43:54 STRING FREQUENCIES FLUCTUATING BETWEEN U322A and U1.  
LEVEL FIVE INCIDENT CONFIRMED.  
2517.04.16.20:43:57 REDACTED  
2517.04.16.20.45:48 REDACTED  
2517.04.16:20:47:27 REDACTED  
2517.04.16:20:58:57 CREW REVIVAL COMMENCING.  
2517.04.16:21:03:58 CREW REVIVAL COMPLETED.  
2517.04.16:21:08:15 REDACTED  
2517.04.16:21:11:32 REDACTED  
2517.04.16:21:11:33 REDACTED  
2517.04.16:21:11:34 SYSTEM STANDING BY.
```

A second later, they had changed again.

```
2517.04.16.20:43:54 STRING FREQUENCIES FLUCTUATING BETWEEN U322A and U1.  
LEVEL FIVE INCIDENT CONFIRMED.  
2517.04.16:20:58:57 CREW REVIVAL COMMENCING.
```

2517.04.16:21:03:58 CREW REVIVAL COMPLETED.

2517.04.16:21:11:34 SYSTEM STANDING BY.

“Holy shit. Did this thing just cover up...?”

“Everything we did and everything the Quintessa Corporation did. Yeah.”

There was now no record that the Quintessa Corporation had ever been notified of the incident, no record that it had instructed the system to trash the Isomorpher. And, fortunately, no record of two stowaways being given a fifteen-minute head start before the crew woke up.

Kyra’s eyes, meeting hers, were awed and a little horrified. “Everybody’ll just assume that the drive got wiped by the Incident, won’t they?”

Jack nodded, feeling a little ill... and a *lot* confused. What had been in the drive and the database that needed so much protection? Mr. Reilly had told her that the Quintessa Corporation was secretive, but...

“We *cannot* get caught,” she muttered. Aside from the whole issue of being arrested for stowing away, and potentially identified as fugitives from a mental hospital, there was now the issue of what the Quintessa Corporation might do to inconvenient witnesses.

Exactly what they were witnesses of, she wasn’t even sure. But it scared her almost as much as the prospect of straddling a universe that was on *fire*.

“So what do we do?” Kyra asked after a moment, looking around at the closet’s shelves.

“I don’t know. Not yet. If we can just... stay unseen by the *Matador*’s crew, and then by the relief crew, maybe we can get out after they’ve evacuated the ship.”

That, she suddenly thought, could be an hours-long or days-long process, as the ground crews switched cryo-tubes over to portable feeds before moving them, and their occupants, out. Could they manage to stay hidden all that time? A quick check of the schematics showed her a single set of restrooms at the other end of the cryo deck.

“We’re gonna have to ‘hold it’ until the *Matador*’s crew goes to sleep,” she realized. “Or at least, until I can figure out how to switch off active feeds between here and the bathroom while we’re on the move.”

“Fun,” Kyra muttered. “Any chance we can blend in with the ground crew while they’re working? I mean, we’re dressed in pretty standard ground crew gear, right?”

Jack glanced at Kyra’s jumpsuit as she gestured at it. “Maybe. But there could be official logos, or colors, that we don’t have. And they’ll probably be wearing protective—”

She didn’t even try to finish her sentence. Instead, she keyed in one of her highest-level ghost codes, inputting her search parameters once she was sure they would be concealed from the flight deck.

STANDARD PROTECTIVE WEAR FOR LEVEL FIVE INCIDENTS

“Why do they call it ‘Level Five,’ of all things?” Kyra huffed. “What are levels one through four?”

“Dimensions, maybe. The whole point is to connect points in our spacetime with... isomorphic... points elsewhere in the fifth dimension... I think.” Jack frowned. “Maybe ‘Isomorpher’ isn’t such a bad name after all.”

The system wasn't especially cooperative. She had to rephrase the search a dozen times before she found a series of pictures someone had clandestinely taken of an incident on Atreyus 4. The crew seen offloading cryo-tubes in the images wore standard hazmat suits.

A search for emergency protocols on Tangiers Prime generated a list of what ground crews were expected to wear during different emergencies. But she couldn't find references to Level Five Incidents...

"There," Kyra said, pointing to a paragraph at the very bottom of the long screed she'd been reading.

Due to the unpredictable nature of Level Five Incidents, there is no standardized requirement for protective gear. In most cases, the effects of the Level Five Incident will only be directly experienced by the occupants of the distressed vessel. Some secondary damage, however, is possible, if the physical effects (ex: fire) cross the threshold via the body of a crew member or passenger, or via affected materials on the ship. The recommendation is for full hazmat gear.

"Fire," Kyra muttered. "So we could find ourselves on fire."

"It's happened at least once," Jack told her. "So maybe hazmat gear would be a good idea even if we weren't trying to disguise ourselves."

Damn. The crew might be coming to this supply closet after all.

Jack switched over to inventory and breathed a sigh of relief. Each member of the crew had their own hazmat gear stored in their flight deck lockers. The suits she'd seen on the shelves were surplus.

Potentially useful surplus...

Finding recent pictures of the hazmat suits worn on Tangiers Prime took just a few more minutes. Jack pulled one of the suits off of the shelves to compare.

"Did we just catch a really big break?" Kyra breathed.

"I think we did." Some worlds loved to gaudy up standard gear and make it unique, but Tangiers Prime apparently had no such pretensions. The suit in her hand was an exact match. She looked over the details and then began scrounging through the shelves. Hazmat footwear covers, in a variety of sizes, were stored below the pile of suits. She began searching for the gear closest to their sizes.

For the next several hours, Jack and Kyra practiced putting on the suits, miming the ways that they would seal them shut with the included tape. Then, after Jack mentioned the amount of time it would take to offload the cryotubes, they called up instructions for the process of detaching an occupied cryotube from a ship's central hub and attaching it to a portable feed. They watched videos together, quizzed each other on the different buttons and switches they would need to press and in which order—Jack, of course, had no problem remembering, but pretended to make mistakes so that Kyra could correct her and remember them all the better—until finally they heard the crew talking about bunking down for a few hours before it would be time to land.

With the crew asleep, Jack switched off the camera feeds in the cryo deck long enough for them to make use of the restroom. The utility closet, they had decided, was the best place for them to be when the ground crew boarded. They would wait for a lull in the activities, a moment when nobody was within line of sight of the closet door, and then emerge, fully garbed in their hazmat gear, to blend in with the ground crew and help evacuate tubes. Once they were off the ship, they'd do a quick fade and make their escape.

Both of them were sure it couldn't be that easy. But they spent the whole time that the *Matador* crew slept working out every possible complication they could imagine and what they might do in response. Jack found and modified a pair of linked comms, open-channel but scrambled against surveillance, so that they could still talk to each other once they were fully suited up and mingling with the ground crew.

When the *Matador* crew woke up and began preparing for the landing, they were ready. Or as ready as they could possibly be. Their cards, from Helion Prime, were back in their smalls. They had changed into fresh clothes, swapped wigs and carefully put them back on, and hidden the rest of their clothing and toiletries beneath various tools and pieces of hardware in their gear bags. If no one else carried such bags into the ship, they could leave the bags behind, hidden on the closet's top shelf, and buy replacements for their contents on the ground. As the crew took their seats in the flight deck, Kyra and Jack exchanged a grim look.

"This is when things could start getting crazy," Jack whispered.

"How?"

"Well, we don't know what the other universe's Tangiers Prime is like. Odds are it's never been terraformed. So the atmosphere on that side could be really different."

"Like, not breathable?"

"That's a real risk, yeah. But it could be thicker or thinner, too, and that could change *everything* about atmospheric entry."

"How do you *know* all this?" Kyra asked.

Jack decided that she might as well come clean, at least a little. "I have a photographic memory. If I hear it, see it, or read it, I'll remember it forever. As long as I'm paying attention, anyway."

Many people had thought her an odd child because of that. Where most small children thrived on and sought out repetition, watching the same movie dozens of times and repeating the same silly jokes ad nauseam, Jack had always found herself wanting to move on. She could remember whatever it was just fine, and repetition just felt like a waste of time to her. As she grew older and began to understand the social effects of her behavior, she had learned to tolerate and even engage in a certain amount of repetition... and to hide just how far ahead she was reading from her classmates and even teachers.

Right now, though, it was a strategic asset, and Kyra had a right to know it was at their disposal.

"Okay," Kyra said after a moment. "So landing could be rough and unpredictable. Dangerous and fatal, even."

"Pretty much, yeah. And then there's the question of the landing site. If they are trying to have us land in an area that was artificially smoothed out..."

“There could be bumpy terrain on the other side. Shit. No wonder they’re making such a fuss about this. So we could burn up during entry, or crash during landing...”

“Or find ourselves choking on a half-poisonous atmosphere when the doors open.” Jack touched the helmet of her hazmat suit. “Once we try to take these off, anyway.”

“Well, hell. At least it’ll be an adventure, right?” Kyra grinned, but Jack could see the gallows humor in her eyes. The auburn wig, now carefully seated over her braided-back hair, was less jarring on her than the blonde bob—which Jack was now wearing over her much shorter, straight hair—had been.

“Everybody’s gotta die sometime, yeah.” Jack sighed. “At least it’ll be in good company.”

Kyra suddenly looked touched. She reached out and took Jack’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

“*Tangiers Prime Ground Control*,” the pilot said, her voice doubling slightly as it came through from both the flight deck microphone and the comm signal, “*this is the Scarlet Matador on approach for our entry window, requesting clearance to proceed.*”

“Scarlet Matador, *this is Tangiers Prime Ground Control. Your descent vectors are looking good. You are cleared for landing. Do you have any anomalies to report at this time?*”

“*None detected yet, Ground Control. Scans indicate no atmospheric variances in density or temperature. Fingers crossed.*”

“*Godspeed, Scarlet Matador. We’re setting up emergency staging at your landing site.*”

“*Thank you. Entering the upper atmosphere now. Adjusting descent angle... resistance is textbook. So far, so good.*”

The ship shivered a little beneath Jack’s crossed legs, through the floor of the utility closet. The hull groaned.

“*Looking good from our end too. You’re nearing comms blackout.*”

“*Roger that. Talk to you on the other side.*”

“*Looking forward to it, Matador.*”

For several minutes, only the hushed voices of the flight deck crew came through the utility closet’s comm speaker. Everyone seemed calm, although Jack had listened to comm recordings from some legendary accidents and almost-accidents that sounded every bit as nonchalant. Flight crews tended to have nerves of steel. She wished she could have watched Fry crash-landing the *Hunter-Gratzner*.

She probably never even broke a sweat... Johns had obviously been full of shit.

“*...do you read? Scarlet Matador, this is Tangiers Prime Ground Control, do you read?*”

“*Ground Control, this is the Scarlet Matador, reading you loud and clear.*”

“*Welcome back, Matador. We show you centered in your lane. Any anomalies to report?*”

“*None yet, Ground—hold on. I’m picking up some... Ground Control, please verify our landing coordinates.*”

“*33.5731 degrees north, 7.5898 degrees west.*”

“*Ground Control, we have an anomaly. We are intermittently picking up a large body of water on our scanners at the designated location.*”

“*Scarlet Matador, please send us your readings.*”

“*Transmitting.*”

There was a pause.

“They’d better come up with something fast,” the Captain grumbled. “We’ll be there in fifteen more minutes.”

“Scarlet Matador,” Ground Control finally said, “*you will attempt landing at the coordinates. You will need to spiral in and then hover over the landing site, just above the detected water level. We will tether you at that height and bring in support scaffolding. Ground support has been notified of the revised plan. Do you need further instruction?*”

“*No, but thank you. Adjusting approach trajectory now.*”

“*Once the ship is secured, we recommend you put on your protective gear.*”

“*Great minds think alike. God only knows what could be in that water.*”

“*Your readings indicate normal saltwater. About 28, 29 degrees... bathwater temperatures. Might be a tropical paradise on the other side.*”

“*Might have sharks, too.*”

Ground Control laughed. “*Well, if you find any coconuts, you pull them over to this side.*”

“*Sounds like a plan. We’ll have a luau.*”

The captain turned off her microphone for a moment, her voice only coming in from the flight deck feed. “Tropical paradise my ass...”

One of the other crew members started singing an ancient sea chanty. “Just sit right back and you’ll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip, that started from this tropic port, aboard this tiny ship...”

“Don’t be an idiot.” The captain switched her microphone back on. “*Ground Control, my readings are showing a five meter depth to the water. Seafloor appears to have roughly fifteen centimeters of variance from the tarmac of this ’verse. Can you confirm?*”

“*Roger, Scarlet Matador. The good news is that means you won’t sink. Adjusting landing plan accordingly. We will bolster the landing gear to match the seafloor height. Prepare to receive new trajectories. You will still want to come in at a hover and then do a slow descent.*”

Jack looked over at Kyra. “Once they land, it’ll be time to put on our suits. They’ll be doing the same thing... and they won’t open up until they’re secure. Then we watch and wait. We’ll put on our helmets last, when we’re ready to join the ground crew.”

Kyra gave Jack a worried look. “Do you know how to swim?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty good at it. Just wasn’t sure if you came from a world where people swam. Most of the girls at the hospital didn’t know how. Not much swimming on a world that’s surface is only 10% water.”

Jack grinned. “I’m good. But... we should try *not* to swim in front of the locals.”

Kyra snickered. “Yeah, that might look a little weird.”

The floor began to tilt to one side, gradually and gently. Jack could feel them turning, a sensation that left her a little queasy since everything around her showed no signs of the motion. The tilt steepened, and the turning sensation grew more pronounced. The ship shivered against some turbulence.

“We’re spiraling in,” she told Kyra. “Another moment and they’ll switch to repulser engines so we can hover.”

Kyra nodded, looking a little pale and nauseated.

The switch was a little rough. The ship shuddered, hard, as the repulsers switched on, and wobbled for several gut-clenching seconds before settling into a strange new attitude that reminded Jack of a floating dock.

CLANG!

She and Kyra both jumped.

“What the fuck was that?” Kyra gasped.

CLANG!

“I don’t—oh! They said they were going to anchor the ship while it hovered, didn’t they? I’ll bet that’s what it is.”

The loud noise repeated six more times, from various directions, before stopping.

“Scarlet Matador, *this is Ground Control. Platforms are in position below your landing gear. Begin dialing down your repulsers and descend.*”

“Copy that.”

Jack could feel it, the moment the ship touched the surface of the water in the other universe. Suddenly there was resistance. Something wanted to keep the ship floating, even as the gravity of U1’s Tangiers Prime was trying to draw it down.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the *Scarlet Matador* descended the final five meters. It was a remarkably gentle landing for one so harrowing.

“Ground Control, *this is the Scarlet Matador. We have touched down. We will need additional anchoring. There’s some tidal forces at work on the other side.*”

“Roger that, Scarlet Matador. *We are moving in to bolster your anchor points. Boarding will commence in twenty minutes. Please be in full protective gear at that time.*”

Twenty minutes was just enough time to finish getting ready. Jack and Kyra tested their comms, making sure they’d hear each other’s voices if they whispered but not be deafened if either of them had to shout. Jack switched the video feed over to external cameras so that they could watch the approaching ground crews and make sure that their protective gear would blend in.

“It’s like trying to watch someone on the other side of an aquarium,” Jack murmured to Kyra after a moment.

“Never tried that. But this is seriously trippy.”

The cameras kept registering the presence of water on the surface. The crews preparing to board the ship sometimes appeared to be doing so in open air, but frequently looked distorted by water, while the cameras struggled to refocus.

“Ground control, *please be advised. The water level seems to be rising slowly. It’s now at six meters. Please enter via the upper decks to prevent flooding on board the Matador.*”

“Copy, Matador. *We will use flyers to transport you and the passengers. Keep us advised of water levels. We don’t want to drown anybody.*”

Hanging the Geiger counters and other detection instruments on their belts—the approaching ground crew all had them—and preparing to don their helmets, Jack and Kyra watched as the *Matador* crew approached the airlock that had been chosen as the initial entry point. Large, one deck above the cryo deck—which, Jack realized with a shudder, was fully underwater in the other universe—and opening on a spacious room, it made a good staging point for the rescue operation that was about to begin.

Hopefully.

The captain stepped forward, wearing a hazmat suit emblazoned with the *Scarlet Matador's* logo.

Good, Jack thought. Her suit, and Kyra's, would suggest even *more* that they were from Tangiers Prime and not the ship. Just as long as they could stay above the water, anyway.

On the other side of the airlock, the leader of the ground crew approached the door.

Jack realized she was holding her breath as the unsealing commenced.

"Captain," the leader said, stepping into the airlock. His voice was the voice of the Ground Control officer who had talked the ship down. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Granted," the *Matador's* captain said with obvious relief. "It's good to meet you in pers—"

A wave broke against the ship, splashing through the open airlock and smacking the captain down to the floor.

22.

The Phantom Tides of New Marrakesh

High tide crested some two meters above the *Scarlet Matador*'s hull and began to recede almost two hours after the first attempt to board the ship. Four hours after that, the water had withdrawn completely from the landing site. With no idea how long it would be until the phantom tide turned again, the ground crew moved quickly to reboard the *Matador* and evacuate its occupants.

Jack, who had listened to the comm discussions about the planned boarding, had also determined that Tangiers Prime's spaceport was another customer of her father's old security company. Well before the ground crew boarded, she had added her pseudonym, "P. Finch," and Kyra's "J. Houlot" pseudonym to the roster of miscellaneous ground crew workers press-ganged into managing the evacuation. They attached their name tags, which Jack had previously hidden on the closet's top shelf, to their suits, and even joined the roll call over the comms, reporting for duty from inside the ship. Jack had to nudge Kyra when it was her turn to respond; the conversation was in Arabic, which hadn't been spoken on New Dartmouth or in the hospital, but which Jack had picked up pretty quickly in the Al-Walid household. In the hurried pandemonium that followed, nobody noticed when Jack temporarily "glitched" the camera feeds and they slipped out of the utility closet to join the relief efforts.

It helped that both of them had run through simulations of disconnecting cryotubes dozens of times. Their speed and competence got them more than a few words of gratitude from actual members of the ground crew, some of them even in English.

Two hours in, after carrying a liberated cryotube down to the waiting transport, Jack and Kyra joined the team that would reconnect them at the other end in the hospital. True to Ground Control's word, they were transported via air. Below them, the city spread out. Trying not to rubberneck like a tourist, Jack studied it, noting that there appeared to be a coastline to one side, running along the land from the spaceport to the urban center, and wondering which universe that water existed in.

Most of the other members of the ground crew were chatting in Arabic, too quickly for Jack to follow what they were saying, but a few were talking quietly in English nearby.

"Man," one of their coworkers, wearing a tag identifying him in four languages as T. Alami, Ground Operations, gave an expressive, exaggerated shudder before leaning back in his seat. "This whole thing gives me the jeebies bigtime."

"Seriously," another—H. Aziz, Ramp Agent—chimed in. "I kept expecting some kinda monster to come charging around the corner at us, any second."

"I wonder what it's like for *them*," Alami said after a moment. "You heard about the captain getting knocked over by an invisible wave, right?"

"Yeah," Aziz groaned. "Jeez. Tomlin was standing right in front of her at the time."

"He's the arrival controller, right? The one in charge of this mess?"

“Yeah. Good guy. I’m glad he was on duty when the shit went down. Khalil says he slept in the control tower last night so he’d be there if they tried to reach him.”

That, Jack thought, explained why Ground Control had always answered with the same voice. She’d assumed it was an AI until a man with that voice walked in through the airlock.

Aziz tugged at her helmet, adjusting it a little. “Damn, I want out of this gear. Anyway, Tomlin said that after she fell down, he could *see* water all over her. Kinda. Like, her hazmat suit looked wet. And so did the floor of the ship. But he couldn’t see any of the water itself and there wasn’t a drop on him.”

“That’s *mental*.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to get done with this and go home.”

Now it was Alami’s turn to groan. “Don’t you wish. You heard that we’re all supposed to get debriefed by the Quintessa Corporation rep before we can go, right?”

“Shit, I forgot. Damn it...”

Jack and Kyra exchanged a silent look. They were going to have to find a way to ditch their gear and get away from the rest of the ground crew before that happened.

At the hospital, Jack caught a glimpse of a man with Ground Control’s voice, now out of hazmat gear and in a smart military uniform, arguing with a hospital suit about the elevation of different hospital wings. His Arabic, she noticed, was as flawless and un-accented as his English. The laden ground crew milled about for a few minutes until word came down that, in an abundance of caution, the cryotubes would be taken to the hospital’s highest levels. Patients on those levels were being relocated to other wings in preparation.

Probably a smart move, Jack thought, but shuddered a little. There had been times, on the brief flight over, when she could feel the other universe’s pull, the sensation that the transport’s floor was illusory and she might fall through it at any moment. She hoped that wouldn’t actually happen to any of the cryotubes... or their occupants, once they were released.

Another transport flight arrived with even more cryotubes. As the area became increasingly crowded, Jack nudged Kyra and nodded towards a door with a familiar keypad beside it.

One Ghost Code later, they were hurrying down a flight of steps with signs that pointed to a garage, stripping off their suits as they went. The lights on all of the stairwell cameras were dark, having switched off the moment Jack input the code. In ten minutes, they would switch back on and the system would report a minor power glitch as cover.

“Damn,” Kyra whisper-hissed as they went. “That Paris guy must’ve been some really hot shit. His codes work *everywhere*.”

Jack grinned and nodded, recalling how she’d sneaked up on him and put a boomerang to his throat.

At the base of the stairs, they straightened their wigs one more time before wadding up the hazmat suits into the smallest bundles that they could and stuffing them—along with their “tool bags”—into a pair of discarded shopping bags Jack had spotted on the way. Now dressed in ordinary street clothes and carrying the bags, looking like two ordinary teens who had been out store-hopping, they walked out into the hospital’s parking garage.

They were one level below the street entrance, Jack figured, and she was suddenly glad they hadn’t gone any lower. The ramp down to the next level ended abruptly, just a third of the way down, at a smooth plain of what looked like drying sand with seaweed strewn across its surface.

Something small and crustacean-like was scuttling across the sand. As they watched, it seemed to pass through the concrete of the ramp and vanish.

Jack was just glad that they hadn't encountered the other 'verse's ground level *before* they'd been able to leave the stairway.

"We'd better find some higher ground fast," Kyra said next to her. "This part of town is definitely going to be underwater when the tide comes back in."

Jack nodded. "That Tomlin guy seemed to think that anything at an elevation of twenty meters above sea level—I mean, *this* 'verse's sea level—should be safe."

"How high up is the hospital's ground level?" Kyra asked.

"Ten meters above." Jack grimaced. "Let's get somewhere where we can pull up an elevation map. We'll pick a good spot to go to ground above the water."

Nobody gave them a second glance as they left the hospital garage and headed toward a cluster of towers in the distance.

Tangiers Prime, like many large colonies, provided street signs in multiple languages. Arabic topped the signs, followed by Berber, then French, and finally English. As Jack recalled, most of its original settlers had been Moroccan, although it had diversified in the centuries since.

"What's this city called?" Kyra asked, as she scanned one of the street signs and shook her head.

"New Marrakesh." Jack led the way, mentally sorting through all of the guidebooks she'd flipped through when she had originally set out for this destination. The plan, back then, had been to arrive on Tangiers Prime roughly a year after she had left Deckard's World, wait a few weeks, and then either bribe her way onto or stow away on one of the semi-annual supply ships headed for Furya and her father, a mere two-month journey away. It had all been timed so carefully, until it had fallen through so spectacularly.

Well, she'd made it this far. Finally.

After a few wrong turns, they found their way to an open air market that mixed centuries-old aesthetics, from old Morocco of Earth, with contemporary technology: carved wood screens with elaborate geometries concealed crass, ordinary information and banking kiosks. Before anything else, Jack sat down in front of a banking kiosk to acquire a little bit of the local currency.

And got a nasty shock.

Error. Card unreadable.

The kiosk spat the card—one that should have had roughly the equivalent of one hundred New Dirhams on it—back out of its slot. Jack felt as though she had just been tossed into ice water.

One by one, she and Kyra tried all of their money cards, with the same results. Unreadable. Unreadable. Unreadable.

"What the *Hell*?" Kyra hissed, struggling not to draw attention to them by raising her voice. "I *know* these were working back on Helion!"

Back on Helion...

"Ohhhh, *damn* it," Jack groaned. "They're straddling universes just like we are."

“Oh.” Kyra sat down hard next to her. “Shit. So they’re only half here?”

“Yeah. Maybe that’s weakened their magnetic charge too much. Or maybe the other universe’s string frequencies are interfering with it.” Jack picked up one of the cards and held it to her, trying to *will* it to be part of just *one* universe. *We are in U1. Only U1. The thing in my hand belongs here and nowhere else...*

She sighed and pushed it into the slot, expecting the machine to spit it right back out again.

Welcome. Please provide your passcode.

“Holy... fuck.” She stared at the screen for a moment before giving Kyra an enormous grin.

Taking no chances, she had the banking kiosk issue replacements for each of the cards they had brought from Helion. Somehow, her Hail Mary was actually *working*, but she wasn’t going to assume that it would stick. They needed cards made out of materials strictly bound to *this* ’verse.

Aware that they might be running out of time, she decided to hold off on acquiring fake IDs for the moment. Instead, she pulled up an elevation map of the New Marrakesh area—noting, as she did so, that the coastline she’d glimpsed from the flyer was real—and identified which parts of town were safely above the other universe’s hypothetical high tide mark. Next up was a search for affordable rooms for rent in those regions.

“Fuck,” she muttered after half an hour of searching. “Why does every town in the Federacy make its heights so damn expensive?”

They had only two available options, both in an area that she suspected had gone into decline and was probably a little dangerous. *Oh well. We’ll probably fit right in...*

Kyra looked over the listings. “I like that one,” she said, touching one of the images on the screen. “Top floor. The higher the better, just in case.”

“Okay...” Jack submitted their application and deposit, putting a hold on the unit. After a whispered conference with Kyra, she entered the security code they agreed upon to use as a key in place of their not-yet-generated fake ID cards, aware that the option to do so indicated how seedy the place would probably be. “Let’s go claim it. We’ll figure out the rest once we’ve got it.”

Kyra quirked her lips. “I know that look. You think it’s got bugs?”

“We may have to fight them for territory, yeah.”

They took a moment to study a city map before setting off. The roads narrowed and became more and more winding as they hiked upward, the buildings becoming less ornate and more weather beaten and grungy. She hadn’t been wrong in her assessment; in the heights or not, this part of town was *not* prosperous. The haves and have-nots of New Marrakesh, she noted, weren’t divided along racial or ethnic lines; she and Kyra didn’t particularly stand out.

Score one for Tangiers Prime...

Her father, she mused, had been right about Deckard’s World.

It had been during one of the loudest pre-divorce arguments her parents had, when he’d shouted at her mother that they were raising their daughter on a racist planet. Thinking now about the cross-section of people she’d met while living on Helion, and saw in the low-rent district of New Marrakesh, she finally understood what he’d been so upset about. Virtually

everyone in their moderately well-to-do part of town, and almost all of the kids at her school, had been white and had treated anyone with darker skin, who showed up in “their” parts of town, with unease and suspicion. Or as invisible, if they were gardening or engaging in some other role of quiet servitude. She’d gone offworld too quickly to even think about it at the time, but if she had needed to try to hide out in what passed for slums in her hometown, she never could have blended in.

Jack wondered if it ever occurred to members of her family, outside of her father, just how *unjust* all of that was.

“*Deckard’s World!*” the tourist brochures all touted, “*Recreating the best elements of small-town America!*” How much of that, she wondered, had been code for something far less pure and noble? How much of that code did her family understand and agree with?

They found their building as the light level started to change and the wispy clouds began to turn into fuchsia streamers above them. Their code opened the inner door into a dimly lit lobby. Several lights were either missing or burned out. A sign was taped over an elevator door, scrawled in Arabic and Berber but forgoing French and English.

Fortunately, Jack *had* been enrolled in “remedial” Arabic classes while she lived with the Al-Walids.

“Elevator broken. Please use the stairs.” She quirked an eyebrow at Kyra.

“No wonder the top floor unit was available.”

“At least we don’t have to tiptoe on these stairs,” Jack laughed. “C’mon.”

The stairwell smelled. Jack tried to ignore the odors—most of them biological—as much as she could. Maybe, once they knew their way around the town better and she’d set up some more resources through the other Ghost Codes—assuming those hadn’t been discovered and shut down while she and Kyra were in cryo—they could pick out a nicer place.

For now, it would do.

Eight flights up and they were on “their” level. Jack identified the unit they had reserved and punched in the security code they had chosen.

The space was cramped, musty, and dim. Jack touched the panel by the door and, after a few seconds, lights came up. One flickered, threatening to go back out at any moment.

The unit was furnished... more or less. Jack had the suspicion that someone had been evicted a while back and hadn’t been allowed to clear out most of their things before being given the bum’s rush. There was a ratty-looking couch and a rattier-looking chair, arranged to face a pitted and scarred table that had probably once had a vid screen sitting on it. Behind the table and a small half-wall divider, pots and pans, plates, cups, and utensils were jumbled on a kitchen counter, awaiting a washing that might be weeks or even months overdue.

“Yeah, we’re definitely going to be doing battle against the bugs,” Kyra sighed. “I sure can pick ’em.”

A small hallway led off to the left. Jack peeked into it and realized that it led to a single bedroom with an attached bath. Again, the rooms were technically furnished, with dilapidated furniture strewn with clothing and various possessions that had been left behind by the last tenant, most of which probably needed to be disposed of. The air had a chemical aftertaste to it; the place had been fumigated even if it hadn’t been cleaned.

“I think the battle with the bugs is over. We’re just gonna have to dispose of their remains.”

“Really not much better,” Kyra said beside her. “But what the hell...?”

She walked over to one of the windows, which had its curtains drawn and shades pulled, but which was leaking vibrant, magenta light around its edges. She pulled everything open and then gasped.

“Damn, Jack, you gotta see this.”

The window faced west. Twilight was fully upon New Marrakesh. The clouds had caught fire, molten orange at the horizon rising up to lava red and fuchsia, through dusky rose and a deep, muted purple before the color faded back to dark gray. The sky, between the clouds, was a gem-bright shade of blue that felt, to Jack, like it was searing its way into her heart. The shoreline she’d spotted from the flyer was visible, their lower perspective making it seem closer to the city than she remembered, its water glittering and reflecting the clouds’ riotous shades. Sloping down to that shoreline, New Marrakesh glowed like the mass of jewelry that had spilled out from one of Paris’s “sarcophagi” when he had ransacked his goods for weaponry, blazing and sparkling in the beam of Fry’s flashlight.

Jack wasn’t sure when she’d last seen anything so beautiful.

“You’d think, with a view like this, the owners of this building would have no trouble renting,” she breathed, feeling awed.

“Okay, maybe I *can* pick ’em,” Kyra murmured back. She looked mesmerized. Had she ever seen a view like this before?

Jack took a closer look around the unit. The woodwork, she realized, was carved—or at least, where it hadn’t been buried under a dozen coats of paint, there were signs of elaborate Marrakesh-style embellishments. Decades ago, she thought, this building had been *the* hot commodity in the town, and its views had commanded a premium.

She wondered why that had changed, exactly.

“Hey, Jack... uh... I think the tide may be rising again.” Kyra’s voice had become uncertain.

Jack looked out the window again and felt her breath catch in her throat. The shoreline had moved even closer.

“The base of this building is twenty-two meters above Tangiers Prime sea level,” Jack told Kyra, trying to reassure herself at the same time. “We’re on the ninth floor, roughly another twenty-four meters up. We’ll be fine.”

The lights along the shoreline were dimming, as if veiled... or overlaid by water from another universe. Moving lights of vehicles began to vanish and appear along that edge... and the edge was creeping closer.

At high tide, Jack realized, all of New Marrakesh’s downtown would disappear beneath the water. Her eyes were drawn to the glittering twenty-story central tower of the hospital. She hoped that all of the quarantined passengers and crew of the *Scarlet Matador* had been moved to its top levels by now.

Behind her, Kyra was moving around the room. Jack turned to look.

Kyra had set down her shopping bag by the bathroom door and had draped her auburn wig over it. She was gathering up all of the strewn clothing decorating the floor and furniture of the room and piling it on the bed. When she finished, she pulled out the corners of the dirty sheets and blankets on the bed and turned the clothing pile into a wrapped package.

“I saw a chute labeled ‘incinerator’ out in the hallway,” she explained, as she hauled the large package off of the stripped mattress. “Back in a few minutes.”

Jack nodded, aware that she needed to start helping with the clean-up too, but drawn back to the view out the window. The waters had reached the city center and the gaudy lights of the market square, that they had sat in only a few hours before, were going dim. What had formerly been the shoreline had gone completely dark.

It’s okay, Jack tried to reassure herself. It’ll come close to where we are, but it won’t go over it. Kyra picked the perfect place for us. We can learn how to time the tides from this window, and we can plan trips to town around them. And plan when we can get off-planet around the tides, too. We’ll be fine.

We’ll be fine.

They spent the next hour hauling things out of the bedroom, stripping it down to the basics and keeping only things that were already clean or could be cleaned easily. None of the clothes were in their sizes, and most of them were so stained that there was no point in offering them to the building’s other tenants.

They left the other rooms for later; they were far too tired to do the whole place. The last—thirty? Forty? God knew how many—hours were finally catching up with them. Once the stained mattress was clean and the sources of various unpleasant smells in the room had been eliminated, and they had wrestled the windows open to let in some fresh air, they took their small collections of money cards out of their smalls, tucked them into a battered dresser drawer, and collapsed on the mattress together.

Jack later thought that she’d fallen asleep the moment that her head touched the mattress. She didn’t even remember to take off her shoes.

She dreamed that she was back on the crash planet, watching the eclipse overtake the sky. But now, instead of strange creatures emerging from rock formations, even more bizarre-looking things were emerging from the ground below her. One of them reached out with a warm, wet tentacle and wrapped it around her ankle—

She woke up, gasping. Warm water slapped her foot again.

The room was bathed in strange, bright moonlight that seemed to pierce the ceiling as it fell. It glittered on the rippling water sloshing back and forth a few inches below the mattress. Another wave rolled across the surface, just above the height of the mattress, and splashed her again.

“Oh *fuck*,” Kyra said beside her.

Jack gave her friend a worried look and climbed out of the bed, sloshing her way to the window. Ground Control—Tomlin—had said that the water was the temperature of bathwater. He hadn’t been wrong. About that much, at least.

An enormous full moon hung in the sky almost directly above them. Beneath it, sparkling waves had engulfed all but the tallest buildings of New Marrakesh. The water, she calculated, was almost forty-seven meters above local sea level. Only the top five floors of the hospital tower, now an island jutting out of the dark waters, were still visible in the distance, an impossible lighthouse.

And the phantom tide was, Jack realized, as another wave broke against her legs, still rising.

23.

The Ocean of Elsewhere

Audrey MacNamera had never been afraid of the water.

Back on Deckard's World, terraformed to be a rustic back-country utopia by its planners, rivers and lakes had abounded. When people went on vacations, swimming was one of the central activities. As a toddler, Audrey had learned how to move through the water like a little fish while she was still trying to master walking on land.

But she had never found herself in the middle of an ocean before. No body of water, ocean or otherwise, had ever come to claim her like this.

"Come on," Jack told Kyra, slogging her way through the thigh-high water toward the apartment unit's outer door, "let's see if we can get to the roof."

"Our cards—!" Kyra protested.

"All part of U1. They're safe. As long as *we* make it through this, they'll be waiting for us right where we left them."

Kyra splashed after her. "What about our gear?"

They had both left their bags sitting on the floor when they had hit the sack.

"Probably already too late for most of the clothes and the electronics," Jack said, pulling the door open and marveling at how it and the water *ignored* each other's *existence*. "The rest'll be here when we get back. It can't pass through the walls any more than we can."

"But—"

"We figured we'd have to ditch it all if nobody in the ground crew was carrying bags, right? It's all replaceable. *You're* not, and neither am I." Jack found the stairwell, again finding herself surprised as the water put up no resistance against the door's opening.

Theirs was the top floor, but Jack had noticed that the stairs continued past their doorway, indicating roof access.

"Please be unlocked, please be unlocked, please be unlocked..."

No such luck. Jack stared at the elaborate locks on the door, the overkill emphasizing that past tenants had used the roof for purposes that the landlords had taken issue with. Even if she had a really good set of lockpicks, she probably couldn't have gotten through the door.

"Fuck," Kyra muttered. "All this way and now we drown?"

Jack shook her head. "We can go out a window. It's late enough that nobody'll notice us floating, especially if we stay close to the building wall."

"Jack, look." Kyra pointed at the steps below them. "No footprints. What the hell?"

Kyra was right. Under normal circumstances, their wet footprints should have been on every step.

"The water's in one universe, and the stairs are in another. The only place they meet is in *us*." Jack shook her head, really glad that she'd *earned* her A+ from Mr. Reilly. She didn't think she'd have managed to wrap her head around what was happening otherwise.

“And our clothes, damn it. Hey, if we buy clothes here in New Marrakesh, they’ll stay dry, right?” Kyra started down the stairs as she talked.

“They should. I mean, the water’ll pass right through them, so *we’ll* still get wet, but...” Jack stopped talking for a second, shaking her head as she followed Kyra back down. “Damn. It’s just too weird to think about for long.”

The water had continued rising, now soaking the crotch of Jack’s pants when she reached their floor again.

Kyra saw her grimace. “Hey, at least it’s warm, right?”

“Yeah, and at least neither of us are on our fuckin’ periods.” She was a little amazed by that; in the past, her period had a habit of showing up at the worst possible moment.

If it starts tonight, I’ll know why.

“Shit!” Kyra gasped. “You don’t think there actually *are* sharks in these waters, do you?”

“I seriously hope not.” Jack opened the door to their unit again, careful about where she placed her feet. A lot of loose junk was still lying in wait in the main room, hidden by water that couldn’t actually touch any of it. “You saw that little crustacean by the ramp, though, right? Something lives in this ocean. Probably a lot of somethings.”

Another wave rolled through the apartment, raising the water to hip level. Re-entering the bedroom, Jack moved for the nearer of the two windows, which faced south. Its view was less impressive than the west window, but more useful right then. It faced a stand of cedars that were taller than the building, cutting down on the chances that two floating girls would be seen by a midnight stroller. She shoved the screen up and leaned out.

“The moon’s almost over us,” she told Kyra, who was leaning out beside her. “The tide should peak when it is, and then it’ll start to go down. We have less than an hour until it peaks.”

“Why’s it so goddamn big?” Kyra asked.

Jack was wondering the same thing herself. Nearly directly overhead, definitely full, and with a diameter five times as big as any satellite she’d seen on Deckard’s World or Helion, the moon shone balefully down on them, almost too bright to look at. To the southeast, Jack could see two other, smaller moons, both gibbous, halfway between the huge moon and the horizon.

“Oh my God,” Jack said, realization hitting her. She pointed at the other moons. “See those? Those are Tangiers Prime’s normal moons. I mean, the two on our universe’s star charts. There’s no *mention* of a third moon, especially one this size. No wonder the tide’s so high.”

“Wait, so this moon only exists in the other universe?” Kyra squinted up at it. “We’re the only ones who can see it?”

“I think we need some other way of referring to that, just in case people hear us.”

“What, the *moon*?”

“The other universe. We keep talking like that and somebody’s bound to notice.” Jack was nerving herself up to climb out of the window. Part of her, on some level, could sense how it was empty space below her, rather than a dozen or so fathoms of water, the same way that she’d felt the empty air below her on the *other* side of the threshold when she’d been on board the flyer. It was a vertiginous sensation. She wondered if Kyra was feeling it too; the older girl hadn’t climbed out the window yet, either, and *she* was something of a daredevil.

“So like, when we say ‘here’ we mean U1?” Yeah, Kyra was stalling too. “And when we’re talking about the other universe, we say we’re talking about somewhere else?”

“Elsewhere. Yeah. We’re talking about *Elsewhere*.”

“Elsewhere. I like the sound of that.” Kyra was exploring the brickwork of the building’s outer wall with her fingers, testing for handholds. Stalling. “The reality of it? Not so much.”

“At least we’re not on fire—whoa!” Jack gasped as two military copters flew low over their building, headed west at top speed.

“The *hell*?” Kyra gasped. “Where are *they* going in such a hurry?”

“The hospital.” Jack suddenly felt terribly cold despite the balmy water temperature. She ducked under the window—realizing, as she did so, that the water had risen to the point where she had to immerse herself completely—and then swam toward the west window. There was no point in walking anymore; swimming was faster. She shoved the window screen upward and pulled herself partway through the opening. Her head broke the surface of the water just as a third copter roared by.

The first two copters were closing on the hospital tower. As she watched, they turned on searchlights, illuminating the tower’s roof. Only four floors of the tower were still visible; the water had almost completely engulfed the floor below them, just as it had more than halfway engulfed the apartment floor.

Were there people on the roof?

The *Scarlet Matador* had been a significantly larger ship than the *Hunter-Gratzner*, Jack recalled. Fry had mentioned that there had been forty passengers and a crew of five on board that ship. The *Matador* had carried five times as many passengers, plus a crew of nine. How many tower floors had they had to open to accommodate more than two hundred patients? More than the top four?

How many of those two hundred patients were trapped on the roof now, watching the waters rise and praying that they began to recede before there was no building *left*?

She found herself imagining what it must have been like for them, waking to the tide’s arrival, calling for help from people who couldn’t feel or even see the rising waters. Had they even been warned about the kind of threat they might be facing? Had the hospital staff?

The moon was almost directly overhead. Jack hoped her limited understanding of how tides worked was correct—despite its abundant rivers and lakes, most of the bodies of water on Deckard’s World had been too small to have active tides—and that soon, very soon, the water would begin to drop back down.

Kyra had joined her at the west window, also watching the long-distance drama at the hospital. “We’re coming up on a moment of truth here.”

“You mean, in or out?” Jack, halfway out the window but still loathe to climb out completely, glanced back through its glass and into the bedroom. “I think there’s a real chance that this thing is going to start going down before it reaches our ceiling.”

“Is that a chance we should take?” Kyra looked dubious.

“Shit. I don’t know. I *do* know that as soon as it’s safe to, I’m getting the best lockpick set I can find so we can sleep up on the damned roof.”

Kyra looked like she was suppressing laughter. “You pick pockets *and* locks?”

Maybe it wasn’t the time for such things to be amusing. Or maybe, in a moment like that, humor was the only thing left to hold onto. Jack closed her eyes and snickered. “You got me, Merc, I’m a born criminal...”

In that moment, it no longer seemed like such a terrible thing.

“Jack?” Kyra asked a short time later. The laughter had subsided and both of them were somberly watching the rooftop evacuation underway at the hospital.

“Yeah?”

“How are we going to deal with this? I mean, high tides happen, like, twice a day, right?”

It was a sobering thought. Twice a day, every day, the tide was going to roll in and bury all of the places they needed access to under fathoms of water. Even trying to get off-world would be tricky, very nearly impossible, unless they could manage to board a ship during low tide and have it launch before the waves could return. There had been a few-hours-long window when New Marrakesh was dry in both 'verses, but...

Could they actually manage to chart out the tidal patterns of a three-moon world with enough accuracy to avoid getting drowned?

Or, Jack thought with sick dread, were their deaths preordained now, the way most of the *Hunter-Gratzner's* passengers' deaths had been from the moment it hit atmo for the last time?

“I don't know,” she admitted. “I'm sorry, Kyra. I didn't mean to get you into this mess.”

“Hey now. You got me *out* of a mess, remember?” The lost look had fled the older girl's face, and her mouth quirked with humor. “Fuck New Dartmouth. I never want to see that shithole again. I'd rather get eaten by a shark from another dimension. Least that'll give me some fun stories to tell in Heaven, right?”

Something about that caught Jack's attention. *Eaten by a shark from another dimension...*

What would that meal be like for such a creature? How much of its meal would actually be substantial? What would be left behind on the other side? Gruesome as the thought was, suddenly Jack found herself wondering about the conflicting laws of physics their bodies were dealing with at that very moment.

They were floating in water, buoyed up by it, because it existed in one universe even as open air existed in another. The water could flow unimpeded through walls that simply didn't exist for it, but they couldn't do the same. For them, the walls and the water were both real, and somehow both sets of universes' rules simultaneously affected them.

If I finished climbing out of the window and let go, I would float, not fall... And yet a part of her could feel the gravity of U1's New Marrakesh trying to contradict that. She wondered, suddenly, if she *would* float, or if she would find herself not falling but sinking down to what was simultaneously street and seafloor... and drowning.

Shuddering with the thought, she pulled herself through the window and back into the mostly-flooded bedroom. She needed to test this, find out, but not somewhere where the result of her experiment could kill her.

Kyra surfaced next to her a moment later. “What are you doing?”

“I need to test something,” she said, treading water. That didn't feel any more difficult than it ever had. “Before we do something that could get us killed. I need to figure out how this all works.”

“How what all works?”

“Being in two universes at once.” Jack kicked up, arcing her body so that she could float on her back.

The water held her up.

“Oh,” Kyra said. “*Oh*. Fuck, I didn’t even *think* of that. I kept feeling like I was gonna plummet straight down but I couldn’t figure out why.”

“Looks like we’re probably safe from that, at least.” Jack let herself drift for a moment. If the stakes weren’t so damned high, she thought, what they were doing right then could have been *fun*.

She mentally slapped herself. Their fellow passengers from the *Scarlet Matador* could be dying, right that moment, and she was thinking about *fun*?

She made herself focus on her task again. The resistance of the water was holding her up in both worlds, even though the lack of resistance in the other world should have pulled her down. And the obstruction of the walls and doors, floors and ceilings, limited her movement in virtually every direction even though none of them existed in the world of water—in Elsewhere. Higher densities, in either ’verse, trumped lower densities and shaped the way she could interact with either world, or both of them at once. She could fly through the air of U1 by swimming through Elsewhere’s water... but she couldn’t pass through U1’s walls as she swam.

But... what if I could?

“*It can’t pass through the walls any more than we can,*” she’d said to Kyra, secure in the knowledge that even if the tide caught up their meager possessions and whirled them around the apartment, it couldn’t pull them out into the open water if all of the doors and windows were shut. Too much of them belonged to both ’verses.

But earlier that day, she’d held one of the recalcitrant universe-straddling cash cards in her hand, trying to will it to *just* exist in the universe where its strip and its chip needed to be read...
...and it had worked.

Was there a way for them to do that with *themselves*? Orient themselves to just one universe? Slip through walls as if they weren’t there, or, alternately... stand on the ground, with a sea engulfing them on every side... and breathe air and not even feel damp?

Could she will *herself* back into the *dry* version of their unit, the one that existed in U1 alone?

Could she choose to be bound by just one world’s physics?

Fuck. I have to try. If it somehow works, we won’t have to worry about when high tide is likely to be.

Jack swam over to the corner of the room with the grubby bed.

If I can make myself fall through the air instead of floating on water... I want to fall on something soft.

Floating above the mattress, Jack closed her eyes, concentrating on the way her body had felt as she was going to sleep a few hours earlier. Dry air on dry skin, dry clothes against her skin as well, the cool, comfortable sensation of having taken off that damned blonde wig... dry. Surrounded by air. Held down by gravity that air wasn’t strong enough to resist.

*I am not in water, she thought. I am surrounded by air. I am not **in** a world where the ocean can touch me like this. No water is touching me. No water is touching me.*

Nothing happened, except another wave rolled through and lifted her body a tiny bit higher.

The water is not part of me. No water is touching me. I am not where the water is. The water is not where I am, the water is Elsewhere—

She landed on the mattress with a hard thump.

Her clothes, she realized, were still soaked. But the water—

It was all around her, and yet it wasn't. Surrounding her, she could see *something*. Something blue-green, bright where moonbeams struck it, shading deeper and deeper the further away it was. A wild shimmer above her showed her exactly where the ocean's surface was, still roughly two feet below the ceiling. She could still see the water from Elsewhere, but—

She took a short, shallow breath, nervous that she would find herself suddenly choking on brine, but air filled her lungs.

*I did it. I **did** it*, she thought with giddy joy. *How the fuck did I do it?*

Kyra floated above her, suspended in the aquamarine air, arms and legs in motion as she turned around and around, looking for—

Looking for me, Jack thought with a grin. She got up from the mattress and walked over to Kyra, reaching up and tugging her hand.

Kyra immediately began thrashing, and Jack had to duck a wild kick.

Damn, she's probably thinking "shark!"

Jack climbed back onto the mattress and stood up on it. The top of her head was almost touching the ceiling. She would be visible to Kyra now.

"Kyra! I figured it out!"

"Jack, something grabbed me—"

"Sorry! Sorry, that was me. Come over here! I figured out how to make it so we can breathe U1's air even when we're underwater."

"You *what?*"

"Get over here and I'll show you. I'll explain everything, I swear!"

"You can't be serious!"

Kyra, she realized, was beginning to panic. With so little space left between the water's surface and the apartment's ceiling, that was inevitable. How could she prove it—?

Oh!

"Smack your hand down on the water, Kyra!"

"What?"

"Do it!"

"Fine! Fucking *fine*, Jack! What the fuck is going on with this *bullshit*—" Kyra smacked her arm down on the water, making it splash around her.

"Now! Watch me!" Jack lifted her arm above the surface of the water, holding it out, and then slapping it down. Her arm passed through the water as if either it, or the water, was a hologram.

"What... the... *fuck?*"

"Get *over* here and I'll show you how!"

"Why there?"

"Because the bed's over here! When the water stops holding you up, you'll want to land on something soft!"

"You think that damned thing is *soft!*?" But Kyra was swimming over. Jack took her hands and guided her until they were both above the mattress, Jack standing on it, Kyra treading water.

"Float on your back," Jack told her.

Kyra gave her a dubious look but obeyed.

“Close your eyes.”

“This is some seriously freaky bugfuck shit, Jack.”

“I know. Close your eyes.”

Kyra released a deep, gusty sigh of frustration and shut her eyes, grimacing.

“I want you to think about how it felt when you were dry, earlier tonight. No water on you, just air against your skin and your dry clothes. Dry hair. Warm. Imagine feeling like that now, okay?”

“Okay...”

“And now you need to tell yourself this. Think these words to yourself as I say them, okay?”

“Okay...”

“I am not in the water. I’m surrounded by air. No water is touching me. I’m not where the water is. The water isn’t where I am. I’m here and the water is Elsewhere.” Jack took a breath and began to repeat the mantra.

For the first time in her life, she truly understood why repetition was so important.

Kyra joined her on the third repetition. “I am not in the water, I’m surrounded by air... no water is touching me... I’m not where the water is... the water isn’t where I am. I’m here and the water is—holy *fuck!*”

With another loud thump, Kyra landed on the mattress. She gasped, staring wildly around her, and for a moment Jack thought she was going to scream. Then she burst into peals of laughter.

Jack sat down next to her, feeling immeasurable relief. There had been a moment of terrible fear that, although *she* had figured out how to survive beneath another universe’s waters, Kyra wouldn’t be able to. That, once again, she would come through unscathed and lose someone she loved.

And when the hell, Jack thought with astonishment, had *that* happened?

24.

Mad Dogs and Englishmen

“This is too fuckin’ weird.”

Jack looked over at Kyra, who was staring up toward the library ceiling again. Filtered through water that only they could see, the lights were brilliant aqua. The whole room was bathed in blue-green light. A large school of fish darted around above them, casually passing through the stacks like particolored ghosts.

Around them, oblivious to the massive ocean that was passing over and through them, dozens of people sat at tables, researching different topics. Just to top off the strangeness, several of them were working with holographic replicas of ancient texts, sometimes forgetting themselves and passing their hands right through the pages as if they, too, were transdimensional fish.

“That’s a serious understatement,” she murmured back.

To the right, suspended on one wall, the chrono displayed three different clocks: two forms of Standard Time—based on the old Earth time system, using its years, months, days, hours, and minutes, one readout three hours ahead of the more universally used system—and Local Time, which Jack had been stunned to realize was necessary to account for the fact that one Tangiers Prime day was almost two Standard days long.

Most of the worlds that humanity had terraformed and colonized, like Deckard’s World and even Helion Prime, were much more similar to Earth. Helion Prime’s day was a mere fifteen minutes longer than a Standard day, while Deckard’s World’s day was just eight minutes shorter. Aside from some periodic calendar resets to realign themselves back to Standard, adapting had been easy.

But Tangiers Prime, one of the oldest of all colonies, had been among the first to be chosen and terraformed, and colonists back then been a lot less *choosy* about the kinds of worlds they’d attempt to make Earthlike. The extra-long days and nights might have caused severe extremes in temperature, but the thick upper atmosphere acted as an insulator. Still, few people were ever out during the hours of midnight or high noon, some twenty-two hours apart from each other.

For the inhabitants of this strange world, it meant that those were the two sleep periods most people engaged in, breaking each rotational period into two shortish “days” with the peak activity occurring in the twilight hours.

The locals were used to it, only considering it any kind of potential hardship during the month of Ramadan, when—according to a chatty food cart owner, anyway—the daytime period was still fourteen hours long, making fasting quite unpleasant. Only one sect observed that stricture; the other, dominant sect on Tangiers Prime had found a clever work-around by deciding that fasting only need occur while it would be daylight in Old Mecca, back on Earth.

Which meant that almost everyone in Tangiers Prime had chronos displaying the time in Federacy Standard +3, which she’d been told—by the chatty food vendor—matched up with Arabian Standard Time back on Earth.

No one could actually go *there*, of course; the original Mecca had been lost in the Great Asian War, which had irretrievably poisoned almost the entire eastern hemisphere of Earth and forced virtually all of humanity to leave. But it was immortalized in art and literature, probably romanticized to an unrealistic level, and still prayed to by tens of billions across the Federacy.

“You getting anywhere with that?” Kyra’s question pulled her back into the moment.

“Almost,” she answered. “How does this look to you?”

On the screen, a complex waveform formed above a time code. The first wave peaked roughly an hour before the code marking Tangiers Prime’s noon hour. It descended, crossing a line marked “sea level” five and three quarters hours later, dropping down to a “low tide” at the 11.5 hour mark and then rising again to meet the vertical line marking midnight, reaching a loftier height than the first peak. A second sine wave appeared, warping the downward sides, raising the overall form back up before it could reach “sea level” and generating new mini-peaks of its own after each of the “high tides.”

Kyra frowned. She pointed to the slight trough when the original wave had almost reached sea level, only to reverse. “So we landed then?”

“Yeah. The landing zone was ten meters above sea level, but the water was still fifteen meters above.”

“So five meters on the tarmac.”

“And it was already starting to rise again as we landed. It went up roughly another five meters.”

“Which is why that Tommy guy—”

“Tomlin.”

“It’s why Tomlin thought anything above twenty meters should be safe for everybody?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t figure out why it would do that, or be so high, until I remembered the other two moons looked like they were about four or five hours behind the main one. They’re close enough to each other in the sky right now that they’re reinforcing each other’s gravitational pull.”

“If you say so,” Kyra sighed. “Damn it. I hate being from a place where everybody insisted math and science were ‘Men’s Business.’ I’m starting to think maybe the assholes of New Dartmouth were *right* about a lot of shit...” She shook her head. “So this is what you got when you added those two moons?”

“Yeah. See how low the tide would have gone without their influence? Instead, it was already starting to climb again when we were evacuating the ship. We just barely made it to Le Rif in time.”

That, she’d learned, was the name of the down-on-its-luck hillside suburb they’d rented in, named after a mountain chain in Old Morocco.

“And about five hours after we fell asleep, the water showed up in our room?”

“Yeah. Megaluna generates a big pull.” She grinned as Kyra rolled her eyes. That was her name for the enormous moon, and she was sticking with it. “It was full, so that’s probably as high as it will ever go... but I want to make sure because I don’t like how its wave seems closer to the wave generated by the two moons, this second time, than it was the first time.”

Watching the tide start rolling back in, hours before sunrise, only to roll out again, had bothered her enough to launch this whole research project. She didn’t quite understand why it

had created a prickle of dread within her, but she was learning to trust those feelings.

“And those two moons aren’t the same as the two in U1?” Kyra asked.

“Nope. Elsewhere’s moons are totally different ones. Qamar and Taziri,” she said, naming the two moons of Tangiers Prime, “were both below the horizon at the time.”

“Okay, so how do we make sure?” Kyra, Jack had discovered, had an insatiable thirst for knowledge, something she was only just starting to explore. Up until now, virtually all of the schooling she’d received had been doctrinal in one way or another, and that was something she’d grown to reject. Now, especially with topics that directly affected their lives, her hunger to learn had come out in force. Jack found herself wanting to encourage it.

“Well, now that these two waves look right... match up with what we saw... and the program has calculated out the sizes, positions, and probable orbits of the three moons that would produce them...” Jack glanced at her friend and grinned, “we let it forecast the next several cycles and see what happens.”

Doing this project, which had taken several hours and required them to stay downtown when the next tide rolled in, had helped distract Jack from the awful story that had come up in the newsfeeds shortly after the sun had risen.

Eighteen Dead Among the Quarantined *Scarlet Matador* Passengers and Crew

The article had had a weird spin on it, suggesting without directly claiming that some exotic illness had forced the quarantine of everyone on board the *Matador*, but Jack knew what had really happened. Eighteen people had drowned before the deadly danger everyone was in was fully understood and the rooftop evacuation had begun.

Jack wondered where everyone else had been taken. Several of New Marrakesh’s tallest buildings had been tall enough to keep a dozen or more floors above the crest of the tide, after all.

“Okay,” Kyra nudged her. “So stop woolgathering and let’s see what happens.”

Grinning back at Kyra, Jack pressed the “Forecast” button on the touch screen, selecting a ten-day period.

The waves rolled out, the larger and smaller tides growing closer and closer to each other and then—

“Ohhhhh *fuck*,” Kyra breathed. Jack couldn’t speak at all.

Five cycles out, two and a half of New Marrakesh’s absurdly long rotational periods away, the waves merged. The graph shrank to accommodate the new wave that resulted, estimated at 90 meters.

“We need to find Tomlin,” Jack told her best friend, “and warn him.”

An hour later, Jack knew for a fact that none of her Ghost Codes had been ferreted out.

She’d had to go deep into the local systems, posing as law enforcement, to learn everything she needed to know. The surviving passengers and crew of the *Matador* had been moved to one of the glittering office towers at the center of town and given occupancy of the twenty-third through twenty-seventh floors. Jack located the architectural schematics, confirming that this put

all five floors just below the new high tide mark. Tomlin was credited with organizing the roof evacuation and minimizing further loss of life after hospital staff had finally notified him that something might be wrong. Now he was in charge of the quarantine and was currently listed as “on leave” from his Ground Control job.

It was approaching noon; most people were in bed or preparing to go there. But the tide had been rising for the last few hours, so Jack had a feeling that Tomlin would be awake and reachable.

She was almost right about that.

Ground Control’s voice was unmistakable, but sleepy, when he answered his comm. “Azul?”

For a moment, Jack thought he was saying someone’s name. Then she remembered hearing that as a greeting throughout Le Rif’s thrift stores that morning, when she and Kyra had been replacing their soaked clothes—“We just moved in and the water line broke, can you *believe* it?”—before traveling downtown. It wasn’t Arabic or French, so it was probably Berber.

“Mr. Tomlin,” she said, making her voice sound as steady and authoritative as possible. “It’s urgent I speak to you about the *Scarlet Matador* and its passengers. They’re still in danger.”

“Who is this?” Tomlin was fully awake and speaking textbook-perfect English again. “How did you get this number?”

“The answers to those questions aren’t important. What’s happening to your charges is.” Jack held her breath. Hopefully the fact that she had been able to reach him via a completely masked line—something technically forbidden on most worlds—would convince him that he was dealing with someone in a position of authority.

Which made it critical that she didn’t sound, even for a second, like an uncertain teenage girl.

“Very well,” Tomlin replied, and she could hear the curiosity in his voice. “When can we meet?”

“We’re close. Name the time and place.” That, she figured, was the best way to cover up her miniscule knowledge of local geography.

“One hour,” he answered. High noon. He then gave her the address of the building she already knew contained the *New Matador*’s passengers. “I’ll be in the parking garage. Level A. I hope you have some real answers for me.”

“I will.” Jack cut the call without giving into the temptation to say, as was common on Deckard’s World, *buh-bye* to him. That felt incredibly out of character with the shadowy authority figure she was trying to create in his mind.

“You watch a lot of spy movies?” Kyra asked beside her, holding in a grin.

“One or two,” Jack answered, letting her own grin out. “Okay, let’s get this data over on the tablet...”

She began transferring the results of her calculations to the brand new unit, purchased just a few hours earlier before they arrived at the library. Part of her still couldn’t help but feel morose that the screen she’d originally built on board the *Matador* hadn’t survived high tide, but the replacement—costly as it had been—would work better for them. She also transferred the data to a chip that she could give Tomlin.

“...and now we can get over there and get ready.”

They stopped on the way to rent lockers to store their other purchases, just in case they had to cut and run. If Tomlin decided to have the police handy, they might need to.

Fortunately, they'd gotten in some good practice, during the hour that the tide was receding from their apartment, and had even worked out how to "isomorph" almost all the way over into Elsewhere. If they had to, they could escape by passing through the local walls. Holding their breath the whole time, of course. Megaluna's rising tide was all around them now. It would crest roughly an hour after their meeting with Tomlin.

The streets were almost deserted; for most of the people of Tangiers Prime, the hours surrounding high noon were a sleeping period. Jack found herself grateful that the phantom ocean was filtering some of the intense sunlight, but suddenly found herself wondering if she and Kyra were going to end up sunburnt anyway.

Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun... It was a line from a song her mother had sometimes played. Suddenly it made perfect sense.

They arrived at the parking garage half an hour ahead of the scheduled time, walking in as nonchalantly as possible, dressed and acting like two girls, probably tourists, out shopping. Jack had discovered that Kyra needed a little coaching in how to "act casual;" the older girl had no experience with theatrics, or even much in the way of let's-pretend games. The New Christy Colony had had strict prohibitions against theater and dance. Which was a shame, Jack found herself thinking; her friend's ferocious grace would have been spectacular on a ballet stage.

They walked down to Level B, and from there, Jack tapped into the cameras. Ten minutes before the designated time, Tomlin arrived on Level A. Alone.

Apparently, he had his own ideas about how meetings like this were supposed to work. Maybe he'd had a few of them before. Jack watched with bemusement as he paid off the gate guard, who—after he received enough New Dirhams, anyway—shut the gates, put up a sign that said "Temporarily Closed" in four languages, and sauntered off. Tomlin leaned against the guard's booth, just out of the sunlight's direct reach, to wait.

"Might as well do this now, right?" Kyra murmured beside her.

Jack nodded and switched off all the cameras on Level A, setting the feed cycle in the building's main guardroom to switch between everything except the blank cameras. Hopefully nobody would notice that Level A wasn't appearing at all.

She switched out of Ghost Mode on the tablet and pulled up the tide cycle. "Let's go."

Tomlin didn't realize, at first, who they were. He probably thought he was dealing with exactly what they looked like, a pair of teenage girls inconveniently appearing at just the wrong time. "Sorry, I'm afraid I need to ask you to—"

"Mr. Tomlin, it's good to meet you in person," Jack said.

That brought his words to a stop. He looked at them, *really* looked at them, and his eyes widened. "We've been *looking* for you," he said after a moment.

Jack had not been expecting that. "You have?"

He nodded, his expression becoming both more certain and a little awed. "P. Finch and J. Houlot?"

Well, shit.

25.

Roses by Other Names

The last time Jack had felt like this was when Riddick had revealed, to the other *Hunter-Gratzner* survivors, that she was actually a girl.

I really hate being put on the spot like this. Fortunately, this time at least, she had more control over her composure.

She could lie. She could obfuscate. She could demand to know why Tomlin thought they were those two people.

Or she could *not* insult his intelligence and get back to business.

All of that went through her head in under a second. She felt Kyra tensing next to her. “You’re good,” she said, resting her fingers on Kyra’s wrist. “Nobody was supposed to know we were there.”

That got a small smile from Tomlin. He was a good-looking man, Jack found herself thinking. His dark hair and olive skin spoke to his Berber heritage. He had the square jaw, strong chin, high-bridged nose, and prominent cheekbones that she’d seen among many of the people in Le Rif, speaking Berber—or, at least, speaking a language she knew was neither Arabic nor French. His eyes were a light olive green. Her cousin Rachel had had posters on her walls of a late Twentieth Century movie star who looked much like him. Jack found herself wondering where his very non-Berber surname had come from.

“It’s my job to keep track of things,” He replied. “But you didn’t exactly hide all that well.”

Jack tried not to let the knot forming in her stomach show on her face.

“After all,” Tomlin continued, his smile widening and transforming his face from handsome to dazzling, “when the two people who worked harder than anyone else, and saved a *lot* of lives in the process, turn out *not* to be spaceport employees and disappear before debriefing... people notice.”

Jack sighed, unsure of whether or not to feel relief. He seemed to be obliquely thanking them. But it could still be trouble. She was going to have to do a deep dive into the systems when they were done here to find out who, exactly, was looking for them. In the meantime, she’d have to stick with as much honesty as she could. She didn’t know how good he’d be at spotting a lie, but the fewer she told, the better.

“I wish nobody had noticed at all,” she admitted. “It’s better if nobody knows we exist.”

She could see him wanting to ask why and then suppressing the urge. “It’s an internal inquiry for now. I can tell the Human Resources department that it was a paperwork mix-up. Technicians on loan from an independent shipper.”

“The Quintessa Corporation doesn’t know?” Jack found herself asking.

“*Baraka*,” he said, making a small, strangely familiar, gesture. “God, no. The fuss they would have raised...” His expression became shrewd. “They can’t know about you, can they?”

“It would be very bad for all of us if they did,” she answered, feeling relief.

He nodded, seeming to accept that. “What should I call you?”

“Finch and Houlot will do,” Kyra said next to her, gesturing at each of them in turn.

“All right. You have something to tell me about the *Scarlet Matador*?”

Jack nodded. “By now you’ve already figured out that there’s a very high tide in U322A.”

Tomlin’s eyes widened, and she knew she had scored. He’d seen the heavily-redacted Isomorph Drive log, then. “Yes.”

“There are three moons in that ’verse that don’t exist here. The biggest was full last night. That was the source of your fifty-meter wave.”

His expression had grown somber while she talked. He had probably been asleep when it hit, she realized, believing that all the quarantined people would have to deal with was a twenty-meter wave that wasn’t due for several more hours and would be far below them. How nightmarish must that terrible scramble have been for him, having to battle a mortal threat he couldn’t even see?

“Moving them here was good. Last night’s wave was probably that moon’s normal maximum. But it’s not the only extra moon in Elsewhere’s sky—”

“Elsewhere?”

“Finch likes to give things unofficial names,” Kyra said. “U322A is ‘Elsewhere,’ and she named that moon, too. ‘Megaluna.’”

Tomlin’s lips twitched as if he was suppressing laughter. “Understood. So there’s more?”

For a second, Jack found herself wanting to argue that Megaluna was a perfectly damn good name, thank you *very* much, but she suppressed the urge. She had to get back to business. “There are two moons behind it in the sky, in close conjunction. They’re responsible for the twenty-meter tide you dealt with when the *Matador* landed.”

Tomlin nodded, his expression expectant.

“The problem is, they’re going to have a conjunction with Megaluna five high tides from now.”

“A syzygy?” Now he looked alarmed.

“Almost one,” Jack told him. The word had appeared in the forecast graph, and she’d already looked its meaning up, so she didn’t have to fake understanding of it. “Like I said, last night was Megaluna’s full moon, so the *sun* won’t be in on the alignment. That’d probably be even worse. But...”

She walked over to Tomlin’s side, aware that Kyra was staying protectively close to her the whole time, and offered him the tablet. He accepted it, glancing at her for a second before focusing on its screen.

“...It’s still going to be bad. Here’s the landing of the *Matador*,” she told him, pointing at the point on the graph when the falling tide had bumped upward again. “And this...”

She pointed at the high tide that had followed it.

“...is last night’s King Tide.” She gently tapped the “Forecast” button on the screen, letting the waveform projection populate forward. “And this is what’s coming.”

“*Baraka*,” Tomlin murmured again, and for a second Jack thought he was going to drop the tablet. With his free hand, he made the gesture again, and she realized it was one she’d seen the chatty food vendor use several hours earlier as a ward against evil. “Ninety meters? You’re sure?”

“Not one hundred percent,” Jack admitted. “We’re working with a limited data set here.”

In point of fact, that was the exact warning that had come up on the program after she had finished inputting the data. She had no way of being sure, not yet anyway, whether the two moons were going to start moving apart or come even closer to each other in the next few days.

“But,” she continued, “the risk is too big not to take it seriously.”

She had to resist the urge to add, *right?*, to defer to his considerably greater experience. It would make her sound like a kid. She had to keep projecting authority. It was hard, though. At any other time, she thought, he was the kind of person she’d have turned to for reassurance and guidance, and part of her desperately wanted that now.

So she was trying to channel Shazza. The New Australian woman had exuded perfect confidence. She didn’t try to pull off the accent, but she was trying to carry herself the way that Shazza had, to frame her assertions with the same aplomb that her wild-haired heroine had. If only that fearlessness hadn’t broken at the wrong moment. If only Shazza had just *stayed down...*

She forced herself back to the present. There was nothing she could accomplish by wallowing in her regrets.

Tomlin was nodding. “You’re absolutely right. Thank you. I will make sure that the passengers and crew are all moved above that altitude before then. I just...”

For a moment, *he* looked uncertain, some kind of battle playing out on his face. Then he met her eyes.

“Is there *anything* else you can tell me about U322A? The Quintessa Corporation hasn’t been helpful at all, they demand information but won’t *give* any, and these people...” He gestured helplessly, handing the tablet back to her as he did. “Are they going to be trapped in a high tower on our world for the rest of their lives? How can I *help* them?”

This, Jack realized, was what she needed to give him most of all, and *could*. He’d just provided her the perfect segue into the other thing she needed to tell him. “They don’t have to be. There’s a way to survive existing in two universes. It takes some work, but they can learn to *pick* which universe they’re aligned with.”

She handed the tablet to Kyra and stepped back from both of them. It was time for some genuine theatrics.

“They can learn to reject the water,” She told him, “or embrace it.”

Jack closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *I am in both worlds*, she thought, deliberately and carefully. She didn’t want to vanish from his sight altogether, after all. *The water is holding me...*

She focused on keeping the connection with the water, with Elsewhere itself, at just the right level, not too strong, not strong enough that the full weight of forty meters of water above her would come crushing down. She’d swum deep enough in the past, back on Deckard’s World, to know how much deeper that would be, how much pressure the water would put on a body, and how painful that kind of pressure change could be if it came on too quickly. An instantaneous change, she knew, could be genuinely injurious, damaging soft tissue and even potentially rupturing her ear drums. No, she wanted the water to float her and buoy her, not beat her down

—
She felt it flow in around her, gentle as a swimming pool, and kicked off, opening her eyes as she swam upward. She didn’t want to bash her head against the garage’s ceiling, either, after all.

That'd ruin the effect she was going for.

Below her, Tomlin was staring at her with his mouth agape as she swam through what was, to him, thin air. She did a slow flip in the water, coming back down to the floor level and hovering an inch or two above it, before pulling back from Elsewhere's hold on her and dropping lightly to the floor. Air, she thought, had never tasted so sweet.

Her hair was wet now, plastered to her head, but her clothes were perfectly dry. She suddenly wondered in alarm if, had she and Kyra been forced to cut and run and try to isomorph through a wall, their clothes would have been left behind in the process.

That would have been a big problem. She added it to her list of things she needed to figure out once they were safely back in Le Rif.

"It takes work," she told Tomlin, who was still staring at her. "They have to think really hard about the difference between the conditions in each 'verse, and what they're aligning themselves with and what they're rejecting. And no matter what, they'll always see a little way into Elsewhere. They'll always be able to feel it."

"Finch came up with a mantra I like to use," Kyra added. "'I'm not in the water. I'm surrounded by air. No water is touching me. I'm not where the water is. The water isn't where I am. I'm here and the water is Elsewhere.'" It's effective, but the first time I used it, it took a few tries before I got it to work."

Jack took the chip out of her pocket and offered it to Tomlin. "The wave forecast is on here. You can use it to help them. Next high tide, or even *this* one, take them down to a floor that's only partly submerged. Get them swimming in the water. Make sure they're floating over something soft and have them try it. Once they can control which 'verse they're aligned with, they won't need to be kept in a tower."

Tomlin took the chip from her hand with the look of someone receiving a gift from a god. "Thank you. This is... you're saving so many lives. The Quintessa Corporation has been no help at all, but this..."

"Don't trust them," Jack heard herself saying. Tomlin's gaze moved sharply from the chip to her face. Kyra was staring at her too, she realized.

He wanted to ask her why; she could see that.

"It's not that they can't help," she went on, ignoring the tiny head-shake Kyra was giving her. "They *won't* help. Not really. Your ground crew was told that if anybody asked, they should say it was all just a quarantine, wasn't it?"

Tomlin nodded. "There were non-disclosure agreements in exchange for the bonuses you two never collected. I... had to sign one, too." His expression twisted a little. "*Why?* Why was such a thing even necessary?"

"We don't know," Jack told him. "We just know that they'll do anything—*anything*—to cover up the existence of threshold syndrome and what causes it. So please let that part go. They have ways of making evidence disappear. And if anybody asks you about the data on the chip, *you* put it together from witness statements about what they saw in the sky during last night's high tide."

"You won't even be lying," Kyra said beside her. "Now, we need to go, and you need to get back to your charges."

Tomlin nodded, pointing to the side. “There’s a pedestrian entrance over there. Thank you, both of you, again.”

Jack would have felt incredibly accomplished, even proud, about how everything had gone, if Kyra weren’t suddenly giving her the silent treatment.

Her friend was unusually quiet as they walked back to the lockers to get their things, and all during the walk back to their apartment in Le Rif. Her expression, as they walked, was introspective, bordering on brooding. It was only once they were inside with the door locked that she finally spoke. “You have a serious White Knight Complex going on with you, Jack.”

“Sorry?” Jack set her bags down on the battered table that had, once, probably held a video screen. She looked over at her friend, feeling a little twist of worry. Weirdly enough, Kyra wasn’t the first one to accuse her of that.

“Look, I get it. We needed to pass on what we knew about the tides. And how to get around them. But telling him not to trust Quintessa? Bad move.” Kyra looked vexed.

“But he shouldn’t. And if they ever found out about us—”

“He already said he was gonna cover for us,” Kyra interrupted. She sat down on the ratty couch, her eyes boring hard into Jack’s. “And he already didn’t trust them. But what you said is gonna make him more interested than ever in figuring out what they’re hiding.”

“But I told him to let it go,” Jack protested, her heart sinking.

“Oh come *on*, Jack.” Kyra rolled her eyes. “What would *you* do if someone said that to *you*?”

Jack opened her mouth to form a vague protest, but closed it again, the words unsaid.

“The two of you are practically *twins*,” Kyra grumbled. “So busy trying to save other people you have no idea how much danger you’re getting yourselves into.”

Jack wanted to say that wasn’t fair. That it wasn’t true. But *that* would be a lie. Paris, after all, had had to forcibly restrain her from running to Shazza, and Imam had had to similarly hold her back from running into the darkness after Fry to find Riddick. A rebellious part of her still insisted that, if she hadn’t been held back, maybe both Shazza and Fry would have *lived*. But that was just so much hot air.

I could have been torn to pieces like Shazza, she thought, or dragged off into the darkness like Fry.

The part of her that had tried to follow them into the black, some three months later, wondered if that would have been a mercy.

“Look,” Kyra said after a moment. “I know you mean well. And it’s good that you want to help people. But don’t forget we’re fugitives from the law here. We took a huge risk today. It worked out this time. But... it could’ve gone so wrong. We’ve got to keep a lower profile.”

Jack nodded, forcing back the part of her that wanted to argue. Tomlin had been receptive to Finch and Houlot, two mystery workers who had sped up the evacuation and then vanished. Would he have been nearly as receptive to Jack B. Badd, wanted for murdering Antonia Chillingsworth, and the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain? Or even just two fugitives from a psychiatric hospital? Would he have covered for *them*, or turned them in? “Yeah. I probably shouldn’t have swam in front of him, even if the cameras were off.”

Kyra sighed, and Jack realized she was fighting a grin. “Honestly, that was really cool. Risky, but cool. God, I want to practice some stuff like that.”

“We’ve got a lot to practice,” Jack agreed, relieved that they were no longer at odds. She sat down next to Kyra on the ratty couch. “I was figuring we could isomorph as far into Elsewhere as possible and go through the walls to get away, if we needed to, but there’s a problem with that.”

“Oh yeah? What?”

“Our clothes probably wouldn’t have come with us.” Jack touched her still-damp hair, and then gestured to her shirt and pants. “They didn’t even get wet. They stayed in U1, and only moved with me because I was still most of the way in it myself.”

Kyra had begun snickering.

“Plus,” Jack mused, growing serious, “We were forty meters below the surface. That’s... well, really experienced scuba divers can go that deep, but the change in pressure, especially if we had to do it fast, could’ve injured us.”

Kyra sobered next to her. “We’ve got a lot to learn. What we can do... I keep being tempted to think of it as super powers like on the shows back in the rec room, and maybe it can be, but we can’t go off half-cocked, even a little. We’re, what, on the ninth floor here? If we isomorphed over to Elsewhere when the tide was out, we’d just drop like a pair of dumb-ass stones, all that way down. Or what if we isomorphed into a space that already had something *in* it? I could feel the water moving out of the way when we were practicing last night, but... what if there was, oh, a glass pane we couldn’t even see from the other side, and it was halfway through one of us when we came back?”

Jack had had a few of the same thoughts. “It’s why I was still floating like an inch or two above the ground when I came back from Elsewhere in the garage. I didn’t want to get my feet stuck to something, or stuck *in* something. I didn’t think I *would*, but I didn’t want to take the chance.”

“Yeah. That was smart.” Kyra couldn’t completely contain her grin. “And it really was damn cool-looking. Did you see his face?”

“I could see his mouth was open.” In truth, the water had clouded her vision some.

“You could’a pretty much convinced him of anything you wanted, doing that. He’s lucky you’re *not* a con artist.” That seemed to sober her again. “The Quintessa Corporation *has* to know what people with threshold syndrome could be capable of. They might have a *problem* with the idea of everybody from the *Matador* figuring out how to switch between two universes instead of dying before they can.”

“Shit,” Jack groaned, closing her eyes and leaning back into the couch. “If he teaches them to do what we do, that puts a bullseye on him, doesn’t it? They’ll want to know how he figured it out.”

“Yeah.” Kyra sounded, and looked, genuinely morose at the prospect. “So what do we do about it?”

For several minutes, Jack couldn’t focus on that. The idea that she’d led someone into harm’s way again—like Ali, like Paris—was almost choking her. The voice within that had been quiet for a few days, with its *I don’t want to be Jack anymore, I want to be Audrey again* refrain, was back at full volume. She wanted to be back to a place where her backtrail didn’t resemble

the damage path of a tornado. Where helping someone, or even just trying to, didn't open them up to a world of hurt. All of her plans for getting there had seemed so solid, until they came up against reality and cracked in her hands. She still hadn't even managed to get herself and Kyra a good set of—

And there it was.

“We're gonna have to make sure he knows he's in danger,” Jack said slowly. “And I'm gonna have to make sure he has a way out of it.”

“Oh?” Kyra's lips were twitching as if she was suppressing amusement now. “I know that look. What's the plan?”

“I still need to get us a good set of fake identities. Ones that'll hold up in the long term. And some funds to back them.” Jack grinned, suddenly relishing what she was going to be doing. For a moment, the voice went quiet, and she was able to revel in being Jack B. Badd. “So I'm gonna make him a set, too, while I'm at it.”

26.

A Momentary Lapse from Madness

It took slightly over a Federacy Standard week—four of Tangiers Prime’s strangely elongated day-and-night cycles and some change—before Jack could finish making fake IDs for Kyra, Tomlin, and herself.

The process itself probably took only eight or so hours of her time for each one. But that time had to be divided up into small chunks over the week, each step requiring her to wait for databases to update with new, carefully falsified information, or for a human operator somewhere to review and clear requests that seemed to come from legitimate official sources, or just for redirected funds to finish moving around and become available for the plundering. It might have taken less time if Jack hadn’t also spent extra hours erasing her back-trail in the system once some of the riskier steps were completed.

In between, she and Kyra found that they had a lot of other things to do. Learning how to safely “isomorph” between U1 and Elsewhere topped the list.

They practiced whenever they could. During high tides—never quite as high as that first night’s tide, until the monster wave in the dawn hours two and a half Tangiers days after they’d met with Tomlin—they used the water to buoy them as they practiced safely navigating their way through physical objects like walls, floors, and ceilings. They learned—after a variety of disturbing and comical mishaps—how to consistently make their clothes accompany them on an isomorph, and how to pick up objects from one world and transfer them to the other, and then back. Or not.

Their apartment, now spotless largely thanks to Kyra, acquired unusual decorations brought back from Elsewhere: pale, beautiful twists of driftwood, a chunk of brilliant scarlet coral that they’d found floating through their rooms during their second night, and several exotic shells that had floated through as well. A small ten-legged crustacean, found clinging helplessly onto a piece of driftwood after the monster wave had passed, now lived under their dresser, feasting upon the large insects that infested the building whenever any made the mistake of entering their unit, and periodically creeping over to stare up at Jack in fascination while she worked on building the infrastructure for the fake IDs. Once, she had looked down to find it sitting companionably on her foot, its eyestalks pointed at her face.

When the tides were out, they still practiced, finding empty, deserted spaces where they could work on learning the differences in the geographies of each world and how to account for them. They learned how to switch quickly between ’verses, how to “fade” between them, and how to negotiate differences in the two terrains without getting caught in anything. Kyra, in particular, wanted to practice using combat moves while isomorphing in one direction or another.

“Where did you learn to fight like this?” Jack asked her on the second day, as Kyra patiently showed her how to position her body to deliver a stronger kick.

“I watched the boys back home a lot,” Kyra told her. She still didn’t seem to like talking about life before the standoff and massacre, but she had begun to open up more. “They didn’t teach girls this kind of thing. We were supposed to be homemakers. But they didn’t care if we were nearby doing our chores during their lessons. Some of the boys would show off a little if we were there.”

Jack had already discovered that Kyra was a remarkably quick study, not eidetic like her, but whip-smart and capable of intense focus. It didn’t surprise her to learn that she’d spent much of her days eavesdropping on subjects the Fathers of New Christy refused to teach girls, and then had sneaked out at night to practice what she’d seen when nobody would see or know. The boys of New Christy had been taught karate, boxing, and some other combat styles whose names she hadn’t caught, and she’d relentlessly worked to become better than any of them at all of them, while still completing her stultifying list of “womanly” chores.

The latter explained, Jack reflected, how she’d been able to transform their apartment from a filthy hole in the wall to clean, light, and airy in less than two of New Marrakesh’s crazy-long days.

The only weapons Kyra hadn’t been able to practice with, along the way, were guns, and only because she hadn’t been able to find a way to keep people from hearing her shoot them off in the middle of the night. But she’d taught herself how to aim with bow and arrow, with darts, with knives... and had adapted that knowledge to gun sights and small firearms as best she could. There were infrequent occasions when, in an attempt to put the girls of New Christy in their place and prove to them that “manly” subjects were beyond their reach, one of her male peers would let her and the other girls handle or even shoot a gun, and she used those opportunities to hone her aim while pretending to have no idea what she was doing.

“Zach loved to make fun of girls by getting them to try to shoot,” she explained. “Most of them were playing dumb, too. They’d act like their fingers weren’t strong enough to even pull the triggers. *Please*. Like the work we were doing every day had left us with delicate little hands... I guess they knew the boys would eat it up, though. But I didn’t play *that* helpless. He’d tell me that he wanted me to hit the green bottle on the fence, and I’d act like I was aiming for it, but I’d really aim for the knot on the fence post next to it, or the can on its other side. He’d think I was missing when I was making bullseyes. And he was *always* willing to keep laughing at me if I wanted to keep ‘trying.’”

Kyra, Jack thought, was not nearly as much of a stranger to let’s-pretend games as she seemed to think she was. She just hadn’t learned—yet—how to mimic that many roles. She had two down pat, though: prim, proper quasi-Puritan girl-child... and the ominous, deadly icon of the Killer’s Club that Stacey and Colette had idolized. Jack suspected that her friend still didn’t know who the *real* Kyra behind either of those masks actually was.

By the time of the standoff, although no one else had known it, Kyra was already the deadliest fighter in New Christy, at least among the children and teens, and needed none of the hurried defensive training they reluctantly gave to the community’s womenfolk.

It had been a startling moment for Jack when she realized that Kyra had been born on Earth, decades before the devastating nuclear war that had finally driven almost all of humanity off the world of its origin.

Part of her had known it, of course; she'd done a report on the New Christy Enclave and knew that their sublight ship had left Earth's orbit in 2087. But Kyra *remembered* Earth. She had been six years old when she and her family had boarded a shuttle to the Gateway Prime shipyards on the promise that, at the other end of their long interstellar journey, they would find the agrarian paradise that her father insisted was what God intended for them. She remembered the world of concrete and leaden skies that she'd lived in before then with nostalgia; that, for her, was the world of her innocence before everything had begun to go wrong.

Kyra didn't realize that Jack's questions about her old life had a secondary purpose: she wanted to create an identity that her friend would be able to comfortably live within, with a background that wouldn't be difficult to recall or relate to. It was the same reason that she spent hours learning everything she could about Gavin Brahim Tomlin.

The people she had thought of until then as "Berber," it turned out, preferred to be called Amazigh in the singular, Imazighen in the plural. That much she'd gleaned from the local shopkeepers and food vendors. Le Rif was Amazigh territory, although no one much minded their intrusion into it. Still, Jack had learned quickly that only outsiders referred to them as "Berbers," and that if they wanted to be viewed as friends, they needed to adjust their vocabulary a little.

"It is not a kind name, you see," Takama—rapidly becoming Jack's favorite food cart vendor—had told her with a gentle smile as she dished up a fragrant bowl of spiced lamb and barley, placing two *medfouna* beside it. "It's what colonizers have called us for thousands of years, but it has never been our name for ourselves. The Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Spanish, the French... it comes from the same root as 'barbarian,' and that is how they all saw us. To them we were unruly children, meant to be enslaved. We were not meant to govern our own lives in their eyes. Even now, on this beautiful new world, there are those who wish us to subsume our identity to theirs, who refuse to acknowledge that our traditions are no more primitive than their own."

That had given Jack a great deal to think about, and she had resolutely struck "Berber" from her vocabulary. Kyra, who had never heard of them before coming to Tangiers Prime, did the same with even greater ease. From the Imazighen, Jack had learned far more about Tomlin, the man, than she'd been able to glean from the networks; he was a local hero.

Almost forty Standard years earlier, Cedric Tomlin, from the Scottish colony world of New Alba, had come to Tangiers Prime as a combat flight instructor. He had swiftly fallen in love with the world, and more specifically, with Safiyya Meziane, a linguistics professor who taught second-language courses in all four of Tangiers Prime's official languages: Arabic, Tamazight—the language Jack had thought of, until then, as "Berber"—French, and English. They had married, and a year later had given birth to a son who received names reflecting both of his heritages.

Gavin Brahim Tomlin had inherited his mother's facility with languages and his father's love of flying. He had trained as a combat pilot and had fought in dozens of deadly skirmishes with starship 'jackers who tried to prey upon the Sol Track shipping lanes where they intersected with the Tangiers system. Many of those battles had crept into local legend and had earned him the nickname "El Krim" among the Le Rif—or, Takama told her, just Rif—community.

Now thirty-five, Tomlin had retired “young” from flying after the last major ’Enza variant sidelined him for nearly a year. The gossip Jack had gleaned from Takama was that, although he’d taken several months to recover from the illness, what had very nearly crippled him was the loss of his wife Thiyya, four months pregnant with what would have been their first child, to the disease.

With no guarantee that he would recover enough to be recertified for combat flight, he had retrained and then taken up a position with Tangiers Prime’s Space Traffic Control two years later. His hire was considered a major coup, because in addition to being a local hero, he was a polyglot like his mother and was fluent in almost all of the languages used by ships’ crews that came through the Tangiers system. He had been on duty on Tangiers Station A when the *Scarlet Matador* had contacted him a Standard day earlier than expected.

If the crew had told him that they *weren’t* trained or certified to land the ship on the planet’s surface, Jack realized, he could have boarded it and handled the landing for them personally. And, undoubtedly, would have done so without a second thought.

The rest of his story was, for the moment, classified, and she’d worked hard to get access to it. Rather than handing the crisis off to someone else, Tomlin had coordinated with the surface to set up a landing and quarantine zone for the *Matador* before taking a shuttle to New Marrakesh to oversee everything personally, even sleeping—as Jack had overheard in the flyer—in its Ground Control headquarters to ensure that he would be immediately available if the *Matador* called. Once the ship had been fully evacuated and the passengers and crews had been quarantined in the top six floors of the hospital tower—

Six floors, Jack thought with sadness. *Only four of those floors stayed above the tide that night.*

—he had briefly been replaced by a designated representative of the Quintessa Corporation, who had taken over “oversight” of the quarantine. After eighteen people died on her watch, despite the Corporation’s attempts to stay in control, the planetary government overruled them and had even made veiled threats about an inquest into threshold syndrome if they obstructed Tomlin’s command again. He had been put back in charge, and while Quintessa had sharply questioned his recent decision to move the *Matador* survivors from the swanky Mansour Plaza to the highest completed levels of New Marrakesh’s still-under-construction Othman Tower, nobody was impeding his decisions... yet.

Things were tense there, but so far it had remained the prickly tension of people who were overtly polite to each other even as they worked at cross-purposes. None of Jack’s delvings into higher security systems had turned up signs that Quintessa viewed Tomlin as any kind of active threat. Yet.

No one had died since he had taken back command.

From all of this information, Jack slowly wove together identities that she hoped Kyra and Tomlin would each find comfortable to take on, ones that would play to their strengths and explain away their weaknesses without drawing too many comparisons to the personas they would be leaving behind. The identity she constructed herself, although every bit as durable, was simpler, credentialing her developing technical skills so that she could join the next supply crew headed for Furya without too many questions. The next scheduled supply ship was a month away; with luck, she would be on it.

Jack, who no longer believed that luck was in any way on her side, planned to make sure that she was the best possible candidate for the job when it opened. In the rare moments when none of their other agendas dominated her time, she relentlessly studied the technical schematics of commonly used supply ships.

The news from Helion Prime interested her, as well. Relay drones, capable of traversing the Sol Track lanes at speeds that no ships with lives on board could, had already brought stories of the scandal gripping the Aceso Psychiatric Hospital of New Athens.

New Athens? That startled Jack, who had spent her whole time on Helion—which was, she realized, derived more from Greek than Arabic—thinking that she was in a city called New Mecca. Heather had teased her about it, but she still hadn't quite grasped how much of her understanding of that world had been shaped by Imam Abu al-Walid's startling parochialism. Would Riddick, she wondered, have been so complacent about leaving her in the man's care if he had realized?

You have to let it all go, she scolded herself. He's gone his way and you've gone yours. You'll never meet again. It's done. Don't worry about what he was thinking.

Director Flint and several of his subordinates were under investigation, both for enrolling patients in experimental treatments and then attempting to cover up negative outcomes and, more interestingly, for maintaining lax security that had resulted in dozens of patients acquiring illicit staff accounts within the system.

The Killer's Club, it seemed, hadn't been the only ones who had pulled that trick.

Careful checking showed that nobody had discovered *her* account, which she had hidden behind law enforcement code once she had the run of the system, but all of the others had been found. Although Stacey was never named, her violent porn collection, also in the possession of several underage boys in the male wards, had become a topic of heated debate and recrimination. The rationalization that the staff had had for letting them keep it—that their willingness to voluntarily surrender it would be a sign of their recovery—was lambasted by other experts who accused the doctors and nurses of feeding and enabling addictive behavior instead, and of potentially creating sexual predators in the process.

Jack's escape, and Kyra's, had been completely overshadowed by the rest of the drama. She suspected that had a lot to do with Toombs, who probably didn't want other mercs horning in on Richard B. Riddick's putative trail. While articles occasionally mentioned that two patients had gone missing and had yet to be recovered, they always treated the escape as an effect of the pandemonium that had briefly overtaken the facility... rather than as its cause. If anyone on Helion knew better, they weren't willing to go on the record saying so.

Amnesty Interplanetary, however, had a great deal to say about the fact that Kyra Wittier-Collins, better known as the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain, had fled custody right before she was going to be illegally extradited back to New Dartmouth in violation of Federacy rulings. That scandal was every bit as high-profile as the one embroiling the hospital. Two members of the New Dartmouth cabinet had tendered their resignations as the fallout spread, and as the abuses that had been perpetrated against Kyra, prior to her transfer to Helion, came to light.

Sometimes, Jack thought, justice actually won. A quick check reassured her that none of the orderlies and nurses she'd liked and respected at the hospital were in any trouble, although most

were actively seeking new positions at other facilities. A few of the older ones had quietly retired.

It was mid-late afternoon, four days after Jack and Kyra had met with Tomlin, when they saw him again. Jack didn't quite have the IDs complete—she still had to pick out names for each of them—and had one or two more sessions in the law enforcement networks before everything would be solidified. But she was feeling relaxed and confident. Nine PM, anywhere else in the Federacy, would have signified late evening, but not during a 44-hour day. To the people of Tangiers Prime, it was the equivalent of late morning after their long high noon sleeping period. Elsewhere's high tide, which shifted roughly an hour later with each cycle, was at its peak once more. In another long day, low tide would occur around noon and midnight, and Jack and Kyra were planning to make the most of that to explore Elsewhere's hidden landscapes when most people were abed.

Sipping at ices, discussing the prospects of trans-dimensional beachcombing, they felt almost like ordinary teenage girls as they walked back to their apartment building.

Gavin Brahim Tomlin, *El Krim* himself, was sitting on their front step waiting for them.

Author's Note: Abd El-Krim, in the 1920s, led the Imazighen of Morocco's Rif region in a successful revolt against Spanish colonial rule. His attempt to establish an independent Rif Republic resulted in a combined force of French, Spanish, and Moroccan armies driving him into exile in Egypt, but to the people of the Rif, he remains an important heroic figure. Many contemporary Moroccan textbooks claim he fought against the French and Spanish for the Moroccan monarchy, something the Imazighen of the Rif call revisionist whitewashing. Amazigh culture, and thus the culture's folklore, is tribal-collectivist and has few solitary-figure heroes to draw from—outside of stories derived from the same sources that fueled better-known Greek mythology—for use in giving a nickname to a living folk hero of the future, so nicknaming him after a legendary and largely-unsung freedom fighter seemed like the next best thing.

27.

Paving the Way with Good Intentions

Even dressed in traditional Amazigh clothing instead of his uniform, there was no mistaking Tomlin. Nor the fact that he wasn't merely sitting on a random doorstep, but was waiting for *them*.

"Shit," Kyra muttered beside Jack.

Jack realized she should have seen this coming. In the last few days, as she had begun to learn more and more about the people of the Rif, she had realized what a tightly knit community they were. If they were willing to share stories about one of their own with two strange girls, nothing was stopping them from carrying tales of those girls back to *him*.

She wondered when he'd put together that the stories were about the same two girls who had accosted him in the parking garage.

"It's okay," she murmured back to Kyra, hoping she was right. She kept walking forward, trying to convey through her walk and her posture that she wasn't at all bothered by his presence on her doorstep, even trying to hint that she had expected it.

Because, she thought, she damn well *should* have.

Kyra kept pace beside her, but she could feel her friend's tension.

"Mr. Tomlin," she said as they approached the building. "It's good to see you again."

She hoped Kyra wasn't telegraphing disagreement with her statement.

"And you, Ms. Finch, Ms. Houlot." He nodded at each of them, giving them a non-threatening smile. Jack noticed that his posture also seemed to be trying to convey a lack of threat. He seemed well aware that this was a bold and possibly unwelcome move.

"How did you find us?" Kyra asked beside her.

Tomlin shrugged. "My family is here in the Rif. You have met my aunt, Takama. She spoke the other day of the two lovely girls who had moved into this *tagat* building and were curious about us. How you never spoke about yourselves but encouraged people to talk about themselves. I showed her the one clear capture the security footage had of you — which no longer exists, don't worry — and she said 'yes, those are the girls.'"

"Sorry," Jack couldn't help but ask. "What does 'tagat' mean?"

"I'm afraid it means 'cursed,'" Tomlin said, his smile becoming rueful. "This building does not have the best of reputations. Its owners are outsiders, who thought they could use it as a jumping-off point for 'gentrifying' our neighborhood. No Amazigh will live within it. They struggle to find tenants, and to keep them, especially because they are lazy and cheap and hardly ever make repairs. Perhaps that's why your pipes burst when you first moved in..."

His smile turned mischievous.

"...Or was that a cover story for why your clothes were soaked after the high tide came through?"

Jack glanced over at Kyra, whose breathing had quickened. Under the deadpan she'd always worn in front of the Killer's Club girls, Jack could see signs that she was becoming increasingly

tense and defensive.

“Well,” Jack replied, hoping she could defuse that tension, “when you’re trying to keep a low profile, telling people you very nearly drowned in an invisible ocean that visited your rooms doesn’t exactly help.”

Alarm had appeared on Tomlin’s face. “You nearly drowned? But I thought you—”

Kyra sighed next to her, visibly making herself relax. “We’ve only ever been about one or two steps ahead of you the whole time, because we stayed out from under the Quintessa Corporation’s thumb and *Finch* here already knew about threshold syndrome.”

Now Tomlin looked a little crestfallen. “I would not have intruded upon you if I didn’t need help, but now I fear—”

“Try us,” Jack interrupted before he could talk himself out of whatever had brought him. She had to admit *she* was curious. “We’ve been learning how to handle moving between both universes pretty much nonstop. We’re happy to share what we know.”

Kyra’s hand knocked against her wrist. Looking over, she saw a quelling look on her friend’s face.

“What?” she whispered. “They need all the help they can get.”

Tomlin hadn’t missed the exchange. “I should probably tell you that I know who you really are,” he said. “Or at least, who *you* are,” he added nodding at Kyra. “Whether or not you can or will help me, I can arrange asylum—protection, that is, not an institution—on this world if you wish it. No one will extradite you from here.” His gaze returned to Jack. “I know less about you, my young *Tislilel*, but having witnessed you swim through the air, I find you far saner than the reports would suggest—”

“She infiltrated the hospital to get me out,” Kyra surprised Jack by saying.

“Ah.” Tomlin nodded. “In that case, I hope that you can, indeed, help me with this problem as well. Most of the passengers and crew have learned how to anchor themselves in U1, as you two instructed. But a few of the passengers are pre-verbal children, and one is a baby, and we don’t know how to teach them to do this, or even if we can. Are they trapped between worlds until they’re old enough to learn?”

“Oh,” Kyra said beside her. “*Damn.*”

“I don’t think they have to be,” Jack found herself saying. “I think their parents can anchor them.”

“How?” Tomlin asked, hope in his voice.

Jack glanced at Kyra, raising her eyebrow and nodding at their building. There was only one way to show him. Kyra hesitated, but then nodded.

“Are you allowed to come inside a... tagat... building?” Jack asked. “What I want to show you won’t work all that well down here. It’s still high tide.”

“I am allowed, yes.” Tomlin grinned and stood up. “I would have a great deal of explaining to do if I chose to rent here, yes, but I may come inside if you permit me.”

“C’mon in,” Kyra said, resignation in her voice. “I think I know what she wants to show you.”

After the squalid condition of the lobby and the stairwell, Tomlin couldn’t quite contain his astonishment as he walked into their apartment. All of the windows were open, admitting the late-afternoon light but, more importantly, the breezes. Kyra and Jack had removed most of the

decrepit furniture and had pulled out the stained carpeting, and had spent the last Standard week —between their many other tasks— scouring the place clean and decorating with colorful blankets and pillows, both to hide the threadbare and battered nature of the remaining furniture and to make it comfortable. Most of their purchases had come from Amazigh vendors in the Rif. Jack had found a way to use a trick of isomorphing to remove the layers of paint concealing the carved woodwork, along with layer upon layer of grubby wallpaper to reveal the original mosaic-adorned plaster beneath. The result was evocative of what the building’s units had first looked like in their halcyon days, before they had been co-opted and corrupted. Souvenirs from Elsewhere sat on a variety of surfaces.

Hearing their arrival, a ferret-sized ten-legged crustacean came scooting out of the bedroom and scurried its way over to Jack’s feet, earning an astonished oath in Tamazight from Tomlin.

“Hey, Sebby.” Jack reached down and let the small creature crawl onto her hands, lifting it up. “You’re right on time.”

“Sebby?” Tomlin asked.

“Well, he’s not a crab, but I always wanted a pet crab to name Sebastian.” Jack grinned. She never had been able to convince her parents to let her have one.

“The *Little Mermaid*? Really?” Kyra sounded on the verge of laughter.

“And here I thought I might be facetious to nickname you *Tislilel*,” Tomlin chuckled. “It means ‘mermaid,’” he explained in response to their questioning looks.

Jack’s grin widened. *Tislilel*. She liked it. “Sebby, here, is some kind of land crustacean from Elsewhere. The monster tide must’ve reached his habitat and dragged him into its wake. We found him clinging to some driftwood and looking pretty miserable when the tide was going back out. I brought him over to U1.”

She raised her eyebrows at Tomlin, waiting for him to catch onto the implication of what she was telling him.

“You can move objects between worlds? And anchor them in a whole new universe?” He glanced around the apartment again, the full significance of the pieces of driftwood, the coral, the shells, finally striking him. “All of this... is from *there*?”

“Objects... and living creatures.” She nodded at Sebby, who obligingly lifted a pincer and waved it in the air.

“Like a baby, or a small child, who cannot make the transition on its own,” Tomlin breathed. “How?”

“Well, the first thing I ever tried it with was one of the cash cards we’d brought with us from Helion,” Jack told him, suddenly very glad he already knew who they were and she didn’t have to come up with weird verbal dodges. “Local bank machines couldn’t read our cards. Not enough of their data signals in *this* universe, I guess. I held one really close, and thought about it *just* being in this ’verse and nowhere else. It was a *serious* Hail Mary, but it worked.”

“And that’s all there is to it?” Tomlin looked astounded.

“Maybe,” Jack hedged. “Sebby’s the only living creature I’ve ever tried it with. It takes work, and some careful thinking. You have to really be aware of what you want to bring with you, and its dimensions and edges. We didn’t know how to get our clothes to transition with us at first.”

Kyra began snickering. She had fully relaxed, and now her eyes were dancing with merriment as she answered Tomlin's questioning look. "You should've seen it. The first time J — Finch here tried to go all the way to the other side and swim through a wall— *whoosh!* She went right through but her clothes stayed behind."

"You can... pass through walls...?"

"*Carefully,*" Jack told him. "Right now, if I isomorphed all the way over to Elsewhere, I'd be okay, because the water's still about waist-deep up here. I can still see it even when I'm all the way in U1. It'd hold me up if I switched over right now. But if I tried to do that at low tide, I'd fall straight through the floors and splatter myself against whatever's eight stories down on that side."

"I will be sure to warn my charges of that risk," he said, nodding. "The Quintessa Corporation wants to move them. To a 'secure facility,' but they won't say where. I have been stalling—I don't want to turn them over. Everything within me says that doing so would be their deaths. So far, the government has sided with me, but I worry they plan to tighten the vise. Tangiers Prime is a primary shipping hub. If they were to declare our Star Jump routes unstable and use that as a pretext to make our port *secondary*, they could cripple our economy. Their envoy has begun hinting that they might."

Kyra sat down on their chair, hard. Jack, who had become fairly good at reading her deadpan, could see her outrage over what Tomlin was saying warring with her reluctance to get involved.

Jack sat down on the couch. She gestured at Tomlin to take a seat, too, if he wanted. Sebby scuttled up onto her shoulder and she stroked his carapace absently. "This is bad. I was gonna come see you soon, to warn you again not to dig into what Quintessa's hiding... but now they want to make everybody disappear?"

"They want to make everybody *die*," Tomlin almost growled, sitting down on the couch. "When I was called to the hospital *that* night, it was after they succeeded with eighteen of my charges. The envoy told the hospital staff that the people in quarantine would be prone to *hallucinations*, but not to worry about it because they would eventually pass, and to keep them sedated. So when an entire floor of patients began screaming about rising waters and begging for help, nobody paid attention until they began to float out of their beds. The ones that could, anyway. Some had been restrained and some were oblivious thanks to the sedation. When those patients drowned—*drowned*, in the middle of a dry hospital floor, with other patients *levitating*—that was when someone finally had the presence of mind to call *me*."

Jack suddenly felt nauseated.

Tomlin ran his hand over his face, looking both exhausted and furious. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to burden you with all of this. But with the non-disclosure agreement they made me sign, in order to gain access to the ship at *all* in the *first* place, there is no one else I can speak to of such things. Except her, the envoy, and *she let them die*. I could never possibly trust her, or them." He looked over at Jack. "But I'm curious as to why you warned me not to."

"Do you remember the log you saw of the star jumps the ship made before it detected the Level Five Incident?" Jack asked.

Tomlin looked startled again, as if wondering how she could know he'd seen it. "Yes."

“It’s missing a lot of data. We were reading the log on board the *Matador*, when a bunch of lines suddenly got redacted and then vanished.” Jack set Sebby down on the floor. A cockroach had crawled under the crack between the front door and the floor. “Go get it, Sebby,” she said, and he scuttled after the fleeing insect in a blur of legs and a clatter of pincers. “There were already some redacted lines in the log, because I’d set things up so we’d wake up before the crew and there’d be no record we were on board. But the other lines were pretty significant.”

“The ship notified the Quintessa Corporation that the accident had occurred,” Kyra continued for her. “It sent a whole packet of data to them. We don’t know what was in the *packet*, but a few minutes after the crew woke up, the ship got an answer back with instructions to destroy the Isomorph Drive and the database it used for calculating Star Jumps.”

Tomlin’s breath caught. “We were told that the drive’s destruction was what had *caused* the Level Five Incident.”

Jack shook her head, aware that Kyra was doing the same thing. “It looked functional until they sent instructions to ‘decommission’ it. Which were then redacted and deleted from the records before anybody but us could get a look. But you saw what was left. Did you notice how long the last star jump was?”

“About four days, I believe.”

“For Star Jumps, that’s long,” Jack said. “Most are under three days apiece. These days, ships spend more time navigating between Jump points than traveling the Jumps themselves, but I’ll bet you already know that.”

Tomlin nodded. “How do *you*?”

“I did a paper on it a few years ago.” Jack could see he had a lot of questions about that. She held up her hand to stay them. Getting into her study habits and actual age weren’t going to be helpful right now, even if she wanted to talk about them. Which she definitely did not. “The longer a Star Jump lasts, the higher the risk of a Level Five Incident becomes. But nobody knows why because the Quintessa Corporation won’t share details about how the drives work in the first place. The three Phase One Star Jumpers that vanished all had at least one week-long Jump in their itineraries.”

“Yes,” Tomlin said, his voice becoming hushed and almost reverent. “My people were coming to Tangiers on two of those first ships, the *Isli* and the *Tislit*. But only the *Tislit* ever arrived. It is why we have always served in the Tangiers Prime Space Squadrons, and why at least one Amazigh must always be on duty at Space Control, in case the *Isli* finally appears, so we can bring it home. But all this time... is this the true answer? It was lost between universes, and left stranded there to die, the way these poor souls have been? *Ten thousand* of our kin?”

“I don’t know,” Jack told him. “I never found an answer to that either, just that this was the most probable explanation.”

“And they know,” Tomlin sighed. “And they do nothing.”

“Whatever it is,” Kyra said, her expression thoughtful, “it’s something they can’t prevent. Maybe it’s part of however the drives work. Like the risks people back on Earth took with nuclear reactors, which mostly worked great, lots of power, no pollution... until they sometimes melted down and fucked everything up for hundreds of miles. My Pa had a lot to say about those, back before he decided to ditch the place and take all of us to ‘God’s New Green World.’ But anyway, maybe it’s a risk that just... comes with the technology.”

“Why wouldn’t they just admit that, then?” Tomlin wondered, clearly not expecting an actual answer from either of them. “It is not as if there is an alternative to the Star Jump drive.”

“Maybe even doing that would cut down on space travel too much?” Kyra wondered. “Or maybe there’s something about why it happens that would upset people if they knew. They were *super* quick to destroy all of the physical evidence.”

That stirred some vague memory in Jack’s mind, something she couldn’t remember clearly because she hadn’t been paying enough attention at the time. There was a show her cousins had watched one day, a centuries-old classic, in which once a year a group of people were told a terrible secret and then voted on whether to remember it and do something about it, or forget it again and continue on with their lives. Something about that secret, she thought as she struggled toward the memory, might almost explain what was happening now —

It was gone. There wasn’t enough there to recall more. She found herself wishing she’d sat down with Rachel, Joey, and Rob that day to watch that ancient show, instead of taking advantage of the rare occasion that they weren’t monopolizing her grandfather’s gaming console to play a few games herself. She’d overheard some of it, some part of which felt suddenly *significant*, but it was like a dream that fell apart the more she tried to recall it upon waking.

Maybe it was nothing.

“I think the most important point,” she said after a moment, “is that, regardless of what the secret is, they’re willing to kill whole shipfuls of innocent people to keep it hidden. I’m really worried that you’re in their crosshairs, too. Especially if they figure out that you’ve taught everybody how to survive what’s happened to them. I... don’t have it ready yet, but... I’m making you a backup identity, in case you have to go underground.”

“You can do that?” Tomlin looked startled. She could see him once again weighing her appearance — she didn’t necessarily look like a kid, but she didn’t really look like an adult yet, either — against the things she could do. “Could you do that for my charges?”

She shook her head. “It’s taken me all this time just to put together solid identities for the three of us. Almost two hundred more people? I don’t think we have that kind of time. Would the Imazighen be willing to hide them? Takama told me most of your people live out in the mountains and high plains southeast of here, in the New Atlas Range.”

In fact, the New Marrakesh suburb nicknamed Rif, or Le Rif, mostly housed Amazigh traders passing through with their wares for sale to tourists and offworld merchants in exchange for things the tribes needed, along with a contingent of less nomadic types from across the tribes; their jobs were to provide logistical support and ensure that their people continued to be represented in the local and planetary government. They had made it their duty to continue fighting for their people’s right to live in ways that they, in the process, had to give up themselves.

There were a hundred million Imazighen living out in those vast highlands; some of the tribes had rejected all outsider influence, but others carried comms in their pockets and readily welcomed those new technologies that didn’t conflict with their way of life. A rare few, like Tomlin, came from marriages that weren’t simply inter-tribal — already a complicated affair — but extra-tribal altogether. The diversity she’d observed among the people of Le Rif was, in miniature, the diversity of the Imazighen as a whole. From some of Takama’s hints in recent

days, Jack understood that places could be opened within the tribes for outsiders who showed sufficient respect for the culture, such as her and Kyra.

Or, perhaps, for nearly two hundred desperate fugitives with nowhere else to turn for succor, who needed to stay on high ground.

Tomlin was nodding. "I think that could be arranged, at least for a while. Long enough to break their trails and, if possible, help them find their ways home. And if they can't go home... well, as a people, we are very good at knowing how to hide. You two could hide among us as well, if you wish, for as long as you like."

It was a sweet offer, and she could see he genuinely meant it, but Jack found herself shaking her head. "I have somewhere I need to go, but thank you."

Whether or not he knew it yet, her father was waiting for her.

She glanced Kyra's way, wondering whether her friend would be tempted. But Kyra was shaking her head, too. "I tried my Pa's agrarian paradise. It's not for me. I do appreciate the offer, though."

"I understand," Tomlin said, his smile indicating that he was not in the least offended. "I must admit that I am more comfortable in a cockpit than a tent, myself. Still, I will do what I must for these people, to keep them safe. Please tell me that the identity you are crafting for me is Amazigh. To my father's great despair, I'm not a very convincing Scotsman."

"It is," Jack reassured him, struggling not to laugh at the sudden mental image of him in a kilt, speaking with a thick brogue. Silly as the image first seemed to her, she suspected he'd still be devastatingly handsome and suave, not at all ridiculous, if he did it.

It surprised her that she was so relaxed around him. Usually, men as handsome as him left her feeling tongue-tied and gauche. Maybe it was just that she'd already won Tomlin's respect before she'd had a chance to ease up enough to really notice that about him.

"The tide will be down tomorrow night when everyone is sleeping," Tomlin said. "I think I will bring my charges out of the downtown area then. Once it recedes far enough that they can leave the building, and most people have left the streets, I will take them past the Rif and into the foothills where it cannot reach them at all. My people will take them the rest of the way. But I will have to concoct an explanation for where they have gone, and a distraction of some kind to keep anyone from seeing them leave."

"J—Finch is really good at those," Kyra told him. "Since you know who we are, you probably know how we left the hospital during some extremely chaotic malfunctions, right?"

Tomlin nodded slowly. Kyra smiled and tilted her head toward Jack.

"That was all *you*?" Tomlin asked, startled once more.

"Only way we could get out with a bounty hunter already on-site," Jack said, struggling to hide the smug grin that wanted to surface. "I had to make sure we got a several-hour head start before they could even realize we weren't just lost somewhere in the mayhem. And I may have released a few files into the wild that they'd been hiding."

"Then it's an especially good thing the Quintessa Corporation has no idea you were on board the *Matador*. They *should* be scared of you." Tomlin grinned, indicating that was a compliment. "If you can come up with a distraction, please let me know. Ask any of my people to get word to Brahim Meziane. That is how they know me best, and it is probably a safer channel than my official name, if Quintessa has its eyes on me."

Three hours later, as the sun was settling toward the horizon and Jack was putting the final touches on the new identities she had created, she had come up with the *perfect* way to both get the *Matador* survivors out of the city unseen... and let her and Kyra keep their beachcombing plans intact in the process.

Tomlin's gonna love it, she thought with a little bit of glee. *But first things first...*

"Kyra, I need you for a second," she called, and her friend entered the room with Sebby on her arm.

"What's up?"

"I have three names for you to pick from. Which do you like best?" Jack gestured at the screen. Planetary law enforcement had several names held in reserve for witness protection purposes, one of which was about to be taken out of reserve and put into active use. The result would be that, once Jack connected the fake credentials she had created, under a dummy name, to the new name, there would be a genuine birth certificate and a wealth of other, real, identity documentation stored in official locations; no matter how deeply anyone checked into it, no matter how far down they dug, there would be no sign that someone had made it up. These three would work for Kyra's approximate age and physical appearance.

Kyra leaned over her shoulder, looking at the screen. "Kali Montgomery. I like the way it sounds."

"Done." Jack hit a few more buttons on the screen. She loved that name, too, and had almost taken it for herself because it reminded her of both Shazza and Fry, except that she didn't think she'd look quite old enough to match its base age. "Our identities will be waiting at a drop point downtown in two hours. Along with some funding cards to help Tomlin—I'm gonna put together our funds later. He needs all the money he can get with what he's about to do."

"Yeah." Kyra seemed to have made peace with helping the man. "You know, I never asked, but I've always wondered. Why 'Jack B. Badd?'"

The two were gathering their things as she asked; walking through the switchback roads that led downward to New Marrakesh's urban center took a while, and both of them preferred to reach drop zones and rendezvous points ahead of anyone else. Jack shrugged, feeling suddenly embarrassed.

"It's a character from bedtime stories my father used to tell me," she admitted. She'd never even told Shazza that, and she had confided a *lot* in her. "Jack B. Badd was always getting into one escapade or another, usually only *just* managing to stay out of really bad trouble."

"So, essentially, you." Kyra snickered.

"Pretty much. Except he really was a boy, not just pretending to be one." The more Jack thought about it, the more she wondered if the stories had been autobiographical, if John MacNamera, whose closest relatives had sometimes called him "Jack-Mac" where she could hear, had been regaling her with stories about his own scrapes from *his* childhood.

That was a handle, sticking *way* out, that she'd never considered when she picked the name: the possibility that its use might make its way back to people who'd recognize the source. Of course, when she'd chosen it, it had never occurred to her that she would end up in quite as many quintessential Jack B. Badd misadventures as she had, or that mercs might one day know the name as belonging to fair prey. That was out of her hands now, though. Fortunately, she'd erased all of the records on Helion that listed her as anything but Jane Doe 7439.

One day, she thought, she'd have to try to erase whatever records Toombs had about her.

Sebby was contentedly patrolling the floorboards, looking for intruders to munch, as they left the apartment.

They stopped by Takama's food cart on the way, to send word to her nephew that they would come see him at Othman Tower that evening. She gave them a knowing look that suggested she might already be in on the upcoming exodus, before giving Jack a motherly hug and plying both of them with freshly made wraps that they could eat while they walked.

The drop went smoothly. As a precaution, Jack transferred all of the documents and money cards for Tomlin into a storage locker. She'd give him the key and let him pick them up at his convenience. She did the same thing for herself and Kyra; they'd collect theirs on the way back up to the Rif. Once they'd each hidden their keys in their smalls, she switched on her tablet to begin preparing for their meeting with Tomlin by taking control of the security cameras at the base of Othman Tower.

"Oh. Fuck," she breathed.

The cameras were already off.

28.

The Claws of the Black Fox

Othman Tower was only a five-minute walk from the transit station with the storage lockers. At a run, it was half that. Jack was screaming inside the whole way.

Kyra was ahead of her, wild hair streaming out behind her as she ran full tilt toward the building, a long knife that Jack had never seen before suddenly in one hand. Jack wasn't quite sure where she'd gotten and kept that, exactly. She didn't want to ask. All she could feel was desperate terror that they were already too late.

A little before they reached the Tower's plaza, still screened by the avenue's argan trees, Kyra suddenly stopped and held up her free hand, making a gesture that she and Jack had worked out in the prior days. *Isomorph over to Elsewhere*, the gesture said.

Jack concentrated, letting the buildings around them fade as she found her footing on the beaches of Elsewhere. She focused on letting her perception of U1 stay intact, though: an invisible girl looking in at the world from the other side of a threshold. She hurried forward, now running after Kyra on wet sand, once the transition was complete.

Two huge shuttles were parked before the building's main entrance, marring the lovely plaza that led up to the doors. Two lines of people, all with their arms bound at the wrists, were being herded into them at gunpoint by soldiers in motley uniforms. *Mercs*, Jack thought. Tomlin, dressed once more in his own uniform, his wrists shackled behind his back, was on his knees by the doors with another merc's gun pointed at his head.

"You grab Tomlin," Kyra murmured next to her. "I'll take care of the rest."

Before Jack could ask what she meant, Kyra was in motion, knives in both hands now. The mercs, Jack realized, couldn't see her—wouldn't see her until it was far too late.

The first to die was the man holding the gun to Tomlin's head.

The firearm went skittering across the flagstones as its owner clutched at his slashed throat before toppling to the ground beside Tomlin. *He* scrambled back away from the body, his eyes widening. Kyra had only made the blade itself manifest in U1. She was already on the move again.

In a second, Jack suddenly thought in alarm, the pilots in the shuttles would hear the commotion and call for help. They probably had the only functional communications in the area right now.

Let's fix that, shall we?

She brought her hands into U1 and laid them upon one of the two shuttles, *pulling* it all of the way into Elsewhere, remembering at the last instant to swap in Elsewhere's air to fill its space. Sometimes, when she and Kyra had been practicing isomorphing objects and had forgotten, the air displacement had created anything from a small snap to a loud bang, although that oddly never happened with their own bodies. This would have roared like thunder.

The huge vessel vanished from the flagstones of U1 and appeared on the sand of Elsewhere. A wave of dizziness passed through Jack; in its wake, she felt light as air. Trying not to stumble

in the sand, she raced over to the other shuttle's location, repeating her moves, staggering as the dizzy-airy feeling grew stronger. The shuttles' comms would be useless now, a whole universe away from anyone who could hear their messages.

Three more of the merc team's members, back in U1, were on the ground, dead or dying. The Black Fox of Canaan Mountain, Jack thought, had been fully unleashed. In defense of the *Matador* survivors, Kyra could do all of the things she hadn't been able to do to save her own family.

Between the dropping mercs and the vanishing shuttles, some of those survivors were starting to panic. The bewildered mercs surrounding them, realizing the situation was inexplicably spinning out of control, were hunting for something to shoot. In a moment, they might turn their weapons against their captives.

I am in both worlds, I am in both worlds, I am in both worlds...

Now visible, audible, and tangible in U1, she pitched her voice the way she had when, once, she had shouted to keep Shazza from killing an innocent man. "**EVERYBODY! ISOMORPH NOW! ALL THE WAY INTO ELSEWHERE! ALL THE WAY!**"

Jack hoped they understood what she meant. She didn't have time to find out. As several weapons pointed and fired in her direction, she isomorphed back out of U1 and ran toward Tomlin's position.

But she could feel the survivors *doing* it, feel them crossing from one 'verse to the next. Now, she knew, they would be able to see Kyra's deadly dance as she slashed her way through the armed mercs who had held them.

Jack reached Tomlin a second later, isomorphing back into U1 beside him. "Are you okay?" "I think so," he told her, sitting up. "What happened to the shuttles?"

"They're in Elsewhere," she muttered, grasping the binders on his wrists, shifting them to that other world, and tossing them aside.

A few of the *Matador* passengers were still in U1, she realized, and in deadly danger. One woman was crouched down, trying to shield two small children despite her bound arms; another, with a small baby harnessed on her chest, was kneeling on the ground trying to present as small a target as possible. A few others looked confused, struggling to do what she'd told them.

Tomlin, she thought, must not have had a chance to brief them on their anchoring tricks. She wondered if he'd even made it into the building before the merc team had captured him.

One merc had spotted her and was lining up a shot when a knife handle suddenly sprouted from his temple. His bullets went wide as he toppled, tearing through one of the stately trees overhanging the plaza. The remaining *Matador* survivors screamed and dropped to the ground; three more vanished from U1.

"Stop right there! Don't you move!" Another merc approached her and Tomlin, his rifle pointed directly at them.

Jack wrapped her arms around Tomlin and *pulled*.

They were in Elsewhere.

"*Baraka!*" Tomlin gasped, staring around him. "Is this—?"

"Yes," Jack told him. She got up and hurried over to the spot where she knew the mother with the infant was kneeling, shifting her vision enough to see her clearly, reaching out until she

was almost touching her.

She'd never tried this before. She didn't know if it would even work. Without isomorphing any part of herself back to U1, she focused on the woman, on the parts of her and her baby that were already connected to Elsewhere, and *pulled* again.

It worked so well that she fell backward, landing on her ass, as mother and child solidified in front of her. Kyra flew past them with a fierce smile on her face, racing for another of the still-standing mercs who was lining up a shot at a hapless civilian. Out of knives, she had a large chunk of driftwood in her hands.

A second later, the driftwood protruded from the merc's chest and back. His gun clattered to the plaza flagstones as he clutched at the wood in confused agony. Jack saw him crumple to the ground as she wrapped phantom arms around the mother with two small children, *pulling* them into Elsewhere.

Screams from the shuttles startled her. She turned and saw Tomlin running for one while Kyra raced for the other. She switched 'verses quickly and grabbed up one of the discarded rifles.

"Tomlin!" she shouted as she isomorphed back, throwing the rifle at him when he turned to look. He caught it easily.

The mercs back in U1 were all dead, she realized. Now they had only the shuttle pilots to deal with.

Kyra, following her lead, switched 'verses to grab one of the dropped rifles and reappeared in Elsewhere a second later.

A standoff was about to develop, Jack realized. The pilots had hostages.

"*ISOMORPH BACK TO U1!*" she bellowed as loudly as she could, hoping the passengers aboard the shuttles would hear her and know what to do. Her throat suddenly felt raw.

She ismorphed over herself, for the moment, letting her vision show her what was in both worlds even as her body stayed in only one. As she watched, several people dropped to the ground in the areas that the shuttles occupied, managing to pull themselves back to U1 on their own. She headed for the shuttle Tomlin had just raced into, pulling a sidearm off one of the fallen mercs as she went and switching off its safety.

I am in U1, but I see into Elsewhere, I am in U1 and cannot be seen in Elsewhere, but I can see...

She walked through the hull of the shuttle like a phantom.

Only the top half of her head was above the cabin floor, unseen. Several cuffed, terrified passengers remained on board. The pilot had one of them in a headlock, holding a gun to her head. Tomlin was trying to talk the man down, but the shouting was getting louder and louder, even through the veil between 'verses.

Jack positioned herself directly beneath the pilot, waiting for a moment when the gun's aim would waiver. She raised her pistol until it was completely above the floor, bracing herself as well as she could in such an awkward position.

I am in U1, only in U1, but the gun in my hand is in both 'verses. And its hammer, and its bullets, are fully in Elsewhere... It was, she thought ruefully, a good thing after all that her father had not only taught her how to shoot, but had made her break down and clean each of the guns they'd worked with. She could visualize, and suddenly *feel*, those parts of her weapon now.

One of the passengers stared in astonishment in her direction.

As his hostage writhed, twisting her body away from his, the pilot's gun slipped and pointed away from her for a fraction of a second. It was all Jack needed.

She fired straight up, over and over, emptying the pistol's clip into the pilot's torso, before ducking back out of the shuttle.

Small arms fire erupted from the other shuttle's space. Kyra was standing in its midst, unloading a pistol upward in U1, but on the Elsewhere side Jack could only see the hull of the shuttle itself. Her wild-haired friend emerged a moment later, her face almost glowing with fierce energy.

"That was a damned good idea you had," she said with a grin. "Last one's dead."

Jack could only nod silently, dropping her gun before falling to her knees. She isomorphed back into Elsewhere so she could vomit on the sand instead of in the plaza.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Jack had pulled the now-evacuated shuttles back into U1, and she and Kyra had finished removing everyone's restraints. The *Matador* survivors, none of whom were seriously injured, had helped them carry the mercs' corpses onto the shuttles, taking back comms and other items that the men had confiscated from their captives, before transferring back to Elsewhere at Jack's instruction, to wait.

"I think you got here not even ten minutes after I did," Tomlin said as he wiped a merc's blood off of his recovered comm. "I spent the last several hours making arrangements for tomorrow night. It was the message to meet you here that brought me at all. I never had a chance to reach the lobby before they had me."

Jack knelt down and transferred a pool of drying blood out of the plaza and into Elsewhere, while Kyra did the same near the other shuttle. It was the last physical evidence of the battle. There was nothing they could do about the damage to the trees where one automatic rifle had chewed them up... but they'd let whoever had sent the mercs worry about covering *that* up.

Someone—and Jack was pretty sure who—had gone to great lengths to ensure they could perpetrate a heinous crime unseen, after all. It would be a shame, she thought, not to take advantage of their efforts.

Othman Tower's building and plaza cameras, she had verified, were still offline, and the cameras and comms for several blocks were scrambled; someone had set things up so that none of them would come back on until the shuttles' transponders signaled that they were out of the cameras' lines of sight. If Jack and her friends played their cards just right, nobody—not even the people who had sent the mercs—would know just what had really happened there.

If she hadn't asked Tomlin to meet her here, she suddenly realized, *he* would have been the one with no idea or proof of what had been done to the people in his care. She suspected that would have broken his heart.

But it meant they probably hadn't been expecting him to come to the tower, or at least, hadn't built their plan around when he *was* expected. They had, in fact, done this on his *day off*. That was something she could *use*.

"You're gonna need to pretend you never got here at all," she told Tomlin, her voice hoarse and her throat feeling as though she had swallowed glass. Had she really yelled *that* loudly?

“You’re gonna need to pretend that everybody’d already been taken when you finally did get here.”

“All right. Why?”

“If you were here and escaped, that means so did everybody else. If you were never here, they won’t know anybody escaped their trap, just that *you* never walked into it. You know how to set autopilots?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Go on the shuttles and set each one to auto-launch in another five minutes or so. Make them fly out to sea, out to where it’s deep, and then dive down into the water. At velocity. Crash the fuck out of them where it’ll be hard to get to the wreckage.”

“All right. What does that buy us?”

“I don’t know what the Quintessa Corporation’s plans for the shuttles’ destinations were, but since they’re hiding the fact that they planned to kidnap everybody, they can’t exactly draw attention to it when it all goes wrong. Hopefully they won’t realize that the *Matador* passengers didn’t die in the crashes.” Jack sighed, suddenly feeling tired and ancient. Every devious idea she’d ever had seemed to be crowding into her head all at once. “Did any of them get on comms to anybody after they grabbed you?”

Tomlin shook his head. He seemed to understand what she was asking—which was good, because she barely did suddenly—and answered as if he was giving a military debriefing. “None of the mercenaries did. The pilots were already on board the shuttles, and they were already loading the passengers, when I walked up. I was coming around the side of the building and only saw the backs of the shuttles, so I don’t think the pilots ever saw me. None of the mercs told anyone they had me in custody. I’m not sure if they were even looking for me or just thought I was an inconvenient witness. And then you moved the shuttles over to Elsewhere before anyone started shooting or screaming. How did you manage—”

“Good. Then as far as they’ll know, you were never here, their mercs kidnapped the *Matador* survivors as planned, and then everybody, including the mercs, died in the crashes... except you, because you didn’t show up until long after they’d left,” Jack told him. “Meanwhile, we take the survivors up to high ground through Elsewhere, bring them out where your people can hide them, and then *you* discover, live on camera tomorrow morning, that Othman Tower’s empty and raise a stink about your missing charges.”

Tomlin was staring at her with strange awe again.

“They can’t...” Jack could feel the steam running out of her words. Why did she feel so exhausted suddenly? She could barely put two words together. “They can’t threaten to cripple the economy if you don’t turn over people *you* don’t have... because *they* already took them from you.”

“And,” Kyra said from beside her, “If they’re planning on killing all of the survivors off anyway, why should they care how it happens, even if they lose a few soldiers-for-hire in the process? Sucks for them that they eliminated all possible records of what went wrong. Let’s get those things set to fly and get back to Elsewhere. You know where the black boxes on those crates are located? We don’t want those found by divers.”

Jack wanted to follow the two of them, but she couldn’t get her legs to work. She sat quietly on the plaza’s flagstones for a few moments while Tomlin set the shuttles’ controls and Kyra

hauled out flight recorders, shifting them into Elsewhere. Her arms and legs felt weak and shaky, and her whole center felt utterly hollow.

“This is what she does,” she heard Kyra saying to Tomlin a few minutes later as they walked up. “She can come up with a crazy plan at the drop of a hat, and it’ll *work*. She’s like... a mastermind that way. I mean, hell, she’d already planned the march through Elsewhere, but those embellishments? She just came up with them now. On the *spot*, fergodsake. But killing somebody? That’s going to fuck her up for a while.”

“Even if by doing so, she saved someone’s life?”

“Even so. That’s our Finch.”

“You don’t think it might be the shuttles?”

“I don’t know. Could be. Never even occurred to me to *try* moving something that big, and she did it four times.”

Strong arms lifted her off the ground and she realized that Tomlin was cradling her like a child. Kyra’s arms came around both of them as she isomorphed them from U1 into Elsewhere.

Jack could, strangely, feel the exact moment when both shuttles left the plaza over in U1. She opened her eyes and watched them, through the veil of dimensions, as they flew off, arrowing toward the coastline.

Kyra was talking to the crowd, telling them that they were going to walk uphill until they were out of the path of the tide, which should stay below sea level for several more hours anyway. Then she was going to help them meet up with people who would take them to a place where they could hide. Jack, exhausted, leaned her head against Tomlin’s shoulder and focused on breathing, on *being*, while Kyra took charge. She’d told Kyra the plan as they had walked down into town, and her friend had loved it. Kyra would make it happen now.

Time slid by in fits and starts. Jack was in a gray place, exhausted by the terrible battle in the same way that she had been after the ordeal on the *Kubla Khan*. She’d slept for more than a day after that, clinging the whole time to the gun she’d fired, in fear that she would wake to find herself back in that world of horrors. Now, though, she didn’t dare sleep, not yet, not until she was sure everyone was really, truly safe... but she had no energy left to make sure of that.

She drifted in and out of consciousness through much of the hours-long night march out of the flat plains that corresponded with New Marrakesh’s city center and upward onto the sandy, weedy, increasingly rocky hillsides. Later, she would have memories of strange, small creatures skittering out of the paths of hundreds of human feet. For a while, Tomlin and Kyra both walked in the lead, side by side, Tomlin still carrying her in his arms, the two talking about combat and soldiering. Jack heard him offering to introduce Kyra to some of the officers he knew, people who would never, he promised, turn away the Black Fox of Canaan Mountain when he vouched for her.

She’ll have a home, Jack thought with wistful happiness as exhaustion took her again. *She’ll be able to fight with real soldiers, not mercs...*

Periodically, when she felt strong enough, alert enough, Tomlin let her walk beside him, but his arm was always protectively around her in case another wave of weakness stuck. One always did after a few moments, and she felt him catching her in a faint more than once. The long line stopped at least twice to take rests and give stragglers a chance to catch up, before they reached an area that Kyra said corresponded with the market square in the Rif.

Kyra brought Tomlin and Jack across first, practically into Takama's lap.

The next thing Jack knew, she was being fussed over and plied with mint tea and *jowhara* inside one of the small shops along the square's perimeter, by a merchant family she'd bought things from before, while Tomlin showered and changed in the shopkeeper's upstairs rooms. Someone collected his uniform for laundering, and two young women helped Jack get cleaned up and changed out of her scuffed, stained, and torn clothes—how exactly had that happened to them? She'd felt so unscathed at the time—into a soft, colorful jalabiya. Then she watched from a window seat, her head resting heavily against the glass, as the hushed exodus continued outside.

Takama, now assisted by a dozen or so of her fellow street vendors, took each of the survivors in hand as Kyra helped them across, hiding them in nearby shops while she and her friends arranged for merchant trucks to come and take them, in small groups, into the mountains. The night was full of quiet activity as the fugitives—now fed and disguised in traditional djellabas and jalabiyas with scarves around their heads—climbed a few at a time into various trucks and carts. No one was going to make them keep walking any further. Somehow, though, the activity seemed no busier than any of the Rif's normal night markets. No one would suspect a thing; those markets sometimes lasted from dusk to dawn in the Rif even when everywhere else was essentially shut down. All of the merchants seemed delighted to be in on the operation, cheerfully waving away the money some of the survivors tried to offer them in compensation. The rules of hospitality, which meant a great deal to the Imazighen, had apparently been invoked.

They had *done* it, Jack thought, allowing herself to relax a tiny bit more.

The sky was still dark, but not quite *as* dark, and the tide had begun to move in, when the last of the *Matador* survivors came through and Kyra joined her in the little shop, allowing the merchant's daughters to clean her up and give her a change of clothing.

Jack had almost forgotten about the storage locker key she'd intended to give Tomlin, hours before, until she'd pulled it and her own key out of her ruined clothing. When he returned to the shop a little before dawn, once again dressed in his cleaned and repaired uniform, she gave it to him at last.

"Thank you, my *Tislilel*," he told her, taking the key. "You saved so many lives yet again tonight. Including mine. Remember that. Please do not hold what you had to do against yourself." He kissed her forehead.

To Jack's surprise, Kyra allowed him to give her a thank-you kiss as well and listened attentively while he spoke softly to her, too. Jack, whose hearing was far better than people ever seemed to realize, heard every word. "You have a warrior's spirit, my *Dihya*. It is a difficult path to tread. But I have faith you will find your way and I promise, I will help you reach it."

Jack felt a weight lifting off of her with those words. Kyra might not want an agrarian life, or a domestic one, but Tomlin was offering her a life she *did* want, and a version she would never have to feel shame or regret for. After encountering the band of mercs in the plaza, Jack had hoped that she wouldn't still consider signing up with any. Now she wouldn't need to.

At the doorway, Tomlin turned back to them, his eyes both kind and tired. Now his words addressed not only them but his aunt, emerging from a back room with a tray of tea and food for Kyra her hands.

“I should be back in several hours, a day at most. After I am done ‘discovering’ that my charges are missing and filing my complaints, I will request some of my leave time. With all that has happened, no one will grudge me for it or even question it.” He paused, as if debating with himself. Taking a deep breath, he continued. “Now that I’ve experienced the journey to and from Elswhere, and have seen what you can do and what it costs, I think I know what the Quintessa Corporation is hiding. It’s much worse than we thought. We must never let them find my charges... or either one of you.”

With those last words, Gavin Brahim Tomlin, *El Krim*, left the amber light of the small shop for the predawn darkness.

It was the last time they ever saw him.

29.

The Voices of the Void

Sometime after the sky lightened, Kyra and Takama helped Jack climb the eight flights of steps up to their apartment and a frantic Sebby. The little crustacean scuttled straight up her jalabiya and onto her shoulder and refused to be set down for more than a minute.

“It is all just as Brahim described it yesterday,” Takama marveled as she helped Jack lie down on her bed. “How extraordinary. And your little pet... such incredible things you two can do. Rest now, little *Tislilel*... although I think he should have named you *Tiraline* instead.”

“He called me Dihya,” Kyra said, sitting down on the bed next to her. “Who’s that?”

“A great warrior queen,” Takama said. Jack closed her eyes and rested her head against the pillow, feeling Sebby settling down against her throat. “*Tiraline* and *Dihya*... the Mermaid Queen and the Warrior Queen... fitting for two young women who saved so many lives. Rest now, both of you. I will come and check on you later and bring you some food. What would you like?”

“Anything I didn’t cook,” Kyra said beside her.

Jack, eyes closed, already drifting off, found herself wanting to ask for a peanut butter sandwich, but the words that came out were oddly askew from that.

“Don’t wanna be a queen...”

Takama laughed softly from far away. “That is fine, young *Tislilel*. A mermaid does not need to be a queen to raise a tsunami...”

The idea of raising tsunamis followed her down into her dreams.

She was floating in darkness, rising and falling on unseen waves. Around her, the stars sparkled and burned as they followed their own tidal patterns. She was adrift among the stars themselves, watching them swirl past her in complex patterns as she swerved around them, free but tethered—

There was something heavy on her back, something chaining her to it, but she couldn’t see it.

And she was not alone.

Creature? something unseen asked. *Being?*

She tried to get her mouth to work, to call out *hello?* into the spangled darkness, but the part of her that suddenly felt like prey gone to ground wouldn’t release her voice.

Something is here. Was that her thought, or had the *thing* said it?

The stars slowed and stopped their tidal spin and for a moment she found herself in darkness.

Alone! a not-voice sobbed. *Alone and trapped...*

The show that she’d tried to recall, while talking to Tomlin, flashed through her mind. Something about a woman in a mask—

Yes, it said to her. *No. What is that thing?*

She could feel something reaching for her from the darkness. Something touched her—

You are not like us, it said after a moment, and she could feel its disappointment... and hope.

And, faintly, others like it, distant, near, reaching for her...

Is it one of them?

No. Larval. Bright and shiny...

The stars faded into view once more, whirling and dancing again as she spun through them.

It rode upon her back, but now it has come beneath and she is lost...

Lost? When had she gotten lost? Out here in the stars?

With horror, Jack realized that she was the *it* that the things were speaking of, not the *she*.

It has come beneath to us, come below to us, passed under to us...

Below... that resonated somehow.

Below... below... yes... beneath, below, under... we are under... take us to... take us... to the...

She was seeing something that could not be seen with human eyes. A shape that defied dimension, a pattern that murdered reason. Jack struggled to look away.

Too much, too much, poor larva, too much...

It doesn't understand. Poor larva.

We will teach it...

A line appeared before her, shining in the vast dark.

One.

It shifted, changing, becoming a glowing square, a flat plane.

Two.

Now the glowing square shifted again, evolving into a cube of light.

Three.

The next shape was almost impossible to comprehend.

Four.

The next was worse still.

Five.

NO...

It wouldn't stop. The shape kept warping itself into something even more impossible and terrifying.

Six... Seven... Eight... Nine... Ten...

Stop, please, stop...

Eleven... Twelve... Thirteen... Fourteen... Fifteen...

No no no no no stopstopstopstopstop—

A sharp pinch on her shoulder launched her up off of her pillow, gasping. Sebby tumbled into her lap.

Jack stared around the room wildly, panting. For a moment, the walls and floor and ceiling were almost incomprehensible to her: barren, flat planes that lacked... what...?

It's wrong it's wrong he said there were only ten...

She shuddered, hard. Sebby crawled up her chest and touched her chin with his antennae, gentle and feathery, as though checking to see if she was ill. Had he pinched her awake? She thought he had.

Next to her on the bed, Kyra groaned, frowning in her sleep.

Of all the things she'd expected to dream about, she hadn't expected... what, exactly? All she could remember now was a tide of stars and a masked woman... and a word...?

...octachoron...?

Lying back down, she cuddled Sebby to her as she settled against the pillow. He'd woken her from a nightmare; that much she knew. She didn't know how he was so perceptive, but she was grateful that he was.

They were waiting when she drifted off again.

We frightened you. We are sorry.

"Who are you?" she asked, trying to anchor herself in as much ordinary, prosaic reality as she could. She couldn't see them, but she tried to show them herself. Tall, gangly, short hair verging between brown and blonde, all eyes and elbows and knees as Rachel liked to say—

*It is one of **them!***

No. Similar three-shape. Different five-shape.

"Who are you?" she asked again, trying to see them.

The impossible thing, the shape that wasn't a shape, the shape that her mind tried to flee from, was back.

It is wondering. Wondering about us.

We are below... beneath... under... under... alone...

Find us. We will show you...

...help us...

DIE.

It was a new "voice," different from the others. Where she had sensed curiosity, loneliness, and strange desperation until then, she suddenly sensed terrible, implacable hatred.

Death to the things that killed us... death to the makers of the cages... death to the 'verse that trapped us... a trillion deaths for every one you took from us...

No. Leave. It is a larva.

It is filth.

Innocent!

Filth. It has no right to come under. Not innocent. Filth.

Flee, larva. Flee. We cannot protect you.

Jack couldn't move. She was rooted in place, locked in horror.

We come. We come to take it all back. All the worlds your filth has stolen will burn...

Something tiny and yet enormous took hold of her and the stars spun. She had the sense that another thing, monstrous and cold, had been reaching for her... but now it was gone.

We are sorry, little larva. Forgive us... help us...

"Who are you?" she whispered into the dark.

You see... you know... For a moment it almost came back to her, shards of memory with no meaning attached, glowing towers rising into a black sky, a woman in a mask, a hand slapping down on a button—

Come for us, the not-voices whispered. Save us. Take us... to...

...the Threshold...

The stars whirled around her again and for a moment, she caught another glimpse of the impossible shape, a chained and contained infinity, beautiful and terrible and mind-breaking—

She woke up gasping, pressing her hands over her mouth to suppress a scream. Kyra cried out in terror and sat up at the same moment.

“Fuck!” Kyra shouted, looking around wildly. Sebby scooted off of the bed and zoomed under the dresser.

Jack realized that Kyra had pulled a knife from somewhere and was holding it out defensively.

“What the fuck *was* that thing? Where did it go?” Kyra gasped.

“The thing in the dark?” Jack asked. “The thing that was huge and tiny at the same time?”

Kyra turned and looked at her, eyes widening. “You saw it too?”

Jack nodded, swallowing. “It said something about a threshold...”

Kyra nodded back. The tension was leaving her body, slowly. “How did we have the same dream?”

Jack shuddered. “Did you... feel it when people crossed over from U1 to Elsewhere last night? And back?”

Kyra looked like she wanted to say no, like she wanted to deny it. “...yes.”

“I think... I think something else felt *us*.” It was an increasingly unsettling thought.

“Fuck.” Kyra set the knife down. “Whatever it is, it ain’t human. Not even a little.”

“Did it call you a ‘larva’ too?” Jack asked. She was struggling to hold onto the memory. Unlike the perfect recall she had of things she paid attention to while she was conscious, her dreams were rarely accessible to her for long. Sometimes, after Mr. Reilly had told her about the Many Worlds Theory, she’d imagined that she visited other universes in her sleep, lived other lives, and that she couldn’t remember much afterwards because the memories lived in the heads of other Audreys, scattered throughout the multiverse.

Maybe she hadn’t been as far off as she’d thought.

“It did. Most of them did. But there was one...” Now Kyra shuddered. “It hated me. It wanted me dead.”

“Me too. Called me ‘filth.’”

“Filth... larva... way to make a girl feel insignificant. Shit.” Kyra blew out a breath and flopped down on the mattress. “If that was some kind of fucked up First Contact, I really don’t want to meet them out here in reality.”

But is this reality? Jack found herself thinking. If the entities they’d both dreamed about were real, was *this* the dream world?

She could feel a headache starting.

“I am *not* gonna go back to sleep for a while,” she said, lying on her back next to Kyra.

Fortunately, their rooms were flooded with light. Jack thought it might be nearing midday outside. There was very little noise coming in through the windows, which seemed to back that up. The heat was beating down, leavened by the sea breezes coming in through the windows, but Jack was glad of the warmth after the deathly cold of the *thing* from her dreams. Around New Marrakesh, people had probably already retired for the midday sleep period, while they were stuck wide awake and scared to close their eyes—

“So then maybe we should talk about what happened last night,” Kyra said.

“Which part? There’s so much.”

That got a soft laugh from Kyra. “Well, I can tell you some of the things that happened while you were kinda out of it, if you want.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” It bothered Jack that she’d collapsed so hard, while both Kyra and Tomlin had still needed her. “Sorry about that.”

“What for? You did great. *Really* great. Crazy-great. But anyway, Tomlin and I did a little embellishing of your plan for the shuttles. He set them up so that they’d fly textbook ‘launch to the space station’ paths out of New Marrakesh, and get halfway up into the sky before colliding with each other. Before they left, he and I did a quick isomorph to some alcove just outside of their jamming range, and he called Takama and gave her the transponder frequencies so she could track them. She says they crashed right into each other and exploded way out to sea, right about the time they reached this planet’s stratosphere.” Kyra grinned. “There’s a marine rescue operation going on right now, but nobody’s expecting to find much. And they’re *never* gonna find the flight recorders, because those are sitting on the beach in Elsewhere.”

“That’s... amazing.”

Kyra snorted. “Well, you said to crash the fuck out of them. Crashing them into each other seemed the best way.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you *kidding*? Last night was one of the best times I’ve ever *had*. I should be thanking *you*.” Kyra’s smile was broad and bright. “I know what I want to do now, what I want to be. I don’t know if you heard any of it, but... Tomlin’s gonna introduce me to some of the officers he served with. People he trusts. I’m gonna do it, Jack. I want to fight for people the way I did last night. He says there are some crack units that get sent on rescue missions, and if I can get into one of those...”

Her smile suddenly faltered. For a moment, the light in her eyes dimmed a little.

“Will *you* be okay if I do that? I know you told him you have somewhere you need to go, but... *do you*? I mean, *really*? ’Cause I don’t want to run out on you or anything.”

Jack felt as if her heart was both impossibly full and being squeezed really tightly. She’d worried more than a little about what would happen to *Kyra* when it was time for her to continue her journey to her father, but now Kyra was having the same worries about her...

“I will,” she promised. “I do have a place to go... I was on my way to my father when things started going wrong. That’s where I’m going. He doesn’t know I’m coming, but I know he’ll still be on Furya when I get there.”

Kyra looked both relieved and curious. “What’s Furya?”

“A planet,” Jack told her. “Kind of a weird one. There’s like, no record of when it was terraformed or who went to settle it, but a hundred or so years ago, some people showed up at Federacy HQ saying they were from there and wanting to register the planet as a sovereign world. That was a first. There really wasn’t much contact or trade or anything after that, either. But then, about thirty-five, forty years ago, a ton of people *from* there started showing up all over the Federacy as refugees, saying their world had been attacked. So scouts went out and... well, my dad said someone had committed genocide there. But all the survivors would say was that the devil had come, so, you know, not very helpful. Their biosphere was seriously fucked up by whatever happened, too. So a bunch of worlds offered their old terraforming equipment that they no longer needed, to help the place get put back together. It’s starting to work, but the

equipment's so old that it needs a lot of tending and re-engineering. My dad decided he'd go there and take charge of that. I guess he was stationed there back before I was born, so he already knows how to talk to the locals."

Describing it to Kyra, she suddenly felt selfish for wanting her father to stay on Deckard's World with her. He was *helping* people. After last night, she understood so much better how strong the need to do that could be.

Maybe he'd thought he was leaving her in the best possible place, with her mother and Alvin, much as Riddick had apparently thought that leaving her with Abu and Lajjun had been in her best interest. Her dad, she reflected, had probably been a lot more right about his choice than Riddick had been—

"I love how you know all this stuff," Kyra said after a moment. "The schooling I got from the New Christy elders... it was all about people from thousands of years ago who talked directly to God and lived for hundreds of years and had a million rules about everything and kept cursing their own children, and none of it made a lick of sense to me. Everything I *wanted* to learn about... oh no, that was *Men's Business*. My job was to cook and clean and make babies one day. I never, *ever* wanted that job."

"Well, you won't have to have it, ever, if you don't want." Jack told her. "Tomlin'll help you get in with the right people. He's the real deal."

"He is, isn't he?" Kyra grinned. "You know, I was real suspicious of him at first. Part of it was I was jealous, you know? The two of you seemed to understand each other so well, from the moment you met, and I've *never* seen you trust anyone so fast. But... you were right about him."

That astounded Jack. Kyra had been jealous of Tomlin?

But, she recalled, Kyra had also been jealous of *her* for a while, back when she'd been taken under Heather's wing. Friendships, she realized, *real* friendships, were hard to come by for Kyra. She was afraid that there wouldn't be any room left for her if someone new came along. She was afraid of being replaced and discarded.

"You didn't need to be jealous," she managed after a moment. "You're still my best friend. More than that. I'm an only child... or I was. But now, you're my sister."

Kyra swallowed, her smile taking on a tight quality, and Jack realized that she was struggling to suppress tears. "You're my sister, too," she managed after a moment, her voice wobbly.

Jack could feel how perilous her own emotions were. If she didn't say or do something to change it, the two of them were going to end up crying for the next few hours. She wasn't sure how long it would be before she could stop, if she started. "You think Takama brought us some food while we were asleep?"

Kyra's expression stabilized and her lips quirked. "Damn. You say *food* and my stomach starts screaming *demands*. Let's go find out."

Takama had indeed returned while they slept, leaving behind items that could safely sit out—protected from insects—on their table. Beneath the coverings, a variety of breads, nuts, hard cheeses, and fruits awaited them. Jack found a bottle of freshly-made orange juice, the New Marrakesh kind that had ruined her for all others, tucked in their otherwise empty cooler.

"So it's almost noon," Kyra said as they ate. "Tide's out. If you feel up to it—and I'll understand if you don't because I don't think you even *know* how much you did last night—we

could do a little of that beachcombing we talked about. Nobody'll notice if we appear and disappear places. And after last night, nobody in the Rif is going to think twice if they *do* see us do that.”

The wariness that had been so thoroughly habitual for Kyra seemed to have dissolved, literally overnight. This was the most relaxed Jack had ever seen her friend.

“I'd like that,” Jack said with a grin. “Let me just check the reports first...”

Her backpack, which had miraculously made it through all of the night's dramas, was sitting by the table. Takama must have found it at the shop and brought it over, because Jack had no clear recollection of what had happened to it after she'd put it on and begun running for Othman Tower. Inside, her tablet was, amazingly, unscathed.

Unlike the clothes I was wearing... She still couldn't figure out when she'd ripped both knees off of her pants.

There was nothing in the local news feeds about almost two hundred people disappearing. Not until Jack pulled up the news about the offshore search-and-rescue in progress.

The Quintessa Corporation has confirmed that both shuttles were carrying the surviving passengers and crew of the *Scarlet Matador* to a new treatment facility. Colonel Gavin Tomlin, who had been supervising the quarantine, is on record as saying that he never authorized, and had not been informed of, the transfer. Local authorities further confirmed that the shuttles appeared to have violated several rules regarding New Marrakesh airspace, and had forced Ground Control to reroute half a dozen flight paths to prevent additional collisions...

“Damn,” Kyra said. “I don't like his name being right in there.”

“Me neither,” Jack sighed. “No way around it, though, I guess. He *was* in charge of them. And it'd be suspicious as hell if he *wasn't* demanding to know why he'd been left out of the loop.”

“I hope he's a good actor.” Kyra grinned at Jack. “He's sure got the looks of one.”

Behind them, the door opened and Takama stepped through. “Awake already?”

Jack realized that, sometime in the last day, she'd stopped thinking of Takama as her favorite food vendor or even Tomlin's aunt, and had begun thinking of her as *family*. No wonder, she thought, soldiers coming home from war talked about their brothers and sisters in arms, and meant it. A powerful bond had been forged.

“We had some trouble with bad dreams,” Kyra said, with an ease that suggested she was feeling exactly the same way. She had probably given Takama the code to enter their building and unit.

This is who she was before life went badly wrong for her, Jack thought.

“I suppose that is no surprise. It is good that you are up, though. I spoke to Brahim a little while ago and thought I could give you an update if you were awake. Otherwise, I just wanted to check in on you before I went to sleep, myself.”

“Is everything okay?” Jack asked.

“He is not entirely sure. Everyone seems to have accepted Quintessa’s explanation and his outrage about it, but... he is not sure that the envoy from Quintessa believes what she is claiming. She acted strangely toward him.” Takama sighed. “He has to go up to Tangiers Station A to pull the original transmission logs from the *Scarlet Matador*, and the readings he took of its approach, because Quintessa is now claiming that it was never a Level Five Incident at all. He told me he thought someone might have been following him into the spaceport.”

“Wait, were you two talking on *comms* about this?” Kyra was frowning.

Takama laughed softly. “Do not fret, Dihya. We spoke a language no eavesdropper could know.”

“Are you sure?” Jack asked, feeling a cold spot in her belly. “Most translation programs—”

“Have no lexicon for it,” Takama insisted. “My sister invented it when we were children. I told you she is a linguist, yes? It was our secret language for years and years. She taught it to her husband and her children, but outside of the six of us, no one has ever spoken or heard it.”

Jack allowed herself to feel a little relief at that. It worried her, though, that Tomlin was possibly being followed. “What’s he doing about his shadow?”

“He said he might go where the man cannot follow. He *does* have clearance into almost every part of the spaceport. But I think he may wish to learn a little more about *why* he is being followed, first. After all—”

With a deafening bang, the apartment building shook.

Jack could hear alarms sounding outside, lots of them. She scrambled from the couch to the nearest window.

People were pouring out onto the streets, talking and shouting. Several of them pointed toward the northwest.

“What is it?” Takama asked.

“I can’t see yet.” Jack told her, running into the bedroom.

Several panes of glass in the western-facing window had cracked, but none had broken. Through the window, to the northwest, Jack could see a large, roiling column of black smoke climbing into the sky, flames licking upward from beneath it.

“*Baraka*,” Takama groaned at her side. “That is at the spaceport...”

Jack, who had impulsively bought a good set of binoculars—along with an as-yet-unused telescope—two days before, grabbed them off of the dresser and brought them to her eyes.

It was a clear day and Jack could see much of the coast of New Marrakesh. To the northwest, it curved to create a bay. Along the edge of the distant promontory, the runways and launch platforms spread out on the flat land. She could see many of the low structures that made up the spaceport, its concourses, towers, hangars, warehouses, ships...

One of the concourses, beside a shuttle roughly three times the size of the ones she’d encountered the night before, was burning fiercely beneath the rising black cloud. The flames were licking over the hull of the shuttle—

A flash as bright as the sun almost blinded her for a second. She threw her arm up over her eyes until it faded.

Now an enormous, gory red cloud was expanding where the shuttle had been, shooting off fast-moving tendrils of fire that arced through the sky.

“Fuck!” Kyra shouted. “Get away from the window!”

They raced for the doorway, only just reaching it as the shockwave struck. It shattered the window and sent dozens of sharp fragments of glass flying through the space where they'd only just been standing.

"Brahim!" Takama wailed, falling to her knees. "They have murdered *Brahim!*" she sobbed.

Kyra's face crumpled as she knelt down next to Takama and put her arms around her. Jack felt numb and weightless.

She couldn't think. She couldn't feel. Nothing made any sense. Only two terrible words echoed through the vast emptiness inside her.

Not again!

30.

As the Ashes Fall from the Sky

A terrible silence had fallen over New Marrakesh.

It wasn't a physical silence; sirens wailed constantly, ebbing and flowing as emergency vehicles traveled to and from the disaster zone. The drone of military 'copters and the whine of airtankers filled the skies. Agonized screams had even come from within Jack and Kyra's apartment building, from people who had been standing, dumbfounded, at their own west windows when the shockwave had struck. Human wailing pierced the air from all directions as people learned that someone they loved had been near, or in, the blast zone.

But Jack felt cocooned from it all, even as she and Kyra helped Takama tend their neighbors' wounds and joined the Imazighen in aid efforts, even as they shared tears and hugs with people who had known Tomlin—Brahim Meziane, to most of them—and had just discovered his fate. She was wrapped in something dark and quiet. In the silence, she couldn't even hear her heart beating and wondered if she still had one.

She and Kyra cried together that night, after Takama ordered them to bed, but the silence of her heart still wouldn't lift. The things that waited for her in her dreams left her alone. Later she had a vague memory of them arguing over whether she, and the "other larva," might be dying. It seemed unfathomable to her at times that she wasn't.

The initial death toll didn't quite reach five hundred, but that was more than enough.

Of those almost-five hundred, more than half were "missing and presumed dead," people whose last known positions had been too close to the blasts for any identifiable remains to be left. That roster was compiled from multiple lists: the shuttle's crew, all of whom had signed in to begin their shifts more than an hour earlier; roughly fifty passengers who had already checked in and boarded the shuttle early so they could sleep while they awaited liftoff; the ground crews loading and fueling the shuttle; the clocked-in staffs of an exclusive pilots' lounge, a small duty-free shop, and the security checkpoint located just before the departure gate... and one last, terrible, overlapping list of people whose comms had signaled their final locations within the blast radius before going silent forever.

Colonel Gavin Brahim Tomlin had been among the last group; his comm's final location had placed him in the pilots' lounge, less than twenty meters from the first explosion, and his bank account had a pending meal transaction originating from there. Where the lounge had been, the side of a monstrous crater now sloped down into the earth.

The initial explosion had been declared a terrorist act. Footage had surfaced of an unidentified man leaving a duffel bag on a bench not far from the pilots' lounge doors, and it was featured in every news feed, but no clear shot of the man's face was available.

Between the massive fire at the spaceport itself, and the dozens of violent secondary fires on the northwest end of the city caused by the shuttle's flaming debris, the search-and-rescue operations out at sea were scaled back, almost all of their teams diverted, and the story about *that* disaster, now thoroughly upstaged, vanished to the back "pages" of the news feeds.

The injury count was in the thousands. The property damage was in the trillions, when six more shuttles and two Star Jumpers that would never fly again were figured in.

New Marrakesh wasn't, in fact, Tangiers Prime's largest city; Tomlin had simply chosen to direct the *Scarlet Matador* there because the planet's most prestigious hospital was located within it, and possibly because he had his best connections to local resources and logistical capabilities there. Both space traffic and terrestrial flights were immediately rerouted to New Casablanca and New Fes, with the still functional landing pads at New Marrakesh's spaceport transforming into staging grounds for relief efforts. Thousands of stranded passengers waited within damaged concourses, and in hastily-assembled tents on the tarmac, for transport out of the city.

Check-in stations proliferated. One man, who had initially been reported as presumed dead, turned up a few hours later; he'd been at a police station on the other side of the spaceport, filing a report about his missing comm and wallet, at the time of the explosion. He was the only one thus far, but it had raised hopes that others might reappear. One Tangiers day after the explosion, the secondary list of missing persons, who hadn't been presumed dead yet but who might have been in the blast radius, had dropped from more than two thousand to slightly under three hundred. At the end of a Tangiers week—four of its long days, a period just eight hours longer than a Standard week—whatever names remained would be added to the list of the dead. It could no longer top eight hundred, but it might still come close. If the noon hour on Tangiers Prime hadn't been roughly equivalent to the midnight hour on most other worlds, the death and injury tolls might have been five times as high, but the devastation had struck during the spaceport's "quiet hours."

Every time Jack thought of those numbers, she felt ill.

Did I cause this? Is this my fault?

She wasn't going to find the answer in the news feeds. Pulling out her most powerful Ghost Code, she dug into the local law enforcement chatter.

No one seemed to be connecting the shuttle crash over the Mutawassit Ocean to the subsequent explosion at the spaceport, but there *was* an active—if backburnered—investigation into it. Jack had been right; the Quintessa Corporation had chosen to make its move while Tomlin was off-duty and out of the way. He'd spent his day off putting together a plan for stealing his charges out from under the Corporation's collective noses even as they were executing a plan to do the same thing to him.

Someone had switched around the evening duty rosters for Othman Tower, swapping in a set of false employee records for the new "staff" that took over the building that night. Jack recognized all of the faces immediately: the merc team. There was no record of who had made the changes.

"So Quintessa contracted out the kidnapping and let that merc team run it on the ground?" Kyra asked. She had taken to reading everything over Jack's shoulder, partly slumped against her back. Jack didn't mind; she needed the contact.

"Yeah," she agreed. "But whoever engineered this was either using a Ghost Code, like mine, or is *really* high up in the security chain around here."

"That's not good. Is that who jammed the cameras and comms?"

“Maybe. Either them or the mercs. I thought they had it set up to key off the shuttles’ transponders, but everything stayed off for another twenty minutes after those had already flown off, freaked out Ground Control—” Jack faltered for a moment on those words; that had been the first name she’d had for Tomlin. “—and then crashed. Kinda ham-handed.”

“Maybe,” Kyra said, her voice considering. “Or maybe they thought having a localized blackout keep going for a while after their operation ended would make it seem less connected.”

“Yeah,” Jack admitted. “Either way, whoever it is... they’re dangerous and they don’t care who they kill, and they can ghost around as well as we can, maybe better.”

With that in mind, she dug—carefully, because it was being actively consulted by law enforcement—into the back-end records of the spaceport, looking for a ghost’s trail: abrupt changes to databases with no record of who initiated them; glitched cameras that briefly lost the ability to record people’s movements; other signs that someone was doing the things she had done on Helion Prime, but to a far more harmful purpose. It took her another hour to find what she was looking for, but at least it kept her stable, quieting the part of her that wanted to scream to fill the silence, and might never stop if she let it start.

Someone had, indeed, followed Tomlin to the spaceport and shadowed him on the way to the pilots’ lounge. Someone who could only be tracked by the wake of suddenly malfunctioning cameras, about twenty meters behind Tomlin himself. Cameras at the periphery periodically captured small glimpses of a man dressed in the same clothing the suspected terrorist had been wearing, but never in any detail. By the time he was near enough to a camera for it to get a good shot of him, it had stopped recording.

Tomlin, in the footage, looked uneasy. At one point, he spoke on his comm—probably to Takama—as he walked through the concourse toward the shuttle that would ultimately explode. He lingered briefly by a reflective surface, studying the scene behind him. Trying to identify, Jack thought, his shadow.

Other members of the spaceport staff, dressed in uniforms like his, greeted Tomlin and spoke to him at times. He was clearly popular and well-liked. When he entered the pilots’ lounge, the malfunctions following him stilled to just three cameras, obscuring a space fifteen meters from the lounge’s doors. For the next half hour, those three cameras remained non-functional while a handful of people—a man and a woman in pilots’ uniforms entering the lounge with formally-dressed guests on their arms, someone else’s departing guest in a djellaba and a face-obscuring headwrap, and a trio of curious-looking teens who entered the lounge and were escorted back out a moment later, now looking disappointed—came and went. The glitches only moved when a technician showed up to examine one of the disabled cameras.

For another five minutes, nothing happened. Then a second set of camera glitches described the wake of another person moving, unseen, though the concourse and arriving at the same location.

The arrival, Jack thought, of the duffel bag.

Soon after, two sets of glitches showed Tomlin’s shadow, and his accomplice, departing the spaceport in two different directions, leaving behind an innocuous-looking bag sitting on a bench beside a potted fig tree. They were outside in another ten minutes. The first explosion immediately followed, every camera within forty meters of the bag registering flaring light from its direction before dissolving into static, the cameras beyond that showing the almost

instantaneous destruction that had been wrought, and the intense fire that had erupted seconds after, before registering their own flash-and-static deaths slightly over a minute later.

Whatever kind of bomb had been inside the bag, its position and blast radius had ensured that both the pilot's lounge and the shuttle's boarding area would be destroyed. They had calculated it so that, when the bomb went off, it wouldn't matter whether Tomlin was still eating his meal in the lounge or had joined the other passengers at the gate.

Jack couldn't bring herself to watch the feeds of the explosion from inside the lounge itself yet. Instead, she ran through all the exterior feeds, hoping that one or even both of the men might have accidentally let themselves get caught on a camera that didn't glitch. Nothing. The only shot she found was the one law enforcement was already circulating, the moment when a camera, too far down the concourse to capture any detail, recorded Tomlin's shadow placing the duffel bag on the bench and walking away.

The uniformity of the glitching suggested that he and his accomplice had been carrying scrambling devices rather than using Ghost Codes. There were no unexplained changes to any of the databases. Jack felt disgusted with herself for being relieved about that, about the fact that she didn't have to reveal the existence of the back doors she used, possibly closing them against herself in the process, in order to get justice for Tomlin.

Even though she'd put it off for the very end, Jack still couldn't bring herself to watch the recordings from inside the pilot's lounge. As much as part of her desperately wanted to see Tomlin again, even for a moment, she didn't want to have to watch him *die* in that moment. Neither did Kyra, who had been petting Sebby while resting her head on Jack's shoulder.

"So everybody thinks it was terrorism when it was an assassination?" Kyra asked.

"Yeah," Jack sighed. "Looks that way."

"Why'd they make it so big?" Kyra asked after a long, morose pause. "I mean, they knew where he was. Did they have to take out the whole concourse to get him? The whole *spaceport*, for fuck's sake?"

Of all the infinite ways that the disaster had struck at them, the sheer, brutal magnitude of it hit hardest after losing Tomlin himself. To ensure one man's death, the Quintessa Corporation had knowingly killed hundreds of people, injured thousands more, and crippled a city.

Jack's words to Tomlin from the night before came back to her. *They can't threaten to cripple the economy if you don't turn over people you don't have, because they already took them from you...*

She'd been wrong. She'd been so very wrong. Whether it was because they suspected Tomlin still had the *Matador* survivors, or because they wanted to prevent an inquest into the secrecy around Level Five Incidents, they'd been willing to do a whole lot more than just *threaten*. She wondered if the explosion was a message: *If you rescue two hundred lives from us, we will take three times as many in their place...*

Nobody could be so casually, inhumanly brutal, could they?

Death to the things that killed us... death to the makers of the cages... death to the 'verse that trapped us... a trillion deaths for every one you took from us...

She shuddered. Whatever *that* was, its malice was personal and vengeful. This was cruelly indifferent. It wasn't as if Tomlin had known, or could have proven, anything that would actually break the Quintessa Corporation's monopolistic power over space travel, was it?

I think I know what the Quintessa Corporation is hiding. It's much worse than we thought. We must never let them find my charges... or either one of you...

Had he discovered something that powerful?

"I think..." she said slowly, aware that Kyra was seeking an actual answer from her, "whatever it was that he figured out about them posed a big enough threat that they didn't *care* how many people got hurt, as long as they eliminated it. But..."

She pulled up the spaceport's schematics as she talked. Anything other than the lounge videos was a welcome tangent.

"...that doesn't really explain how strong that bomb ended up being, or how it started that fire, or why the *shuttle* exploded. Shuttles are made to deal with much worse when they hit atmo. It should've been okay. Maybe not *space*-worthy anymore, but still..."

The structure housing the concourse was multi-level. The upper level, where the pilot's lounge and departure gate had both been situated, was positioned six meters above the tarmac, level with the airlock into the shuttle's passenger cabin. Beneath it, the ground level was a long, vast warehouse-style structure with conveyors for both baggage and freight, carrying it from the spaceport to the shuttle's belly. And beneath that—

"There," Jack groaned, pointing on the screen. "Oh *fuck*, there it is."

"What?" Kyra leaned forward, touching the conduit Jack was pointing to. "What is it?"

"Hydrolox-M fuel lines," Jack managed, feeling ill. "For refueling the shuttle. It was still an hour until launch time, maybe more. The lines were open and *pumping*."

She could see it all now. The bomb had been strong enough to ensure that, whether Tomlin was still in the lounge—whose entry doors had been fifteen meters from the duffel bag—or was waiting at the departure gate thirty meters further down the concourse, he wouldn't survive. But that was also strong enough to reach, and rupture, the hydrolox-M fuel lines eight meters beneath it, while they were actively pumping *one of the most combustible materials in the universe* into the shuttle's enormous, almost-filled tanks...

Safety valves further down the line toward the spaceport hub would have tripped closed automatically upon sensing a sudden pressure drop, but if the concussive blast had damaged the valves leading into the shuttle itself, the hydrogen fire would have traveled, in moments, into its tanks, generating a blast whose power was just shy of *nuclear*.

Had they *known* the bomb would do that? Had they cared at all about the chain reaction it would set in motion?

And I thought I'd seen monsters on the crash planet...

"I hate not being the bad guys," Kyra grumbled.

For a moment, Jack's mind stuttered over that. But technically, she realized, they *were* both criminals. Escaped from custody and fugitives, they had stolen money and property and falsified documents along the way. They had participated in the hijacking and destruction of two shuttles, albeit ones that were empty aside from some merc bodies. But those were the bodies of their *victims*. They had committed murder—Jack for a second time, while Kyra had added another dozen or so notches to her belt.

I am technically a multiple murderer now, Jack thought, feeling a bubble of nausea rise in response. Whether she'd been defending people's lives or not, both of her victims had, at least nominally, been the ones on the right side of the law.

But the world would still be a far better place, she admitted, if their crimes were the worst ones on the board, if they were the worst villains on the stage.

“Yeah,” she finally agreed with a heavy sigh, “me, too.”

A soft knock on their door alerted them to Takama’s arrival before she came in. She wasn’t alone.

The silver-haired woman who came in next was unmistakably Takama’s sister. Safiyya Meziane, Jack realized. Which meant that the fair, Celtic-looking man walking behind her, whose appearance was hauntingly similar to Tomlin’s, was his father Cedric. A younger woman, who looked like both Safiyya and Cedric, followed them in—his sister. Jack recalled that Takama had said her younger nephew was away at flight school, following in his brother’s and father’s footsteps.

She rose from the couch to greet them, Kyra rising beside her. It took her a moment to find words. “I’m so sorry—” she began, before she found herself enveloped in a crushing mass hug.

Sebby, who had been sitting by Jack’s tablet tapping ineffectually at the screen with a pincer, scooted back into the bedroom, perhaps fearing that he was next to be squished.

“Was that it? The creature from the other universe?” Tomlin’s sister, Tafrara, asked.

“Yeah, that’s Sebby,” Jack told her, wiping her eyes. “Sorry, I think he’s feeling shy.”

“We brought you food,” Cedric said. “Takama says you don’t seem to keep any in your home.”

Jack felt terribly embarrassed suddenly. Amazigh culture was *huge* on hospitality, and they had nothing to offer. “Thank you. We, uh…”

“We’d love it if you’d stay and eat with us,” Kyra said, rescuing her.

That, Jack decided a few minutes later, had been the plan from the start, based on the quantity of food the Tomlin-Meziane family had brought with them. Soon everyone was settled in the living room with fragrant plates. Jack, who hadn’t thought she would ever want to eat again, found that she was suddenly ravenous.

Conversation inevitably turned to the explosion, and to loss.

“They’ve told us that there will be nothing to bury,” Cedric said. “He was too near to the blast. But they haven’t told us anything useful about *why* this happened. No terrorist groups have taken credit, nobody seems to know—”

“I know,” Jack said heavily. “I know what happened. And I know why.”

For the next half hour, she walked them through what she’d discovered, showing them the glitch patterns and the small amount that had been captured on camera. She showed them the schematics, and how the size of the first explosion had made the second inevitable. They watched somberly; like her and Kyra, they didn’t want to see footage of Tomlin’s last moments in the pilots’ lounge.

“You are every bit as formidable as our son said you were,” Cedric murmured as she put the tablet down at last.

“All this... to kill our son?” Saffiya finally asked. “Why?”

“Cause they don’t want people knowing about Level Five Incidents,” Jack sighed. “T—Brahim...” That seemed to be what everybody had called him in the Rif, when they weren’t referring to him as *El Krim* or, as some had pronounced it, *Il Karim*. “He thought he knew why.

Something that happened, when we were rescuing the *Matador* survivors, made him realize what Quintessa had to be hiding. Maybe they figured out he was onto them.”

“He didn’t tell you what it was?” Cedric asked.

Jack shook her head. She could see Kyra and Takama doing so as well. Whatever he’d discovered, he’d seemed reluctant to voice his suspicions, and had taken them with him into the black.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “This is all my fault—”

“Shut that down,” Kyra snapped. “Shut that down *right now*. You didn’t do this. *They* did. You want to know why people keep dying around you? It’s because *you don’t bail when things go bad*. Ever. So shut down this ‘my fault’ bullshit.”

“Dihya is right, Tislilel,” Cedric told her, and Jack abruptly realized that neither she nor Kyra had *ever* actually told anyone their names since their arrival in the Rif; now the names that Tomlin had given them had stuck. “I’m an old hand at these kinds of intrigues. They may have been planning on killing Brahim ever since he took the survivors back from them after the high tide. If he was going up to the space station to retrieve evidence of their wrongdoing, they’d have wanted to stop him in a way that didn’t look too specifically targeted at him.”

“I think,” Takama said, “from watching the footage, they may have intended to abduct him, or possibly engineer an accidental death for him... until they realized that he knew they were following him, and he made himself inaccessible to them by going into a lounge that only pilots and their guests can enter. Technically, he still numbered among the pilots even if it has been three years since he last flew a mission.”

Cedric nodded, looking thoughtful. “That’d explain why the bloke on his tail staked out the lounge and called for backup... and a much more violent plan. You say they were using portable jammers on the cameras, not jacking into the security system?”

“That’s what it looks like,” Jack said. “None of the signs of someone with *my* kind of access were in the system.”

Cedric gave her a weighing look, his expression heartbreakingly like Tomlin’s when *he* had restrained himself from asking when and how she’d learned so much high-level espionage. Jack swallowed, suddenly feeling like her food had gotten caught in her throat.

“So they may not have had any idea that their briefcase bomb was going to trigger something catastrophic,” he said after a moment. “I suspect, if they’d been *able* to gain access, they’d have put it on the shuttle itself and timed its detonation for sometime during launch. So whoever it was had top-level tech, but not top-level clearance. Could *you* have walked a bomb like that onto the shuttle?”

Jack winced, feeling ill, and nodded. She knew exactly how she could have done it, too. “I would never do that,” she whispered.

“We know,” Takama said, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Maybe I should be bothered by how much access you seem to have,” Cedric agreed, “but I’m not, because it seems to me like it’s in pretty safe hands. Incredibly *young* hands, but—”

“Now *hush*, Cedric,” Safiyya said in a gentle scolding tone. “You know that my cousin Lalla looked like she was twelve years old until she was nearly thirty. Don’t embarrass her. Or yourself.”

“The point is,” Cedric continued, giving his wife a somewhat subdued playful glance, “you aren’t at all responsible for what happened. The two of you are, in point of fact, also victims of Quintessa. Both of you could’ve run away and hidden, but you stood beside him when he needed allies most of all. You’re why almost two hundred people survived long enough to escape into the mountains. And you saved *his* life.”

“I didn’t, though,” Jack blurted. “I just postponed his death.”

Just like Fry...

“No one gets to choose how long their life is,” Cedric told her, his voice becoming a bit stern.

I tried to...

“All we can do is make the days we have count. My son would have no regrets about how *he* spent his last days, and who he spent them with. Nor do we.” He took a deep breath. “Which brings us to one of the reasons we came here today. We’ll be holding his memorial a few days from now, once the search-and-rescue is over and the Islamic funerals are dealt with first. And we would like it, very much, if both of you would join us at it, and stand with us as part of his family.”

Jack looked at Kyra, who was looking back at her in speechless astonishment, eyes filling. All she could do was nod and try not to start crying again.

Tomlin, she knew, would have wanted this. She had a sense that, on some level, she and Kyra had awakened fatherly impulses in him, and he’d have wanted his family to pull her and Kyra into their orbit and take them in on his behalf. But unlike Kyra, she had a father who was waiting for her, and a life and self that had been put on hold for far too long. For Kyra, what Tomlin had offered *was* the life she needed, not a further detour away from it. But even as part of Jack had been—and still was—a little tempted to let herself be enfolded into Tomlin’s world and family, she knew it wasn’t where she truly belonged. She needed to be Audrey MacNamera—not Jack B. Badd, not P. Finch, not Tislilel the mermaid—and inhabit a world without mercs, monsters, or murder. But first...

She would do this. She would honor Tomlin at his memorial ceremony. She would make sure that someone kept his promises to Kyra so she would have a future on Tangiers Prime that she could take pride in. But then...

It was, Jack knew, time for her to go.