

IN A FLASH

ARVIN LOUDERMILK



From the year 2234

IN A FLASH

A COLLECTIVE NOVEL BY ARVIN LOUDERMILK



A rebellion escalates.

A city disappears.

A civilization is left staggered.

IN A FLASH

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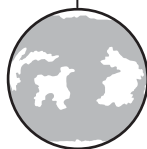
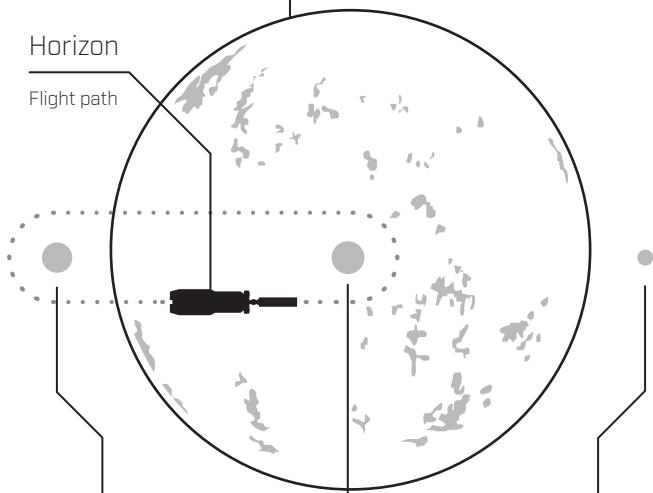
KROMA

A gas giant.

The second celestial body in the Spectra planetary system.

Horizon

Flight path



Azur

Mercado
Wagner
Covington

Ceris

Unsettled



Verdan

Echograd
Garland
Ushakov

FOR JAMIE FEASAL
gone like that



BEFORE

The Spiral Hall erupted in applause. Tana Kucherov whirled on the dais, in the round, surrounded by friends, family, and hundreds of invited citizens and dignitaries. A mobile spotlight trailed above her as she bounded across the stage. Nearing the edge of the elliptical platform, she planted her feet flat and locked eyes with an unfamiliar face in the second row.

“I stand here tonight and declare myself a nothing,” she said, her voice amplified throughout the high-domed chamber. “A young woman of little accomplishment being handed society’s ultimate respect and position. I am not my grandfather. I did not give away my fortune, change the political thinking of an entire planet, and then leave that same planet to shepherd the best and the brightest of the human race to a home on this beautiful new world. I am not even my father—a man who died taking those first bold steps onto the surface of that new world.” Tana held the pause. “My father actually did that—for you, for me, for *us*.”

Another pause followed, far longer than the first one. “As proud as I am of my lineage, I never got to know the two men I’ve just eulogized. Who I do know is all of you. To me, this is significant. To me, this is what Collective living has always been about. Everyone interacts with everyone else, and the playing field remains forever leveled, buoyed by the strength and support of our neighbors, made greater by the opportunity to live and work unencumbered by financial restraint or societal judgment. This ‘freedom to achieve, expectation to assist’ is our government’s greatest trust,

and my prime marching orders for as long as I hold office. I will never stop working to make your lives better. It's what my grandfather lived for. It's what my father died for."

Tana brought her fingers to her face and dabbed at her wet eyelashes. "Look at me. I'm about to cry. To maintain whatever dignity I have left, I should probably start wrapping things up."

She breathed out and allowed her hands to flop down to her side. "It's been twenty-one years since the night I was born. It's been twenty-one years since this society remade itself here in this grand and gorgeous city. Today is just one of those days in our history—in my life—and I'm here to express all my gratitude. The trust involved in permitting my ascension to the Directorate, at such a ridiculously young age, it's humbling. And yes, I know that as the designate firstborn Kucherov heir I *must* assume the Ninth Seat on my twenty-first birthday. I know it's the law. But to me, it's become so much more than that, it's a responsibility, a responsibility I accept with my whole heart. Thank you all so very, very much."

Out in the audience, Leta Rishar, Tana's lifelong best friend, shot from her seat and threw her arms into the air. "*We love you, Tana!*"

"And I love you. I love every single one of you."

Four Months Later

Tana kicked out at the silk sheet that had gotten twisted around her leg. Deen Adello gyrated against her, his fingers nudging her wrinkled pink blouse higher and higher. Then, just as he was cupping his hand over her breast, Tana shuddered.

Deen's eyes blinked open. "Something's bugging you."

"Nothing is bugging me. I'm fine." Tana lurched upward for a kiss, missing Deen's mouth and thudding awkwardly into the underside of his nose.

"Kiss me," she said. "Stop with all the psychoanalyzing and just kiss me."

"Hey, I'd love to. But you're not exactly making it easy on me, not with all the jerking and squirming."

"I neither jerked nor squirmed."

"At the very least you just jerked. It was like this massive spasm."

"No, that was a failed attempt at a kiss. Earlier, yeah, maybe I recoiled a bit, but—"

"Recoiled?" Deen rolled off her and buried his face in the pillows. The whine in his voice grew muffled. "Is that supposed to make me feel better or worse?"

"It wasn't intended to make you feel anything. It's what I was doing, plain and simple."

"Liar. It's obvious that something is upsetting you. Why don't you just

spit it out and tell me what's wrong?"

"I can't. It's not the kind of thing I can just talk about."

"That's bull. If something's upsetting you, you *have* to talk about it. You'd force me to talk about it if I was the one who was upset."

"This is not an issue of choice, Deen. This is Directorate business. Official secrets. I couldn't talk about it even if I wanted to."

"But it was me you were recoiling from. I deserve to know what I did that was so wrong."

"You didn't do anything."

"Then what's going on? You don't have to be specific. All I need is a hint."

"Forget it. There is no way I'm going to start quoting to you from highly classified historical records."

Deen flipped back around and brought them face to face once again. "Now that's interesting. What sort of highly classified secrets are we talking about here?"

"I cannot tell you," she said.

"Earth secrets?"

"Can't tell you."

"Voyage secrets? Arrival? Settlement construction?"

Tana's shoulders went slack. "Didn't I just say I couldn't tell you?"

"Hint, hint, hint," Deen said. "I want one."

"Okay...*geez*. I'll give you a one, a very *small* one."

Tana stretched out on the bed and draped her arm over Deen's chest. "Yesterday, I ran across an anecdote about a couple of our relatives. I didn't know they were friendly, and I was definitely unaware of the depth of their relationship."

"I don't know what that means."

"It's nothing, Deen. Nothing at all. I can't believe I've told you anything."

He squinted at her. "*Uh*...what does 'the *depth* of their relationship' mean? For some reason, you've got me thinking we're related...secretly related."

“Don’t be dense. Your great-great-grandfather did a favor for my grandfather—my famous grandfather—and it weirds me out because it revealed a lot of other things about the great Dimitri Kucherov I did not want to know. And now that I do, I find the man’s behavior extremely distressing.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Deen said.

“And you can’t know. I’ve already said too much.”

“But you obviously have the need to talk about it.”

“And how is that relevant? I’m legally disallowed from saying anything further. So that’s that.”

“Well, you need to talk to somebody about it. It’s driving you nuttier. Dimitri stuff always makes you nutty.”

Just then, Tana’s head twitched as an incoming audio summons began buzzing inside her ear.

“I’m going to need you to shush up for a minute.” She sat upright and pressed her earlobe, activating her link implant. “This is Tana. What can I do for you?”

She gave Deen a shrug as she listened to the caller’s response.

“Unfortunately, there’s no real privacy where I am at the moment. I should get to the Concourse before you go into any more detail. Give me a couple of minutes and we can all conference together once our situations are more secure.”

She severed the connection with a double tap.

“You have to go,” Deen said.

“I’ll be back.” She slid off the end of the bed and straightened her crumpled top.

“Tonight was supposed to be bed night,” Deen groaned. “I was hoping we’d actually get to do it for once.”

“We will. When I get back. We’ll do it more than once.”

“No we won’t. You’ll come back tired and uninterested, and eventually recoiling because Directorate intrigue is all that really interests you anymore.”

She retrieved her skirt from the floor. “Are you trying to sad sack me?”

“A little. I miss you. I hardly ever get to see you.”

Tana wrapped the streaked white skirt tight around her waist. “Do we need to have the responsibility conversation again?”

“No, I get it. You are important and have important work. I am not important and have no important work.”

“Good boy. I’ll be gone less than an hour.” She slapped at his feet as she leapt toward the bedroom door. “Be naked when I get back—and all ready to go.”

2

Rex Muran shook his head. A live dimensional transmission was gleaming inside the display port that split the eastern wall of his spacious new office suite, located two hundred thousand meters above the surface of Verdan, safe and snug aboard the orbital transport ship, *Horizon*.

On the other end of the broadcast, a moon away on Azur, operatives Jenna Quintanilla and Randall Dye sat slumped in a pair of armchairs that had been pushed together on the top deck of the Hub—the Covington construction site’s open-air command and control platform.

His voice calm, Rex repeated the question. “Come on, guys. Talk to me. How were they able to get a jump on you?”

Jenna mumbled an apology for their evasiveness and inspected her dirty fingers. Randall just sat there frozen.

“One of you *really* needs to answer me, or I will start shouting.” Rex’s hand swung behind his head and he rubbed the back of his cleanly shaved scalp.

Randall’s eyes blinked four times before he spoke. “I guess it was basically like all the other times, Commander. It happened fast. Jenna was out patrolling the coastline while I was doing the same in the hills, when, out of the nowhere, everything suddenly went dark. I woke up a half-hour later, bound back-to-back with Jenna on the beach. The Rangers had loaded the new supply canisters onto maybe a dozen or more sleds and were fleeing the scene just as we regained consciousness. It was a good hour before

one of the crew members could twist his way loose and unbind us.”

Rex nodded. “Is that your recollection as well, Jenna? You were surprised and overpowered?”

“I’m not sure what else I could add, so yes. Our answers at these things are getting real repetitive.” She shifted in her seat. “Oh, and lest we forget, there are puncture wounds on the back of our necks. So it’s safe to assume, once again, we were tagged and knocked out, probably from a click or more away.”

A visitor notification beeped twice in Rex’s ear.

“Have any inventories been done?” Rex said as he reached for an illuminated green button on his desktop. “Do we know what was stolen?”

“Food. Only food,” Randall said.

The office door slid open and Guard Lieutenant Jill Webb strutted inside. Like Rex, the only trace of her naturally dark hair was a hoop-bound braid dangling from the base of her skull.

Rex offered his second-in-command a requisite wave and returned to the task at hand. “In other words, you’re telling me that no water or medicine was taken?”

“Not this time,” Jenna said.

Jill widened her eyes as she walked past Rex’s desk. “Starting the debrief without the Directorate, huh?”

“Just putting the basic facts on the record before the inquisition can get its claws out.”

Jill took a seat in a neighboring chair.

“And what about injuries?” Rex asked the team in Covington. “Did they rough up any of the crew?”

“Everyone is fine, like always,” Jenna said.

“Actually, the whole place has been acting kind of giddy,” Randall said. “The raids have become this fun little diversion around here.”

“Wonderful,” Rex said. He and Jill looked at each other in despair.

Over on the transmission, Randall started jiggling his hands in front of the camera. “Boss, you need to remember, this situation, it’s so solvable. You know it is.”

“Solvable or not. This is not the sort of thing either of us should be discussing, not before the Directorate links in.”

“I know, but—”

“What did I just say? Not now.”

Randall hesitated, but did not stop. “Please, sir, just hear me out. All we’ve got to do is bring in a large, permanent detachment of operatives and your old buddies will stay far away from here, guaranteed. As it is now, Jenna and I are completely outmanned. It’s the two of us against nine or ten of them. Even if we had been warned before they struck tonight, those thugs still would’ve overwhelmed us. It’s a sad fact, but the Rangers outnumber us big time. Jenna and I are like sitting ducks out here.”

Rex leaned back in his chair. “I hear you. But right now, you’re all I’ve got. The apprentices are still way too green to be sent out in the field.”

“They are too green, that’s true,” Jill said as she jumped into the fray. “But Randall, he’s right as well. They need someone down there to watch their backs. The apprentices are never going to be that. They’re a long-term project, at best. But Aldon and I, we’re a lot more than that. We should be down on the ground with our people, protecting that site. Anything else is a waste of resources.”

“The Directorate doesn’t want a show of force,” Rex said. “They want the kids trained.”

“Well, they’re going to keep losing supplies.”

“And they don’t care. They understand the nature of the problem. We all do. There are two definitive ways to end the raiding—imprisonment or annihilation. Obviously, neither option is palatable with the public, or even with any of us. That means, for the time being, we’re stuck looking like fools every time the Rangers have the need to steal. And the Directorate, well, they continue to sacrifice an acceptable amount of supplies.”

“If you wanted to,” Jill said, “you could convince them to try something new.”

“I’ve told you my two ideas. They’re both insane.”

“But unlike the three of us, you have some influence to try. The Magistrate and your mother listen to every word you say, even when you’re being

dopey. If we could brainstorm up a decent plan, they'd have to consider it."

Rex tapped the mute button, killing audio communication with the team in Covington. "You want the four of us to brainstorm?"

"Sure. Tactical planning, isn't that what the Guard does?"

"Tactical planning is what the Guard is *supposed* to do. So far, we haven't done much of anything yet."

"Then let's do something already." Jill's eyes were blazing. "If we can come up with something unusual, something unpredictable, I know the Directorate will listen. They have to hate being embarrassed at least as much as we do."

3

“Thanks for the refill, Wes.” Kellen Granger gave the boy a friendly pat on the arm. “We really appreciate it.”

Wes Rishar fell back against the kitchen counter, watching Kellen longingly as she wandered over to the container of cookies he’d spent the afternoon preparing for her.

“You’re welcome,” he said. “It’s no problem at all.”

Kellen dropped her hand on the center of the container and tipped her head at the door. “Well, Kris is kind of waiting outside.”

“Why didn’t she just come inside with you?”

“Because. Our psychiatrist says we need to spend more time away from each other. We’re supposedly too close. Abnormally close.”

Wes’ eyes narrowed. “Really?”

“Yeah, can you believe it? There’s this ridiculously long name for the condition, but I can never remember what it is he calls it.”

“Is it serious? Medically serious?”

“I don’t think so, but he claims it’s unhealthy psychologically. I don’t think it’s that big of a deal myself.”

“Huh,” Wes said. “I’ve never heard that siblings can spend *too* much time together. My mom always complains that my brothers and sisters and I never spend any time together at all.”

“Kris and I are twins. That’s different.”

“Different in what way?”

“To be honest, it’s sort of deeper than I’ve ever been able to express. Kris and I, were kind of the same person. We think alike. We do everything together. It’s as if we’re one girl in two bodies.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Wes said.

“That’s all right. I wouldn’t expect you to. It’s kind of impossibly weird.”

“I want to understand.”

“You can’t, though. No one can, not really.” Kellen picked up the cookie container, a move that required both hands.

Wes took a sidestep around the predatory island. “Hey, if you’re ever looking for a reason to spend more time away from Kris, I’ll be around. You know what my schedule in the kitchen is. I’m here from dawn to twilight, and always available to help.”

“That’s sweet, but you do so much already.” She gave the container a shake. “You make cookies for us *exactly* how we like them.”

“No nuts,” he said.

“I’m telling you now, we’re going to eat through this whole thing in like three days. They’re so good.”

Wes’ face had become one big grimace. “I’m glad you like them.”

“What’s wrong?” Kellen asked him. “Is everything all right? If I just said something to upset you, I didn’t mean to.”

“You didn’t. Everything’s fine. It’s just that I like you is all. But I know that you and Kris already have a boyfriend.”

Kellen’s expression stiffened. “Daniel is mostly Kris’ boyfriend.”

“I know. You tried explaining that to me before. I’m not sure why I brought it up again. Maybe because there’s something else I’ve been meaning to say...about us. I wanted you to know that I can do a lot more than bake cookies. We’re both going to be stationed up on the *Horizon* for the foreseeable future, far away from our friends and family. I want you to remember that I’m pretty good at listening. Everybody says so, my sister Leta especially. She always says I listen too much and I need to start saying more of what’s on my mind.”

“Don’t be mad that I’m going,” Kellen said. “I have to.”

“I’m not mad.”

She slid the cookie container back onto the counter. “I hope not. Now give me a hug. I owe you a big one.”

She floated over to him and slipped her arms around his waist.

“You’re a terrific guy, Wes. I’m going to make more of an effort to see you when I’m putting in my allotted ‘No-Kris’ time. And it won’t be to just leech cookies off you, I promise.”

The Next Morning

4

Mary Muran had been keeping a close eye on Tana.

The green skies of Verdan engulfed the windowed assembly chamber. All nine of the Directorate Trustees had settled into their assigned positions around the center table, corresponding liaisons and advisors stationed both to their left, and to their right.

Mary's son Rex stood hunched at Tana's side, in full dress uniform, lighting up a stack of operational documents for the Magistrate's quick perusal. Smiling brightly, Tana returned her aunt's stare as the aging Sergeant-at-arms brought the meeting to order with a bellowing call for recording to commence.

"Mary, you're up first," Tana said. "What's the status on the grid upgrade?"

Mary glanced down at her notes. "The original completion schedule is being kept at a shockingly efficient pace. Initiation is still right on target for the third of August, eight days from now. Barring any unforeseen breakdown, the engineers promise the upgraded grid will be brought to complete functionality as soon as it's launched."

"And this is without any additional testing?" Tana asked.

"As I understand it, additional tests are unnecessary. Kenyon and his team have been running full simulations as the leads have been stretched farther and farther into the cities. Everything has functioned ideally so far, that makes the final testable junction points the stacks themselves, which

really can't be evaluated until all leads have been a hundred percent connected. Therefore, the new grid will either work, or it will not."

"That's reassuring, I suppose."

Tana checked her own notes. After a few seconds of sustained silence, an impatient Walter Stoddard cleared his throat. Tana turned to her friend and mentor, tacking on a dozen more seconds of deliberate delay.

"Okay," she said with a smirk. "That takes us through item one, which consequently leads us headlong into what occurred last night."

Mary raised her hand. "Any discussion of the Ranger raids should be put on hold until we have a full accounting of what was stolen."

"I have that accounting here," Tana said. "Although, even if I did not, delaying discussion on this issue is no longer an acceptable option. Yes, these thefts have been more humiliating than threatening. But the opportunity for violence has almost become inherent. In my opinion, it's only a matter of time before one of the Rangers lashes out and injures someone."

"We cannot control what the Rangers do," Mary said. "Not anymore."

Tana nodded. "Understood, but Ranger volatility is not my only concern here. What about the construction crews? What about the two Guardsmen we have stationed on site? These operatives have so far restrained themselves rather admirably, but let's not forget that they have been shamed over and over again. If an opportunity to punish presents itself, I'm afraid action might be taken and someone, *anyone*, could end up dead."

"I see," Mary said. "Rex has gotten to you, hasn't he? Look at him there grinning."

"This time, it was the other way around," Tana said.

"But he did discuss his ideas with you?"

"He did. Three plans were brought to me this morning."

"Three plans? What three plans are these?" Walter's head flicked to and fro, from Mary to Tana, and back again. "One of you needs to explain this latest dust-up of yours. You're leaving the rest of us in the dark."

"The plans being discussed are my son's doing," Mary said. "This after he swore to me he would take none of this to the Magistrate." She bent

forward and put her elbows on the table. “Try this one on for size, everyone. Our new field commander wants us to pull our people from Covington, abandon its construction, and leave the Rangers to forage for themselves in hopes of bringing about a more reasonable negotiating stance.”

“We cannot abandon that location,” Trustee Jane Ferid said. “We’ve put years of planning into the establishment of a parallel port city to support the Wagner fishing lanes.”

“You’ll get no disagreement from me,” Mary said. “All of us at this table understand that. It was an ill-considered idea—a potential last resort, at best. Which is exactly why I never wanted these plans anywhere near you-know-who.”

“I liked his second idea better,” Tana said.

Mary shot her niece an angry look. “I hated his second idea.”

“Why pray tell?”

“As if I need to explain that to you.”

Walter brought his fingers to his mouth and whistled. The noise that came out was loud and piercing. Mary and Tana’s argument ceased then and there.

“Which one of you is going to share this second idea with the rest of us?” Walter said.

“I will.” Tana triple tapped the tabletop, swapping a file bundle to the other eight Trustees. “The Guard, in their infinite wisdom, has proposed a trap that will compel the Rangers to negotiate with us.”

“What sort of trap?” Trustee Jonas Vickery asked.

“A perilous one,” Mary said. “A lunatic scheme. The most idiotic plan ever concocted.”

“Ah, it’s not that bad,” Tana said.

“It is, young lady. It very much is.”

“Can you just please fill us in,” Jonas said. “We’re all inclined to go along with your wishes, Magistrate—you haven’t led us astray so far—but we do need to hear some gosh darn details first.”

“The details are in the file right in front of you,” Tana said. “Would you like me to read it out loud? If that’s what everyone would like, I don’t

mind taking the time.”

Mary stood up and spoke to the room. “I need to be crystal clear about something before we go forward. I realize I cannot prevent the Magistrate from getting the votes she needs to go ahead with this silliness, not with that charm of hers, not with the dashing hero uniformed up as he is. But for the record, I want my objection to read emphatically. What she and my son are about to propose is reckless—reckless in the extreme.”

5

Deen was dragging his hands across the editing console. Renado Saziz was a level down, out in the encircling aisle, staring dead-eyed at the empty display column that was pulsating in front of him.

“You’re going to love this,” Deen said as he tapped in a final command. “It’s so freaking hilarious.”

Inside the column, a three-dimensional image of Natalya Rossonov materialized into view. The pregnant liaison was walking two strides behind Mary Muran before she inadvertently stumbled over a descending step and fell face first into her overseer’s backside.

Renado pumped his fist into the air. “*Awesome! Right* where the sun don’t shine.”

Deen laughed. “I keep watching it over and over again. She had to protect her stomach, so her hands went straight to the floor, not caring where her face went. It was beautiful, and more appropriate than you know.”

“Because she’s a butt kisser?”

“Oh, she is, for sure. But the truth is way more entertaining than that.”

“Tell me,” Renado said.

“I can’t. Tana would kill me if I blabbed.”

“She’ll never know. Just tell me.”

“Sorry.” Deen swiped the image away. “A secret’s a secret.”

Renado peered up at Deen all innocently. “Do you have any good shots of girls?”

“What sort of girls?”

“Girls who are not pregnant. Girls who are not so old.”

Deen cocked his head. “I have footage of everyone, but I do not access *anything* upon salacious request. That’s not a real rule or anything. It’s just the kind of good common sense I really like to practice.”

“Don’t torture me, my man.” Renado pressed his shoulder against the base of Deen’s console. “What’s the big deal? You just showed me one boss lady butt-sucking another boss lady.”

“Yes, but there was a reason I showed you that. I wanted to get your opinion of how it worked in the overall narrative of my Earth broadcast. I wasn’t being a creep or anything.”

“I get it. You’re looking for advice.”

“A storyline idea would be nice, too.”

A leer wormed its way onto Renado’s face. “There are these two blondes I train with. They’re twins. They should be a huge part of your next broadcast. I know them pretty well. I’ll bet I could help you with their storyline thingy.”

“Say no more. The gorgeous Granger twins.” Deen slid his pinkie across the citizen list on the right margin of his control screen. “My artistic intention with this pair could be to show viewers how getting dressed and undressed relates to the grueling training you guys undertake to become shiny new Guard operatives.”

“That might be the best idea I’ve ever heard,” Renado said.

A dimensional clip of Kris and Kellen Granger appeared in display column three.

“Do you see what I’m trying to do here? When they peel off their tights and tops, they are, in effect, stripping away the innocence of their old lives.”

Renado slumped lower and lower against the console. “I’m dying, you know that, right? Their bodies are so hot.”

“Hold up a minute,” Deen said. “I need a serious opinion of my metaphor or I’ll be forced to shut this off before it gets way, way more interesting.”

“But they’re on their way to the shower...together.” Renado was hoping straight up and down.

“An opinion. Give it to me.”

Renado shut his eyes as he concentrated on Deen’s request. “I get the peeling thing you’re talking about. It happens to me when I train, sort of. I guess you could say it’s good art thinking.”

“Are you breathing okay?”

“Not really. They’re standing there naked, completely naked”

“That they are.”

The Granger footage reached the end of its timecode and disappeared from sight.

Renado stepped toward the now empty column. “How were you even able to show me that? They must kill the cameras when they’re alone in their bedroom. I know I do.”

Deen wriggled his fingers in front of his face. “I’m magic. I see everything, and *everyone*.”

Three Days Later

6

Taking each step carefully, Walter was making his way down the patio staircase.

A tier beneath him, but well within earshot, Charin and Troy West quarreled across the table, their evening meals untouched, both visibly unnerved by Walter's purposeful approach.

"Charin. Troy. Hello," Walter said. "Have either of you seen my great-grandchildren? I hear they were recently in the vicinity."

Charin did not look up. "Which great-grandchildren are you referring to? You need to be more specific."

"Yes, we Stoddards are a brood, that's for sure." The older man smiled. "But it's Tonya's children I'm looking for, Allison and Timothy. They were supposed to meet me at the top of the stairs. I didn't want to have to navigate this deathtrap on my own."

Charin finally made eye contact with the man. "You've always hated this staircase."

"Who wouldn't? It's very steep, *far* too steep."

"You're looking good and healthy, sir," Troy said. "As strong as an ox. You can handle any staircase."

"Thank you, Troy. But at my age, we both know that isn't true."

Charin scooted away from the table and started to stand. "Would you like me to go find the kids for you? Mine are running around wild and need to be corralled as well. It's really no trouble."

"I appreciate that, but—" Walter lowered his voice. "Since you're already offering up assistance, there is something else you could do for me."

Charin fell back into her chair, her brow furrowing. "Mother sent you, didn't she?"

"Actually, no. She did not." Walter grabbed hold of the railing. "However, as you may or may not be aware, your mother *is* staying over in the city tonight. As a personal favor to me, would you please drop by and say hello. Maybe even bring the kids along? She misses you all very much."

"You had to be up to no good," Charin said. "If you were willing to dare these steps, you had to have some kind of ulterior motive."

Walter shrugged. "Is wanting you and your mother to mend fences such evil intent? I love you both. I hate that you're fighting."

"I love you too, Walter. But this is none of your business."

"When your mother is upset, that is always my business."

"Maybe she's not the only one who's upset here."

"I would never think that she was, but Mary has at least attempted to make amends. It is you who still blocks her calls. Relationships are a two-way street, sweetheart. Mary can be hardheaded, as we all know. But you, your behavior has been confusing. I think it's high time you explained yourself. No matter what it is that's gone wrong, the problems between you and your mother need to be addressed."

"Nothing has gone wrong," Charin said. "Which means there's nothing that needs to be fixed."

"Then what's the trouble? You have been ignoring Mary for weeks now. Clearly, she's done something to offend you."

Charin sighed. "My mother has done nothing wrong, okay? I am not mad at her in any way. Why can't anyone understand that?"

"She and I have been over and over this," Troy said. "I can't get a straight answer out of her either."

Charin glared at her husband. "You are so pompous, so fake."

"I am not."

"Yes, you are. You've been reveling in Mom's exile. Whatever my issues are with her, I don't hate her like you do. I don't hate her at all."

“I don’t hate anyone either.”

“Oh, please, give me a break. This entire city knows that you and she despise one another.”

Walter stepped in. “None of this is relevant. You two have been married for years, and it has had no lasting impact on your relationship with your mother. The distance between you now is new and inexplicable.”

“I have no idea why I don’t want to see her,” Charin said. “I’m sorry. I just don’t.”

“But don’t you owe her a reason?”

“What if I don’t have one? I don’t know why I feel the way I feel. Sometimes a person changes and they want something different with their life. Can’t a person decide to live their life in a different way? I know everyone thinks I have these all-important responsibilities, but I don’t care. I don’t want to be a part of any of that. Rex and Kip and Tana are already more than willing to take up the family legacy. I just want to practice medicine and raise my kids. I want to be left alone.”

“You sound like me fifty years ago,” Walter said.

“Then you understand that I don’t want to be bullied.”

“Oh, I was bullied constantly.”

“I’m sorry, but I won’t be.”

“Of course not. In that way, you’re quite like your mother.”

Charin took Walter by hand. “Look, old man, you know I adore you. And I have no doubt how much you love my mother and me, but I can’t just—”

“I got you. I’ll back off,” Walter said. “No more meddling.”

“Really? Just like that. Thank you.”

Walter leaned in and kissed Charin on the cheek. “It’s getting late. I should probably finish rounding up the great-grandchildren. It wasn’t merely an excuse.”

“Well, if you run into my two monsters, send them up as well. They were told to be back at the table ten minutes ago.”

Walter took a short step downward and steadied himself. “It was wonderful talking to you, my dear. Don’t be a stranger, all right?”

“I won’t,” Charin said.

Walter waved. “I’ll see both of you soon. Have a good night.”

Rex took a bite of his chicken salad dinner as the man in front of him gazed out at the soft, still waters of Echo Cove. The man—Koron Aw, the former Ranger—sat ramrod straight, flipping a small gold medallion back and forth between his fingers. The medallion, a retirement gift commemorating Koron's years of service in the wild, was etched on one side with the letter 'R,' and on the other with the official Collective emblem, a pair of raised concentric circles.

Rex swallowed what was left in his mouth and said, "Thank you for meeting with me, Mr. Aw."

"Certainly. Though, I must say, it's hard to refuse an official request."

"And I apologize for that. The order to meet came from the Directorate because the Guard still hasn't been given a liaison of our own. I've had to borrow Natalya Rossonov on occasion, which makes any outreach from me appear more heavy-handed than I intended."

"There's no reason to explain."

"I just don't want this meeting to be confrontational."

"Neither do I. I realize we haven't spoken since the secession, but the Directorate already knows good and well that Anne and I disagree with the Ranger temper tantrum. Severing ties to the Collective was a ridiculous overreaction to the failure to pass an even more ridiculous piece of legislation. Our son may have sided with Bernard and his goons, but not even our love for Tunji could tempt us to be disloyal to a government

we've fought so long to protect."

"That's good to know," Rex said.

Koron set the medallion on the table and folded his arms across his chest.

"Whenever you're ready, I'm ready," he said. "Ask your questions."

"Of course. But what if this isn't just about questions?"

"Then I would tell you to never deceive or manipulate a fellow operative. I was told you had questions for me."

Rex set his fork down on the table. "Again, I apologize if there's been a misunderstanding. I asked you here because I have a request to make. We—the full Directorate and I—would like for you and your wife to return to active duty with the Guard."

It took Koron a good long while to respond.

"I see. You do realize, neither of us were ever members of this Guard. That's your new thing. I was a Ranger. One of the very first Rangers, like your father."

"And like Bernard Stalt."

Koron gritted his teeth. "I am nothing like him. Bernard Stalt is a no-good traitor, a Ranger in name only."

"We are in complete agreement on that, sir, believe me. But at this moment, he's also the person in control of your son's well-being. Forgive my directness, but this seems to be an especially valid reason for you to join our ranks and help end this conflict as peacefully as we can."

Koron shook his head. "I don't know."

"When was the last time you spoke with Tunji?"

"It was the day before the secession vote. He called during your cousin's swearing-in ceremony. The conversation was brief and detached, as it tends to be with Tunji."

"Has he made any attempt to contact you since then?"

Koron arched his left eyebrow. "Didn't the Rangers carve the links from their necks to avoid being tracked?"

"They did."

"Then the only way for him to make contact is to fly home to Echograd."

“Or to have someone else call for him.”

“No, he wouldn’t. Tunji made it clear that he’s done with his mother and me. He’s been done with the family for a long time now.”

Rex lowered his voice. “Mr. Aw, we’re desperate. We need you back. The Ranger raids have grown more and more brazen. It’s only a matter of time before things really do come to blows. You remember what it’s like. It only takes a spark. One wrong word.”

“I understand everything you’re telling me,” Koron said. “The difficulty I’m having is, I can’t imagine suiting up again. It’s been too many years.”

“It doesn’t have to be a permanent assignment. I’m only looking for manpower and experience. My current team consists of five fully trained operatives and four untested apprentices. I don’t have to tell you how difficult that makes it for our side.”

“Have you asked your father to rejoin yet?” Koron asked.

Rex hesitated. “I haven’t, only because the Directorate has already nixed the idea. Camden’s out of shape, and far too unpredictable.”

“I’m not exactly in the best shape either.”

“But you respect authority, even if it’s mine.”

Koron glanced back out at the cove. “I’m sorry. What you’re asking me for, it’s impossible.”

“I get that. But Tunji is under the influence of a man who doesn’t care one iota about what we’ve accomplished on these moons, or the pride we place in being participants in something greater. To bring Tunji back safe and sound, I’m going to need your help. All I’m asking is that you consider rejoining. Will you at least do that? Will you at least think about it?”

Koron snatched the medallion off the table and the nervous twirling motion began anew.

“I’ll take your request to Anne,” he said. “Although, I cannot see her reacting any differently than I have. Our son is in jeopardy, you’re right about that. But the idea of holding a weapon on him to save him, I just cannot see myself going to that place. It’s too deranged a concept, even for an old nutjob like me.”

Tana, her mother, and her stepfather were the last ones left at the table. The other Ballard family members—Tana’s stepsiblings—had already dispersed, abandoning their plates in varying states of consumption. Tana, for some reason, could not take her eyes off the uneaten meal that had been left abandoned by her grumpy sister Donna.

“What’s wrong, honey? Are you still hungry?” Jocelyn Ballard asked.

Before Tana had a chance to respond, Jocelyn was already reaching out for the bread tray. Across the table, Adam Ballard smiled.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Tana said, pushing her own plate aside. “I couldn’t eat another bite.” She turned and gave her mother the look. “But it is getting to be that time. I need my moment alone with Adam.”

Jocelyn set the bread tray back down and muttered, “Oh, is that still necessary? I have you here at home so rarely. I hate having my time stolen from me.”

“Mother, no one is stealing anything from you. I just have a couple of quick inquiries about life on Earth that require Adam’s honest response, not the guarded reactions he usually gives when you’re pestering me to wrap it up.”

“I pester no one.”

“Whatever you say, but we still made a deal, remember? If I dropped by for a visit tonight—which required that I set aside my Magisterial duties for a couple of hours—you would in return allow me a few quick words

with Adam before I had to fly back. It was a promise, Mrs. Ballard, and you made it.”

Jocelyn stood up. “Right, right. I’ll sacrifice. You win. He’s all yours.”
 “Poor Mommy,” Tana said.

Jocelyn huffed and sulked as she trudged out of the room.

Tana put some weight behind her voice. “And *don’t* stand in the doorway and eavesdrop.”

There was no response from the kitchen.

Tana moved to the other side of the table. The archway that led into the kitchen was now in her full line of sight. She whispered to her stepfather, “I need to make sure she doesn’t listen in.”

Adam lifted his glass and drank from his milk. “I have to say, I’m intrigued that it’s Earth you need to talk about. What exactly do you want to know?”

“Nothing specific. The facts are the facts. I know what I need to know. I’m just looking for a reaction. I want to see if you think I’m being too sensitive about something.”

Adam set down his glass. “And that something is?”

“Several months ago, the day I was elected Magistrate actually, I was given access to a library of sealed historical records from Earth. As I’ve read my way through them, I’ve discovered a handful of disturbing incidents involving my grandfather. And I’m talking about Dimitri here, not Mom’s dad.”

Adam nodded, and Tana went on.

“Come to find out, Dimitri had made several questionable choices—but there was this one thing in particular that really made my skin crawl. It was a despicable thing for him to do, and it’s been completely stricken from the public record. Nobody outside of the Directorate even knows that it happened anymore.”

“Are these files you’re required to read?” Adam asked.

“More like expected to read, so I’ll have a better understanding of Collective history when I’m voting and adjudicating.”

“And these incidents pertain to a personal failing of Dimitri’s? A

betrayal of a friend or family?”

“Oh, wow,” Tana said, her eyes growing wide. “You actually know what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t, not specifically.”

“Yes, you do. I knew that you would. You were born on Earth. It’s easy to forget because you look so young, but you were there at the beginning. Of course you’d know everything.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. I was already in transit when the *Horizon* left Earth. I know almost nothing about that year or so before the big ship was launched.”

“Before the main launch, after the construction ship was launched. You know exactly what he did.”

Adam held still. “Listen to me, Tana. Whoever sealed those files a hundred years ago had their reasons. We live in a stunningly open society, if someone wanted events from more than a century ago kept quiet, there were surely important reasons to do so.”

Tana smiled at him. “I trust you more than anybody else in the world, you know that, don’t you?”

“Thank you. I do know that.”

“You’re playing it so cool, but I can see the outrage written all over your face. Thinking about this is a struggle for you. It pissed me off when I found out about it as well. But you—*whoa*. You’ve been living with this jerk’s horrible behavior for years and years.”

Adam looked away. “I really don’t like it when you’re judgmental like this.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t think I’m being judgmental at all. Nobody is perfect, that’s for damn sure. But not everyone has the means to strip their sins from history either.”

“Dimitri Kucherov was no sinner.”

“Well, that’s debatable. But he sure wasn’t the incorruptible icon everyone paints him out to be.”

“He was a giant man with giant flaws.”

Tana got up from the table. “No, it’s way worse than that. Dimitri

IN A FLASH

Kucherov was everything I've been forced to live up to my entire life. And now, I find out he's a myth. All the focus on living up to his greatness, it's been complete and utter crap.”

The Next Evening

9

Kris and Kellen were marching in a single-file line, fresh off the night's final flight down from the *Horizon*. Burned-out and silent, the twins kept perfect pace, their skintight training gear still glistening with sweat.

Twilight had begun to settle in over Echograd, and the dinner crowd was thinning. In the western sky, the glowing white planet of Kroma loomed ever present.

The girls made their final turn onto Garrison Lane and Kellen spotted a teenage school acquaintance waving to her from across the street. She stopped where she was and returned the boy's greeting. Kris continued forward, zeroing in on a set of winding steps in front of the cornermost home. The footlights on the lot were inactive, and its windows had been fully darkened.

"You ready?" Kris asked her sister. "We'll try knocking first."

Kellen had just caught up with her. "I don't know. The place looks deserted to me. Maybe we should try calling first."

"Nah, it'll be okay. We know for sure his parents aren't home. It's not like anybody can come out and scream at us if we wake someone up."

"Daniel could, if he's in there sleeping."

"He won't be. It's way too early to be sleeping. Besides, he'd love to be woken up by us. Trust me, the only screaming from him will be yelps of joy."

Kellen glanced back at her school friend, who was still standing in his

yard. “And exactly why would Daniel be yelping?”

“Because he loves us.”

“You mean he loves you.”

“He tells me he loves us both, deeply.”

“That’s what he says, but you have to know he’d say anything to keep you happy.”

Kris rocked her shoulders. “Probably. Maybe.”

Hand in hand, the twins scaled up the walkway, only halting once they’d reached the alcove front entrance. Kris knocked on the door. After no one answered, she struggled to get a look inside the large picture window to the right of the entranceway. When that wasn’t possible, she slid her foot onto the recessed activation pad.

“If somebody’s inside, this will get their attention.”

The light fixtures snapped on, bathing the entryway in a dank, yellow glow.

The Core voice responded to the teenagers’ presence—its tone warm and calm, its external volume low. “Miss Granger and Miss Granger, I regret to inform you that the Kiley family is not at home at the moment. If you would like to leave a message, please do so now.”

“Are you saying that Daniel Kiley is *not* inside?” Kris asked. “Is that what you’re telling us?”

Kellen tightened her grip on her sister’s hand.

“That is correct,” the Core said. “Daniel Kiley is not inside this residence.”

“Are his sisters gone, too? He lives with them now. His parents have moved to—”

Before Kris had a chance to finish, the Core spit out an additional response. “Kiley siblings, Katherine and Madison, are currently in the Echograd Playhouse. The parents of Daniel Kiley are no longer living as sanctioned Collective citizens.”

“We know that,” Kris said. “Everybody knows that. They’re on Eden Island with the Gideons.”

Kellen interrupted. “Can you please just tell us where Daniel is right

now?”

“Daniel Kiley is not currently within Echograd city limits.”

“That makes no sense,” Kris said. “If he’s not here, then where is he?”

“Daniel Kiley no longer resides in any Collective city.”

Aghast, Kris stomped her foot. “That makes even less sense.”

“What is Daniel Kiley’s current status?” Kellen asked. “Is he hurt? Is he alive?”

The grid voice skipped as its tonal inflection became slightly more stern. “All further information on Daniel Kiley has been restricted, by order of the Directorate. I apologize for being unable to answer any more Daniel Kiley-related questions.”

Annie Ling loped through the front door and discovered her mother and siblings, the Echograd wing of the family, up visiting from the city below.

The fair-haired foursome—who'd assembled themselves around a steaming buffet meal—held their tongues as Annie stutter-stepped her way over to the dining room table. Drips of bright blue construction gel coated the young girl's coveralls, and her flaming red hair was a tangle of thick, wet clumps.

Florin Ling looked her eldest over, sighing at the unkempt, unlady-like appearance. Annie's brothers—Sasha, Bryan, and Victor—sat in an ascending row on the far side of the table, snickering and pointing at their wild child big sister.

"Dinner is ready," Florin told Annie. "Get yourself changed and we'll eat as soon as your father arrives."

A step away from the table, Annie ceased her advance.

"Hi, sis," Bryan said.

Sasha held up his hand. "Howdy."

Annie blew a kiss at the boys, which made them all laugh.

"Hey," Annie said. "I just learned myself a new word today. Do you guys want to learn a new word, too?"

"I do," Victor said.

Jance Ling entered the residence at that exact moment. The family patriarch had already changed out of his own technical coveralls and was

dressed in creased long pants and a gray pullover shirt.

"Tell us the word," Sasha said.

"Okay." Annie's voice lilted. "It's *slut*. What do you guys think the word *slut* means?"

Florin's eyes snapped shut.

"Annie Ling!" Jance launched himself in his daughter's direction. Everyone at the table went deathly still.

"Let's ask Mom." Annie bucked her hips. "She most definitely knows what the word *slut* means, right, Mommy?"

"What is wrong with you?" Jance said as he tried to grab Annie by the shoulder. She dodged his lunge with ease.

"Go put on a dress," Jance shouted. "Right now. And make it something frilly." He started shaking his finger at her, but Annie remained just out of reach. "If I ever hear you talking like gutter trash again, I'll make you wear something frilly every day for the rest of your hateful little life."

Annie stormed off. "Like I care."

Still fuming, Jance took his seat at the dining room table, one eye on Annie as she turned the corner into her ground floor bedroom. Her three brothers sat up nice and straight in their chairs.

"At least she behaves for you," Florin said. "The girl needs to fear someone, and that someone is certainly not me."

"Truth be told," Jance said, "she's mellowed some. But it was disgusting of her to inflict that word on you."

"Even though I deserve it?"

"You don't deserve it. Not from her. Never from a child." Jance glanced over at his sons. "And how are you boys faring? You listening to your mother and keeping up with your coursework?"

Sasha answered first. "Yes, Dad."

"Of course," Bryan said.

"Me, too," Victor said. "I keep up with everything. And I'm nice to Mom, unlike Annie."

"Good." Jance gave them all a supportive nod.

The conversation had begun to lull when Annie made her return to the

table. She'd changed into a red tank top and a knee-length skirt. Her hair was still a mess.

Jance inspected her wardrobe. "I thought I told you something frilly."

"Don't you see it?" Annie gestured up at her neckline. "There's a stupid bow right here on the collar. It's a tiny one, but boy, it's oh-so frilly."

"I'd watch your tone if I were you."

Florin got up and removed the plastic coverings from the waiting dinner containers. Each of the Lings dug right into the night's outlay of roast beef, mashed potatoes, and mix of vegetables, piling their plates high.

"So, what were the two of you working on today?" Florin asked as she bent down to rest the coverings against the base of the table. "I know the big grid upgrade is about to happen. My people have been working on that in Echograd for weeks now. Is that what you two have been busy with?"

Jance scooped up some steamed green beans. "That's precisely what we've been busy with. That and just about nothing else. This new grid runs independently of the *Horizon*, which I assume, was its primary selling point. Up here, the tech division's one and only charge has been to prep the old network for dissolution. Annie and I have been scurrying in and out of maintenance corridors for the last month, pulling out dead leads, severing unused stems."

"Considering the ship's advanced age," Florin said, "all that probably needed to be done anyway, wouldn't you think?"

Jance nodded. "Definitely."

Annie settled in with her completed plate. "This ship is a total disaster area. It's falling apart...fast."

"It is," Jance said. "And I hate admitting that. I've spent my entire adult life struggling to keep the *Horizon* up and running, but that's become harder and harder of late."

Florin started putting together her own meal. "Over the years, I've really come to adore this ship. If the day ever comes, it'll be difficult to let her go. It was my home for so long. I guess it's *still* my second home, as long as you and Annie are living up here."

His mouth full of roast beef, Victor said, "If this is our home too, then

why can't we all live up here. You know, together?"

Jance and Florin's eyes met.

"Son, your mother is the Executor of Echograd. That's one of the highest elected offices a citizen can hold. My job is essential, and there are many excellent reasons why I'm teaching my skill set to Annie. But what your mother does brings true significance and prestige to the family. And unfortunately, that means, for the time being, the status quo must remain the status quo, no matter how much we all hate living apart. Separation was the last thing your mother and I wanted for all of us. But separation is what we are left with. And like any family, when left with no other choice, what is it that we do?"

"We do as we must," the three boys chanted.

Leta was just standing there in the doorway. Tana, the office's lone occupant, was reclined on the couch, her legs propped precariously against the wall as her feet tapped out a slow, yet melodic beat.

"Are you busy?" Leta asked, barely loud enough to be heard.

Tana craned her head up and grinned. "Well, look who it is."

"I'm not kidding," Leta insisted. "Are you busy? Please, be honest with me. I don't want to interrupt if you're in the middle of something."

"I'm a teensy bit busy, but it's nothing that can't wait. It's good to see you."

Leta meandered through the door. "Shawn said you were up on the ship today, so I decided to chance it and just drop by and say hello."

"It's been a while, I know. I've been swamped. I'm sorry."

Leta stared down at her friend. "I hate to be contrary, but you don't appear to be working too terribly hard at the moment."

"It must look that way with me lying down like this." Tana gave her ear a tap. "I was having briefing papers read into my ear. Outwardly, it appears I'm lazing about, but in truth, it's like I said...busy, busy."

Leta settled into a chair opposite Tana and the couch.

"You aren't the only one who gets busy, you know. Everybody does. I have my Guard training. And Deen, he's got his broadcasts. Everyone has something."

"Uh-oh. Is that a tinge of annoyance I hear?" Tana swung her feet away

from the wall and put herself upright. “Tell me, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. I’m just here to say hi.”

“Yes, but something is on your mind. I’ve done something, or someone has done something. Something has definitely been done.”

“It’s nothing. Deen and I have had some conversations recently, and this issue has come up.”

“You and Deen talk?” Tana hiccupped on the word ‘talk.’

“A few times. He’s needed to vent. The guy is lonely, and I’ve listened.”

Tana straightened out her left pant leg. “He sent you here to talk to me, didn’t he? Unbelievable. He can’t get the troubles of society to disappear through whining and badgering, so he seeks out my best friend and guilts her into doing his dirty work.”

“He’s upset,” Leta said.

“He’s a baby.”

“He says he misses you, a lot.”

Tana shrugged. “Believe me, I give the guy every second I can spare, at the expense of everyone else—including you. You’d think he’d understand what my life has become. The fact of the matter is, the only reason he’s even attracted to me is because of who I am. He won’t admit it, but he likes sleeping with someone significant. He revels in it. But lately, when I’m not there at his beck and call, he reverts to infant mode and tries to get me to shirk my responsibilities. I don’t have to tell you how much that annoys me.”

“Deen’s not as smart as you are. He doesn’t have the words. Not everyone does.”

“This isn’t about words. This is about basic common sense. He needs to take what he’s given and stop complaining. He needs to leave my friends out of his pleas for love, because if this kind of behavior continues, he and I will come to an end, rather quickly. I’ll have no other choice.”

“I know, but he’s not as bad as you’re making him out to be. I like him, and I sympathize.”

Tana’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Look, I realize that I’m not as available as I used to be. But my life has changed. I want to have more free

time—and I try to find it wherever I can—but this job, it can get crazy. There are pressing duties I have to attend to at almost every second of the day. I'm not a natural at the politics and the policymaking, despite what the outside world imagines. Through no choice of my own, I've been transformed into this convenient public surrogate for my dead grandfather. Think about it, so what if I was the first child born on these moons? Who even cares about any of that? I know I don't. Why does everyone think I should be the one to do this? Because of who I'm related to? Because of the opportune time that I was born? All of it, it's so ridiculous. My aptitudes are in engineering, not political science. It's no wonder I've had so much trouble getting into the swing of this council stuff. It's been a nightmare. I have no idea what I'm doing. How could I? I'm ill-equipped. I'm this pathetic novice who has no idea why you lunatics handed all this power over to me."

"First off," Leta said, "you are not ill-equipped, not in the slightest. You're the greatest at everything you've ever tried to do. You always have been. That's why we all look up to you. That's also what makes you the only person for this job. You're Tana Marie Kucherov, and everyone else isn't."

Tana fell back into the couch cushions and covered her face with her hands. "So, you've been talking to Deen, huh?"

"A little, sure. We're both stationed on the *Horizon*. This is a large and empty place. And if Deen's not in Echograd with you, yeah, we've become pretty good friends."

"I didn't know that. I thought he had just been harassing you."

"He's definitely not harassing me, not in any way."

"Well, I think it's a good thing for you both. I honestly do. This ship does get lonely. It must be nice to have someone to spend time with."

Leta put her nose in the air and broke eye contact with Tana. "Come on, it's not like we hang out *that* much. I do have more of a life than just filling in for you."

"Of course you do." Tana brought her hands back down. "Of course."

"Are those briefings still being read in your ear?" Leta asked her.

"No. I stopped that the second you and I started talking. But I did just

remember why I came up to the ship. I have a meeting I have to attend. Big surprise, huh?”

“I should go then.” Leta eased herself out of the chair.

Tana stood as well. “Tomorrow night, let’s get dinner. You, Deen, and I. We’ll have some fun. I have process meetings during the day, but I should be free by seven at the latest. I’ll even come to you guys. Up to the ship, I mean. We’ll have ourselves a nice meal and chat, just the three of us.”

The Next Afternoon

12

“Can I have a quick word? I promise, I’ll be extremely brief.”

James Cutler looped his arm around Walter’s back, interrupting the argument his grandfather had been having with Trustee Deborah Summers, chief instigator in the day’s discontented negotiations. The morning half of the Directorate’s bimonthly process meetings had just broken up, unleashing politicians and liaisons into the bustling Concourse corridors. A tidal wave of conversations ensued, all vital and important, blending together into a single, simultaneous buzz.

Walter turned to his grandson. “I always have time for you, Jimmy. Always.” He swiveled back to his colleague and sneered. “Trustee Summers and I can continue this discussion later.”

Summers’ only response was to return Walter’s sneer. She left without another word.

“That woman is a handful,” Walter said once she was far enough away. James smiled. “So I’ve heard, mostly from you.”

Walter smiled back. “What was it that you needed, kiddo?”

“To tell you that I’m ready. I’ve decided. Next election, I’m running for Trustee. My time has come, of that I’m certain.”

Walter clenched his fists and nodded. “What a wonderful decision. This is *exactly* what I hoped you would be doing.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty excited.”

Walter came forward and gave his grandson’s arm a swat. “You have

always made such excellent decisions. Perfect decisions, actually.”

“Let’s not get carried away. This is just the logical progression of my career. I’m no political savant or anything.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. What you’re doing here will have a lasting effect on this government. I’ve been calling on people like you for months. We need more youth on the council. With Tana fitting in so ideally, she’s going to need allies her own age to balance out us old fogies who don’t quite think as grandly as you youngsters.”

James was beaming. “I can’t wait to tell Tana. She was definitely my impetus.”

“As she should be. As Dimitri was mine.”

“So,” James said, “if the current ordering zones hold up, I’ll be going up against Heather Cottingham.”

“It’ll be either her or Jane Ferid. But more than likely, as you’ve already determined, it’ll end up being Heather.”

“From what I remember, she’s a slash and burn sort of campaigner. She’ll be dangerous. She’s sure to go straight for a nepotism attack.”

“She might, although other losing candidates have wielded nepotism as an evil before, and it’s never worked for any of them. People like the idea of the Four Families, and they want these families represented on the council, generation after generation.”

James’ smile grew ever wider. “As I was saying, I’m very excited.”

“And Kevin will run your campaign again?”

“Unless you have a better suggestion. Kev did bang-up work on my last Prefect election. I took ninety-one percent of the vote.”

The Core voice came online and called for Trustees to return to the meeting hall.

Walter brought his hands together in a clap. “Kevin it is then. We’ll do some more strategizing after dinner. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“This is good, Granddad. I *am* ready.”

Walter drew James into an embrace. “You have been ready since the day you were born, son. Believe me, greatness, it’s right around the corner.”

Kellen curled up beside Kris on the unmade bed. Their parents, Robert and Marta Granger, hovered near the bedroom window, maintaining their distance as Kellen soothed the emotions of her heartbroken genetic duplicate.

“He’s gone. He ditched us,” Kris said between sobs. “I want to forget him, like he never even existed.”

“You won’t forget. You can’t forget,” Kellen said.

“You’re probably happy. You never liked Daniel anyway. Not really.”

“I liked Daniel very much.”

“But you didn’t *love* him.”

“It was never as black and white as that.” Kellen kissed the back of Kris’ head. “I didn’t know him well enough to love him yet. And to be truthful, neither did you. Yeah, he was charming and handsome, and he promised forever love. But we also both knew what he really wanted. Daniel was a lustful guy.” She gave her sister a nudge. “And you and me, we were a bit lustful, too.”

“He was more than that to me.”

“I know, and that’s why you’re hurting.”

Robert took a seat on the edge of the bed. “You know that Daniel had his tendencies, Kris. He spoke in solidarity with the extremists. When his mother and father defected—he defended them. You remember, right at our dinner table. He called where they went ‘the heart of God.’ His leaving

to join them was always a possibility. None of us ever spoke about it, but it's been a concern for your mother and me. The boy had issues."

"But he told me he would *never* go with the Gideons," Kris said.

"He also said he wasn't interested in sex," Kellen said. "But you know that wasn't true. You know how grabby he could be."

The admission made both Robert and Marta flinch.

Kris sniffed. "He could still come back. The Magistrate said so when we asked her about what she knew. She said he never officially severed his citizenship to the Collective. He just took a boat and left the city. He could be coming back. He could just be gone for a visit. None of us know anything for sure."

Marta joined her husband and daughters on the bed. "Kris, his sisters told you he was leaving for good. Various friends have said the same. He even took a snapshot of his shaved head before he left. That was a political message. You heard Miss Kucherov tell you precisely that."

Kris responded so quietly only her sister could hear. "His beautiful hair, all chopped off like that. What a waste."

"It'll be all right," Kellen said.

"It's not going to be all right. I want him to come back to us, with his old hair. Is that so wrong? The three of us never had our chance to be real boyfriend and girlfriends."

Kellen was now whispering as well. "What you were saying before, you weren't wrong. I never wanted to be Daniel's girlfriend. I did try to like him, though. I did. I tried hard."

"Then you should have tried harder. We're supposed to think the same. I love him totally, so you have to love him totally."

"And with everything else, that's the way it's worked out. But I just didn't feel anything romantic for the guy. I guess at some point we were bound to feel differently about something. Neither of us wanted this to happen, but now that it has, it's something we have to deal with."

Kris nodded. "This is why I think we need to start looking for someone else right away, someone for us both. I don't want to be with anyone if it means you and I have to be apart. We have to find another guy. That's the

way it works. The only way you can get over someone as cute as Daniel is to find a much cuter guy, as fast as you can.”

“That’s certainly proactive,” Robert said.

“I think the word you meant to use is rash,” Marta countered.

Kellen nuzzled her face in her sister’s hair. “Okay...sure. If that’s what you want, then that’s what we’ll do. Carefully and selectively, we’ll become more social, and maybe attract a few fellas.”

Robert held his hand out at the window. “Personally, I don’t think you’ll have to look too far. Just step outside and throw a rock. Believe me, the willing and able line up on the lawn, day and night.”

“They do not,” Kellen said.

“They absolutely do. And I’ve tried everything I could to frighten them away, but they keep coming back again and again, desperate to get in the good graces of my beautiful daughters.”

“Oh, Dad,” Kris said. “That’s such an exaggeration.”

“It’s not. You two are the most perfect, most gorgeous girls in this city. Every boy is interested in you.”

Kris and Kellen cooed as they tightened their embrace.

“Now, are we done?” Robert asked. “I sure hope so, because I believe we have now talked this thing to death. Does everyone agree? Stupendous. I will take your silence as a yes.”

Robert got off the bed. “In addition, I realize it’s still early yet, but the two of you are going to need to get a decent night’s rest before your workouts tomorrow. There will be no more personal days taken, you hear me? You cannot be skipping out on any more training sessions.”

Kris reached down at her feet and pulled up the sheets and comforter, enveloping her and Kellen in a pillowy lump. Marta kissed each of them on the forehead while Robert, already on his way to the doorway, called out for grid control.

“Lights out,” he said, “all the way out. It’s sleepy-by time, girls. There will be no more discussion of Daniel Kiley, not until tomorrow morning at the earliest.”

Walter led Tana into the Cutler family dining room.

James, the oldest of Walter's grandchildren, was at the head of the table. Kina Cutler, his spouse, was on one knee in the corner of the space, struggling to get her three children—Clark, Johnny, and Kate—sitting still and behaving peacefully. Already seated, somewhat peacefully, were James' sister Tonya and her husband Russell Pickering, flanked by their boisterous girl and boy, Allison and Timothy. Walter's tall and lanky third grandchild, Dimitri Cutler—the first boy Tana ever kissed—was the only member of the greater Stoddard clan to notice the Magistrate slipping inside the room.

"Heads up, everyone. We've been blessed with a royal visit," Dimitri said as he sprang out of his chair. "On your feet and bow, Miss Tana Marie has arrived."

The attention made Tana cringe. "No one needs to stand except you, Dimitri. You...you need to bow each and every time you see me."

"Anytime, anywhere." Dimitri scuttled over to her and planted a peck on her cheek. "Just name the time and place, gorgeous."

As Tana stepped past Dimitri, his big brother James met her gaze. "It's great to have you here tonight," he said.

"Alas, I cannot stay long. I made a promise to have dinner with some friends on the *Horizon*. Grandpa Wally here didn't invite me over until the last possible instant, so all I can really do is stop by and say hello."

“You can at least sit for a second,” Dr. Courtney Cutler said as she entered the room carrying a pitcher of water. “Take Dimitri’s chair. He belongs on the floor anyway, sniffing after you the way he does.”

Tana gave Dimitri a scornful stare. “You hear that, punk? Your own mother says you’re like a dog in heat.”

“First, you expect me to bow.” Dimitri backed up and pulled his chair out for her in the most gentlemanly fashion. “Now, you side with my mother. I’m beginning to think you don’t have all that much respect for me.”

Tana took the seat and told the room, “Not as dumb as he looks, is he?” She reached out for the man seated next to her. “You, James...you’re the reason I just had to drop by. I’m beyond thrilled that you’re making your run. I screeched rather loudly when Walter told me you’d decided. I’m very happy for you, for the whole family.”

“If I win,” James said, “it’s going to be pleasure serving with you, Madam Magistrate.”

“You will win,” Walter said.

“You will,” Tana said, seconding the sentiment. “I’ll do as much campaigning for you as you need.”

Kina lifted up four-year-old Kate and placed her into a booster seat. “Would you like anything to drink, Tana?”

“No, I’d love to, but I can’t.” Having just sat down, Tana rose from the table. “My boyfriend is expecting me.”

“Can’t he wait?” Kina asked as she began her pursuit of Johnny, the last of her children to be seated. “This fellow must be able to part with you for at least a few minutes?”

“He parts with me a lot actually, that’s the problem. And I’m always late. I’ve barely seen the guy lately.”

“And not seeing him is a bad thing?” Tonya said.

“Most of the times, yes. Sometimes, no.” Tana’s eyelids were fluttering. Neither Tonya nor Kina said anything further.

Dimitri leaned in close. “I think they’re trying to tell you that Deen Adello is an idiot who doesn’t deserve to spend two seconds with you.”

“Is this you talking, or is this everyone talking?”

“This is everyone everywhere talking. The whole Collective wonders what you’re doing with the guy. It makes no sense to anybody.”

“Who should I be with then?”

Dimitri puffed out his chest. “Well, since you’re inquiring, I believe there are plenty of men of eligible age. Some closer by than maybe you’ve ever realized.”

“I have to go,” Tana said as she crossed toward the door. “But, please, do me a favor, keep an eye out for one of these eligible guys. If you see one, make sure you point this potential dreamboat out for me.” She waved back at the table. “Have a nice dinner, everyone. I’ll see you all soon.”

The group answered back in a maelstrom of farewells. Dimitri’s voice thundered out above them all. “It was *me*, Tana. *I’m* the eligible one.”

Dimitri retook his chair and asked his brother, “She had to know I was talking about myself, right?”

Deen and Leta sat slumped on the couch, hip-to-hip, half-dressed, their limbs knotted at the elbows and knees.

“We said we weren’t going to do that again.” A bead of sweat slithered down Leta’s neck. “I mean it. We *swore* that wasn’t going to happen *ever* again.”

Deen moved in for a kiss, his face utterly entranced. “You’re so beautiful. You know that, don’t you?”

After their lips had separated, Leta peered down at the exposed male flesh. “What does that even mean—you’re *so* beautiful?”

“It means that you’re incredibly sexy. It means I can’t resist you. You’re the most beautiful woman that I know.”

Leta’s face pinched up. “Tana’s going to be here any minute, as promised. She’ll walk right in and see us with everything hanging out. What do you think her reaction will be then? Will she think I look *beautiful*? Will she think I look *sexy*?”

“I thought we agreed we wouldn’t get crazy about this?”

“Who’s getting crazy—*me*? You think *I’m* crazy?”

“I think you’re letting your guilt get the better of you. I think you’re angry about a situation that really should be making you feel very good.”

“You’re cheating on Tana, Deen. And me, I’m betraying my best friend. We’re awful human beings. Don’t you get that?”

“I get it,” he said.

“Then be ashamed about it.”

“I won’t. I can’t.”

“Then you’re the one who’s being crazy. Tana, you, me—this whole stupid thing—it’s breaking my heart.”

“I realize that, but it’s setting my heart on fire.” He kissed her again. “I’m happy, deliriously so. Being with you feels incredible, and I don’t want it to stop. Think about what just happened, we couldn’t even stop ourselves from being together tonight, like we swore we would do. Both of us swore that, and neither of us could stop it.”

Tears were draining from Leta’s eyes. Deen attempted to smooth them away.

“I don’t care what we’ve done,” he said. “I just want to be with you.”

“Sorry, I don’t feel the same.”

“You do, though. You know that you do.”

“I don’t. What we’ve been doing is shameful.”

Deen moved in for her neck and Leta shoved him away.

“We have to tell her, tonight,” she said. “I stopped by her office yesterday, planning to own up—and then it all became about how little time she spends with you. I feel awful about what we’ve been doing, and she doesn’t have any suspicions at all. She didn’t even know you and I had been hanging out together.”

Deen took Leta by the hand. “All I can say is, thank goodness that you chickened out. Telling her would have been a *horrible* idea, like on a scale unimaginable. I’m so glad you couldn’t go through with it. Tana would *never* understand.”

“Yeah, because what we’re doing is wrong,” Leta said as she jerked out of his grasp.

“It’s not wrong. Don’t you get that? You and I can never be wrong.”

Leta shook her head. “If you feel that way, then leave her. If you have no more desire for her, then dump her.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“You say I’m so wonderful and beautiful—sexy even. You babble on about how deliriously happy I make you. Well, us sleeping together makes

me miserable. I don't want to do it anymore. I'm not sure I could be with you even if you did leave her. The two of us are not a forever-and-ever thing, Deen. I'm well aware of this. We're loins desiring loins. The sad truth is, I'm not her. Nobody is her. You want the famous girl, the special girl. That is *so* not me."

"Why do you think that's what I want?" Deen asked her.

"Because Tana is the most famous person in the Collective, and that's why you're with her. Even Tana thinks you only want her because of who and what she is. I think that, too."

"You're both wrong," he said. "Dead wrong."

"That's the thing, I don't think that we are."

Deen put his hand on her thigh. "Pay attention to me here. I don't know what she has told you, but way back when, I only approached Tana because she seemed lonely and isolated. I was being nice. And sure, she has beautiful stuff to like on the outside, and all the life perks you could ever dream of. But I only wanted to be with her back then because, for some unthinkable reason, she seemed to want me back. Now, though, that's no longer the case. She obviously doesn't care about me, if she ever did. All she does is belittle and ignore me." He squeezed Leta's flesh. "With you and me, that's not the way it is. You treat me so much better than that. You treat me like a man. You make me feel special. Together, you and I are special."

Leta smiled. "Yesterday, I told Tana you didn't have the words to explain your frustrations. Stupid of me, huh?"

"Idiotic," he said.

Over the room speakers, breaking the silence, a high-volume beeping went off.

"What's that?" Leta asked him.

"An alarm I set. Tana's spire just landed."

Leta reached for her dress on the floor. Deen stopped her and pulled her close.

"Let me go," she said. "We need to get dressed."

"There's still time. It'll take Tana ten minutes minimum to get here.

And that's only if no one stops her on the tram over to talk her ear off. What do you think the chances of that are?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to take any chances."

"Great," Deen said. "We're in agreement then. We keep our mouths shut. Under no circumstances will Tana ever be told. There's no reason for her to know any of this."

"You can say that, but she's always thinking. Either you or I, you know we're going to slip up."

Deen winked. "Not if we don't worry so much. Let's just take this one day at a time. I know that I want to be with you. If you want to be with me as well, then we'll find a way to make this work. There has to be a way to manage the situation where Tana will never know a thing. She and I will break it off. You and I will fall in love—publicly, logically, sooner rather than later—and all will be as it should. You and I will be together, and Tana will be super happy for us. How's that for a plan?"

"Sounds more like wishful thinking to me."

"Maybe, but it's a whole lot better than you suffering like this any longer than you have to."

“I get what you’re saying, I do. You’ve got work to do. I totally understand. But what if we did something that was a bit faster than a full-on meal, you know, like grabbing a quick snack?”

“I’m knee deep in goop at the moment, skinny, and in no mood to be patient and say ‘not tonight’ thirty different ways.”

Wes was pacing up and down the deserted maintenance corridor, his green eyes laser-locked on his pal Annie, who was down on all fours, having pried herself head first into a ground-level access shaft.

“Are you staring at my butt?” Annie asked as she labored on, pulling out lead after lead from seeping old socket beds.

“Of course not,” Wes said. “I’m trying to have a conversation.”

“Obviously, but if you hadn’t noticed, my pert little behind is out wagging for the world to see. I thought you might be staring at it. Guys stare at my butt sometimes, believe it or not.”

“Yeah, well, I imagine that they do—but that’s not what I was doing. I’m just hanging around disappointed that you’re copping out on me again.” He turned himself around and finally averted his eyes. “We were all set to have some fun tonight, and now we’re not. I’m disappointed.”

“Why?” Annie said. “The last thing we were going to have is fun. You know how much I despise fun.”

Wes grumbled. “Do you want me to leave then?”

“Leaving would be an excellent choice, skinny.”

“Stop calling me that. I’m not *that* skinny.”

“Right. Scrawny then. Underdeveloped. Waify. Slim. Wimpy-boy thin.” Annie was laughing between lead pulls.

Wes stood there pouting. “I’m going.”

“See ya later,” Annie replied.

Wes spun toward the waiting tramway and ran straight into the bull-shaped Chief Technician. Jance Ling stared the teenager down without ever saying a word. The popping sound of leads being disconnected in rapid succession persisted on in the background.

“Hello, Mr. Ling,” Wes said, his face slackened.

“Hey, Daddy’s here,” Annie said with a cheer. “Howdy-do, Dad. I can’t quite see you at the moment.”

“You just keep working, Annabelle.”

Wes attempted a hasty retreat around Jance’s blind side, but the stockier man cut the teenager off at every turn, stranding him in place.

“I was just leaving, sir. Before you arrived, that is. I was on my way home.”

“Is that so? Have you been enjoying the view?” Jance tipped his head back at Annie, who was still sticking out of the access shaft, her haunches raised high. Wes was smart enough to not look over.

“I really was leaving,” the boy said.

“There’s no reason for that.” A smirk slowly materialized on Jance’s face. “Stay here a while. Keep Annie company. She’s had a long day.” He pushed past Wes as he headed down the corridor, traveling by Annie at an extra-slow trot. “Keep up the good work in there, sweetheart.”

“Almost done,” she said. “Thanks.”

Breathing normally again, Wes collapsed against the wall.

“Are you still out there, skinny?” Annie asked.

“I think so...sorta.”

“I’m nearly done. Wait for me a sec, okay?”

A final lead-pulling noise was audible as Annie’s right leg slid out across the corridor floor. Then, slowly but surely, she maneuvered herself out of the exposed shaft. Blue grid gel had drenched her gloves and arms.

"I thought you had a lot more to do," Wes said.

Back on her feet, Annie held her arms out, keeping her sticky hands well clear of her clothing. "Lots and lots more. I'm not even close to done. I've still got like twenty-seven more terminals to take offline all across the ship. Every one of the stupid things has to be disconnected by the day after tomorrow. Which means, sadly, I'm stuck pulling and pulling for the rest of the night."

"Do you want some company for a while?" Wes asked. "Your dad said it was okay."

"I don't think he was being serious about that."

Wes stared at her. "He's quite a large guy, you know."

"He's not really. I'm like eight centimeters taller than he is. It's not—" All of a sudden, she stopped and smiled. "Forget it. He's a big man, you're right. It doesn't matter. Maybe you should just go. This is boring to do, let alone watch."

Wes shrugged. "All right."

"Come here first." She was undulating closer to him, as if swooping in for a kiss.

Wes went limp in the center of the corridor, loosening up for whatever was coming his way. Annie puckered her lips just as she wrapped her arms around Wes' waistline and started wiping the excess gel up and down his slacks.

Wes took a stumbling step backward. "*What* are you *doing*? You got that *crap* all over me."

"That's for staring at my butt."

In a panic, Wes charged for the tram. Annie was cackling as he galloped clumsily away.

"Don't bother trying to clean it. Gel goop, it doesn't wash out."

Two Days Later

“Off-planet colonization has always been an unarticulated, yet universally accepted inevitability. We humans are a thriving species living on finite landmasses. A time was bound to arrive when our fields would become desiccated and our restless herd would leave this globe in search of room to grow. It seems we have been waiting for a moment, an excuse, a day where scientific fact and political will collided to declare we could wait no more. Today, my friends, after years of planning, our expeditious moment is at hand. In minutes, an echo of humanity rockets into the darkness of space to discover its new—”

Tana was hunkered down inside the framing of a prototype spacecraft she'd been designing—a no-frills, two-person shuttle—listening to an audio excerpt of her grandfather's launch day speech in the Arizona desert, recorded for posterity over a hundred years earlier.

Contorting herself onto her back, Tana clutched hold of a hovering molecular binder and finished attaching a thin, hard-topped covering onto the undercarriage of the ship's primary navigation console.

“Farewell, sweet Mother Earth,” the recording cried. “Your sons and daughters will *never* forget you!”

“Playback. Pause,” Tana said.

She drew away the binder and released its power button. The covering she had positioned remained rock steady, fused into place. She laid there admiring her handiwork until her shoulder began to cramp. To get more

comfortable, she rolled onto her side and rested the side of her face against the metallic flooring.

She yawned twice before licking her lips and tapping at the base of her ear. “Deen Adello, call.”

The Core voice acknowledged the request with a brief reply before leaving Tana alone on the line to wait for a response, which came quickly.

“What do you want?” Deen asked.

“Don’t you dare be rude to me. I’m here on the *Horizon*. Where the heck are you? I came back aboard this morning to have lunch with you.”

“Liar. You came up to work on your ship. That’s where you’ve been hiding out for the last few hours, ever since you arrived.”

Tana smiled. “Oh, I see. Been checking up on me, have you?”

“A little, because I’m curious. I’m not stalking you or anything.”

“No one suggested that you were. Where are you right now? Get your butt up here. I’m all by myself on the hangar deck, dying of loneliness.”

“Sorry, but I can’t. I’ve got things to do. I don’t have time to lounge about waiting for you to be done tinkering with your ship.”

“Hey, my tinkering is done.” Tana swiped at a thatch of curls that were dangling in front of her eyes. “And the *Sparrow*, it’s sort of dark and romantic at the moment. Climb on in here and deflower me.”

“Funny, but I have work to do. I’m documenting the grid changeover for my broadcasts. It’s happening in a little while, as I’m sure you already know.”

“I see. Duty calls. Make a mental note of this moment, ace. You’re the jerk who’s neglecting me. I have made an effort. You have not. I never want to hear about being ignored again. As of now, this has all become your fault, not mine.”

“Oh, aren’t you clever,” Deen said.

“Yep, been that way since the day I was born.”

“How about we get together later this afternoon instead?”

“Sure,” Tana said. “When I get back from Azur.”

“Azur? The ship is on its way to Azur. Is Azur why you’re up here?”

“Can’t say. Top secret.”

Deen mumbled something unintelligible on the other end of the line.

“Talk to you later,” Tana said.

“Yeah, talk to you later.”

Sitting up, Tana touched her ear again and ended the call. She retrieved the binder and reached out for another covering. Before she had a chance to grab hold, the Core cut in with a fresh summons. “Shawn Ritt calling,” it said.

Tana tapped her ear one more time. “What is it? I’m on my break. Leave me alone.”

“Your break time has been over for the last seventeen minutes,” Shawn said.

“Sorry, but the ship’s in a delicate state at the moment. I can’t just leave her.”

“Yes, you can. Hobby projects come second, remember? We need you up here. The *Horizon* just entered orbit around Azur, making you very, very late.”

“I’m not late. I’m just not where I’m supposed to be. The Magistrate of the Directorate can never be late.”

“I’m begging you, stop with the word games and just get over here. Your cousin is about to blow his stack. I don’t think he likes waiting around all that much.”

Tana grinned. “Oh, he hates waiting. You know what we should do, tell him I’m in the Esplanade having a bite to eat. He’ll think it’s going to take me forever to get there.”

“But you’re in the hangar above us. *Right* above us.”

“He won’t know that. Just imagine how thrilled he’ll be when I show up lickety-split, way before he’d be expecting me.”

“Forget it,” Shawn said. “I’m not messing around with Rex. He’s extremely muscular, not to mention temperamental.”

Tana sat all the way up and stretched her lower back. “Rex—nah, he’s all bark, trust me. I tease the guy incessantly, and yet he’s never hit me once. And I’ve deserved a thrashing more than a few times, but not a single punch has ever been thrown. And don’t forget, this was me doing

the teasing. His restraint has been nothing short of miraculous.”

“That’s a very cute anecdote. Now, will you *please* stop your babbling and get down here. We’re all just standing around waiting.”

Mary and Natalya were huddled against the rear wall of the Turret—the summit of the *Horizon's* multi-deck nerve stem—whispering angrily at one another, oblivious to the sudden uptick of activity around the flight console.

Misha Stennikov, the *Horizon's* pilot, was seated at said console, communicating back and forth with the upgrade team in Echograd. The ligature implants connected to his head and arms—fully visible beneath his skin—flickered with cascading grades of blue. Behind Misha, Jance Ling stood bristling as Deen conducted an extended interview about his thoughts and feelings on the day's big event. Annie—present as a potential runner and fixer—had all but disappeared from view, having hidden herself neatly in the corner, boxed between ceiling-high stacks of soon-to-be-discarded storage shells.

“Stop it,” Mary said, and then lurched to the right, separating herself from her heated discussion with Natalya. For the next few seconds she just stared ahead at the forward observation windows. The moon of Azur hung just off the starboard bow, its purplish hue casting a languid shimmer. Mary looked back at Natalya briefly before calling out to Misha, her voice wavering.

“Are we still waiting for the final go ahead?”

The pilot held up his index finger as he carried on with his conversation he was having with Echograd. Following a series of definitive nods,

he answered Mary's question.

"My ligate counterpart tells me they are initiating one last simulation, madam. The sixty second countdown will be starting any minute now."

"Oh well, it's not like I have anything better to do." Mary jerked her head back and banged it against the wall.

Natalya wandered over to her. "Sounds like we have a bit of time. How about we use a few of those seconds for telling the truth?"

"Please don't," Mary said. "I'm begging you. Just let it go."

"And how pray tell am I supposed to do that? Your daughter is upset with you, and we both know why that is."

"No, you just think you know."

"Oh, I know."

Mary banged her head against the wall two more times, in fast succession. The sound made was deep and hollow. Natalya, overtaken with concern, took Mary by the arm and separated her from the wall.

"Stop hurting yourself," she said.

Mary brushed her friend's hand. "You're barking up the wrong tree here, okay? Charin is well aware of our relationship. All the children know. I told them everything a few years ago. I didn't want them taking rumors the wrong way."

"Yeah, but that was then. Now I'm having another baby with Vlad." Natalya ran her hand across her belly. "Maybe she doesn't understand why I would—"

Misha interrupted from across the room. "Madam, the countdown clock has initiated."

"Not a second too soon," Mary said.

The Core voice began counting backward from sixty. Jance disentangled himself from Deen's questioning and shuffled over to Mary and Natalya.

"I thought you two would have been in Echograd for this?" he said.

Mary could barely make the effort to shrug. "My council colleagues are down there, doing their historic requisites. I was chosen to stick close to home base and keep an eye on you people."

“*Attention*,” Natalya said, holding her hand up in mock salute. “*Horizon* Captain Mary Muran on deck, here to monitor and supervise. Long may she reign.”

“Ahoy there,” Mary said.

Jance smiled politely. At that same moment, the countdown clock reached six and everyone present converged around Misha.

“Here we go,” Jance said.

Misha’s implants shifted from blue to pink as the countdown hit zero. Several of the activity monitors flashed brightly before going to black all across the room.

“I remain in full contact with Verdan,” Misha said. “The hand-off appears to be successful. The surface power networks are now independent of this ship, independent of us.” He swiveled around in his chair. “I’ll switch the audio on in here so all of you can listen in. They’re cheering in Echo-grad. They’re cheering rather loudly.”



BEFORE

“I’ve called you here tonight to take a vote,” Bernard Stalt said.

A second voice chimed in, “About damn time.”

Several of the Rangers cheered at that. The entire active roster of the field unit had gathered in a semi-circle around the raging campfire, filthy dirty and unusually rapt.

Bernard shifted his stance in the mud. “The Directorate held their own vote a few hours ago. For months now, they have promised to take our proposal seriously. They pleaded with us to wait until the new Magistrate had been sworn in before we took any ‘regrettable’ action. And now that she’s in place, and now that they have voted—*still* our proposal was rejected. The way I see it, our future as Collective citizens was rejected. As I have said, we are all here tonight for a vote of our own.”

Lieutenant Rex Muran was seated on a hollowed-out log, swiping at an eight-winged insect that was buzzing around his ear.

“Let me get this straight,” he said to Bernard, who was barely a half meter in front of him. “The Directorate didn’t do what you wanted them to do, so it’s suddenly time to just give up on everything and bolt?”

Bernard stared straight into the flames. “Nothing has been decided yet. However, I do believe the time has come for the Rangers to have our own say, to make our own decisions.”

“But we’ve had our say, *and* our own vote. We selected our representatives on the council. And after that, we elected a brand new Magistrate.”

Bernard shook his head. “You don’t get it at all, do you? Our proposal, it was *unanimously* rejected.”

“No, *your* proposal was unanimously rejected. What did the rest of us have to do with any of it? I know I was never brought in to consult on this idiocy. None of the rest of us were either. You and Kay are the ones who’re making choices for everyone else, not the Directorate. They make decisions because we’ve chosen them to make decisions. What you’re doing is pure egomania.”

“Let’s just have the vote,” Kirk Hensen said.

“Yeah, Lieutenant.” Jessica Stalt, Rex’s former sister-in-law, was leaning against a barrack, far behind the rest of the group. The bitterness in her voice was palpable. “We all know what your vote’s going to be anyway. You’re a loyalist. Your precious family’s always going to come first.”

Rex took another swing at the flying bug. “The reason I’m loyal has nothing to do with my family. But wherever my loyalties lie, they’re irrelevant at the moment. I am not the problem here. Bernard, he’s the problem. To be frank, I worry about the man’s mental health. What he’s doing here is out-and-out lunacy. Having the Rangers designated as its own principalities district, as if we were an actual city, with all the governing rights therein. I don’t know how many of you realize this, but that’s his actual plan. He’s demanding power, unequal power. He believes that every other citizen should be treated as less than we are just because our job requires that we risk our lives, conveniently forgetting that we Rangers are in the wild to protect the Collective, not to blackmail it. Every single one of us have chosen to be here. Doing this job does not make us any better or worse than anybody else—and it sure as hell doesn’t give us the right to become a self-ruling entity.”

“My Mellie was killed by these beasts we hunt,” Bernard said, using his boot to snuff out a loose ember that had been spit out of the fire. “*She* deserved special treatment. She deserved to live. And I don’t care what nonsense you spew. She deserved more of a say than anyone who lives safe and sound in one of those fortified settlements. We can all agree upon that.”

A murmur shot through the crowd.

Rex got up. "Never forget, Commander, you're not the only one who's lost someone. My wife died out here as well. I understand what we've gone through better than most. Don't use that as an excuse, not when everything is changing. With my cousin in charge, we have someone on the council now who's actually interested in listening to our concerns."

"You do realize your cousin voted *against* us today?"

"Of course she did. She disagrees with your proposal, just like I do. I'm sorry if this is too blunt, but the idea of the dozen of us earning legal standing as a concurrent branch of government is laughable. It was never going to fly, not in a million years. But that said, just because she voted this way once doesn't mean she isn't open to some sort of compromise that's a little less extreme. Trust me, if we are ready to talk, she will listen. Tana is the fairest person I've ever known."

"Warriors do not compromise," Bernard said. "True warriors are *incapable* of compromising."

Rex shut his eyes and shrugged. "I don't know what to say to that."

"Then say nothing. For once in your coddled life, keep your big mouth shut." Bernard turned away from Rex and addressed the crowd directly. "It's time. Is everyone else ready? I wanna get this vote over with."

At first, there was a smattering of applause, and then a whole lot of it.

"You're leaving me with no choice, you do know that, right?" Rex motioned backward at the two Rangers who had been sitting near him. Jill Webb and Aldon Saziz broke off from the pack and lined up beside him.

"There's no way I can be here for this," Rex said. "I refuse to be here for this." He raised his voice and asked, "Is there anyone else who's going to leave with me?"

No one said a thing.

Bernard stood there smirking at him. "Just go. You're obviously not wanted here anymore."

Rex drifted to his left and approached Leonid Bratsk, the legendary Ranger. "You'll get up with me, won't you, Leo? You of all people, you have to know how stupid this is."

With all eyes bearing down on him, Leo dismissed Rex with a flick of

his fingers. "You need to be leaving now, boyo. I'm done with your family's sad little utopia. It's time to start something new, where I'm no longer working under someone else's thumb."

After that, Rex, Jill, and Aldon left, slipping into the surrounding tree line and vanishing from sight.

Bernard kicked at the ground. "Now that it's finally just us, all those in favor of the Rangers seceding from the Collective, raise your arms high."

