



A NEW WORLD

ARVIN LOUDERMILK

From the year 2213

A NEW WORLD

A COLLECTIVE NOVEL BY ARVIN LOUDERMILK



A voyage ends.
An ecosystem threatens.
A foundation is struck.

A NEW WORLD

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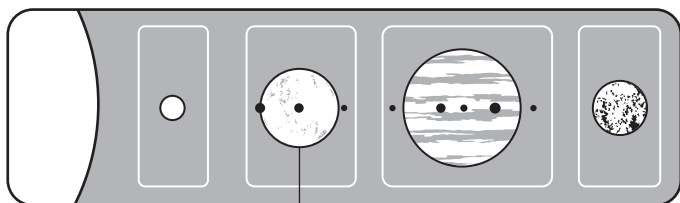
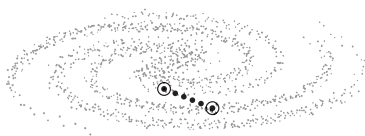
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SPECTRA

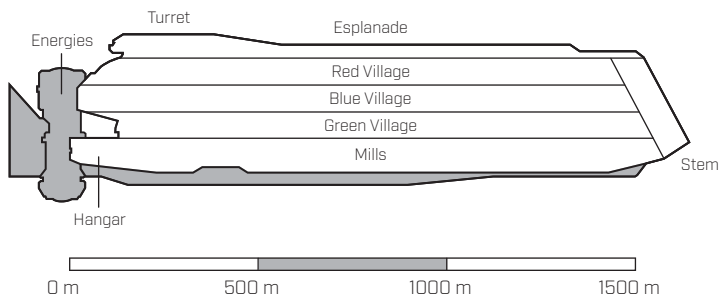
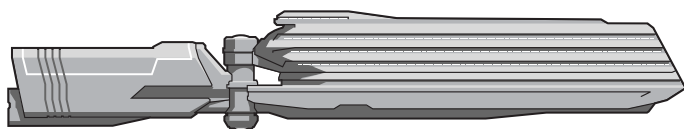
A planetary system



Kroma

HORIZON

An interstellar transport vessel



FOR MARY MARTINI

my mother



BEFORE

The observation screen flashed blue and white before filling itself with the blackness of open space. Dimitri Kucherov and Misha Stennikov were standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the ceiling-high image port when a female voice came online and announced the distance traveled—14.7 billion kilometers.

Dimitri shifted his weight from one leg to the other and inadvertently jabbed his elbow into Misha's arm. The embarrassed pilot took a step to the side and gave the Founder more room. Dimitri was too preoccupied to notice the gesture. The display screen held his full attention.

Minutes passed and stars glistened.

Dimitri Ivanovich Kucherov—the man who had changed the world. He was taller than most people expected, and thinner. The color of his well-tanned skin was a near match for his sienna-print suit. Atop his angular head, his hair hung thick and brown, and perfectly groomed—the gray flecks at his temples the only sign of approaching middle age.

As darkly complected as Dimitri was, Misha stood as his pasty opposite. His ligature implants—visible from any part of his body his jumpsuit did not cover—blinked in a cavalcade of colors, linking him to the innards of the ship like the living, breathing control system that he was.

“No, no. This won't do.” Dimitri flipped his hand at the screen as if he were dismissing the entire universe. “Is it possible to switch to a reverse view?”

"If that's what you prefer, sir. The only reason the display is pointed forward is due to your edict that none of us should ever look back. It's what you've always spoken of, from the very earliest days. 'Looking back is wasteful.' Those are words you're famous for. And I for one have always understood the quote, and agree with its premise."

"Well, just this once, how about we ignore my little pearls of wisdom? We're about to leave the solar system. If there was ever a time to look back, this would be it." He elbowed Misha intentionally this time. "And don't tell me you don't care or think about such things. This is a monumental moment, Mr. Stennikov. This could be the last time we're able to see it with our own eyes."

Misha's cranial implants lit up, a blazing ruby red. The next instant, a dimensional representation of the planet Earth materialized inside the screen, its man-made rings ever spinning in the distance.

Dimitri stared at the blue-green wonder, muttering over and over, "My, my. My, my."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?" Misha said as his implants transitioned back to an inactive gray.

"Not at the moment, no. Although I do ask that you relax. I insist upon that. I want everyone aboard to take a deep breath, and no matter what else—*find-a-way-to-relax*. Yes, our birthplace is fading into the distance. And yes, the unknown is out there beckoning. But none of that matters, not a single bit of it."

As if reminded of something, Dimitri stopped there and turned.

"Listen to me ramble on. You were correct to quote me, Mr. Stennikov. Looking back is anathema, the ultimate distraction. What we are embarking upon here will require fortitude of the highest order. The past is irrelevant. The distance forward, out of our control. From now on out, all we can realistically do is live our lives—which I remind you, is precisely what we would've been doing on Earth. And now, as we inch our way across the galaxy, it's what we have to do here. Perspective is paramount. A purposeful existence, that's what truly lies ahead."

Seventy-Eight Years Later

Mary Muran returned to her seat.

The other five individuals on the circular couch sipped at their glasses of wine. A miniature statue of the expedition's ship, the interstellar transport *Horizon*—a token offering presented at the beginning of Mary's remarks—was positioned at an angle on the coffee table that rested between them.

Mary whispered to her husband Camden, asking how she'd done. Camden shrugged. Mary glared back at him, and then looked away. Camden responded in kind and caught a disapproving scowl from his father, Randall Muran. Dana Muran, Camden's mother, threw a tepid slap at Randall's forearm. Mary's own father, a now elderly Dimitri Kuchеров, was oblivious to all the back and forth, and on the verge of a nap. A dozen more beats of sustained silence ticked by before Kimberly Akana, the last of the group, blew out a frustrated sigh and lifted herself off the couch.

"Yuck, yuck," she said. "*Yuck, yuck.*"

Dimitri, Mary, and everyone else snapped to attention.

"What's wrong?" Randall asked Kimberly. "Is it the arthritis again?"

"No, it is *not* the arthritis again."

"Then what the devil is your problem?"

Kimberly swiveled around and bore down on the man. "What do you *think* my problem is?"

With that, she took off, limping around the backside of the couch, her

fingers tracing indifferently across the subtle blue stitch work.

"It's the end of the line and none of this feels like it's really happening. We've been traveling for so long, training for even longer. How does one react to the end of a lifetime of waiting?"

"You don't," Dimitri said. "The inevitable has been accomplished. We're on the precipice of arrival. The three of us, we were lucky enough to have survived. In the end, that's all we've done. We did nothing more than survive."

Hearing this, Mary shook her head. "You know what, Dad—that might actually be the most ridiculous thing you have ever said."

"I speak the truth, young lady. And speaking the truth can never be ridiculous." Dimitri's voice was rumbling from the back of his throat. "When this expedition left Earth—and only Kimmie and Randall have the *right* to contradict me—we understood that we would be taking a massively long voyage to colonize another world. But none of us ever thought we'd get to see this place for ourselves. We hoped to survive, of course. But anyone with a lick of sense knew our chances would be slim. We left Earth assuming it would be our children who would finish this quest for us. The true discovery, and the subsequent colonization, that would be on the backs of the young, while we would serve our purpose as genetic conduits, nudging humanity forward for the chance at a better life. So, as I said, *all* we did was survive."

Camden crossed and uncrossed his legs. "Well, I for one am proud to be doing the finishing now that we have arrived. There's no two ways about that."

"We haven't arrived anywhere. Not yet." Randall held his empty wine glass out as he reached for the open bottle on the table. When his arms wouldn't extend far enough, he dropped back into the couch cushions.

"This party tonight," he huffed. "It's just pomp and nonsense for the masses, a senseless distraction. That's all any of these celebrations have been. They've gotten everyone so worked up and sentimental."

"Well, I'm sorry if this upsets you," Camden said. "But I'm feeling every emotion in the book right now—and I don't care if that makes me

sentimental.”

Randall rechecked his glass. It was still empty. “Bully for you. Cling to that sentimentality why don’t you.”

Kimberly was working on her fifth lap around the couch as she circled past Randall and grazed his shoulder. “Lighten up, for goodness’ sake. Allow the boy to express himself. We’ve shot past Tono. We’re days away from Verdan. Now is the perfect time to allow the children to show some pride.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think that it is,” Randall said. “This is *our* moment, dammit. After all these years on this ship, this is the survivors’ moment to show some pride.”

“But it’s not,” Dimitri said. “The moment is theirs, certainly more than it was ever meant to be ours. The Camdens and the Marys of the world are here to finish the voyage for those of us who are too ancient to conquer any new frontier, let alone a whole new planet.”

Mary groaned. “You three. I am getting *so* annoyed by all this negativity. You have done so much more than survive. And I don’t care if you feel grumpy or melancholy about that—or even about getting older. Three of the original Trustees are here to see us reach Verdan. That accomplishment sends chills up my spine. My father and his friends did the bravest thing any human beings have ever attempted—and that’s an indisputable fact. I’m as proud as Camden. Prouder even.”

With that, the tension in the room seemed to lift.

Randall tilted his glass at Mary. “Now there—that’s what she should have said in her toast. That last bit was heartfelt and unforced.”

“She’s always been better off the cuff,” Kimberly said.

Dimitri nodded. “She’s never been comfortable with formality. I’ve been working with her on it for years, but she never seems to improve.”

Mary offered up no rebuttal, and before too long the critiquing tapered off.

“Alrighty then.” Randall set down his glass. “I believe we all have a faux celebration to attend.”

“And we’re already late,” Mary said.

“Then let’s get our butts in gear and pretend to celebrate.”

Randall struggled to extricate himself from the couch. Dana flashed Mary a knowing smirk and helped him up. Kimberly capped off her final lap around the couch and connected up with the departing Murans, stepping between them as they plodded toward the door.

Mary stared silently at Camden until he got the hint and bounded after his parents.

Dimitri leaned toward Mary, who was half a cushion away.

“Were you able to have a conversation with your brother?”

“I was. I told him the original Trustees were having a get-together—you, Kimberly, and Randall. I stressed the fact that all three of you wanted him to stop by.”

“And still he refused?”

“You didn’t actually think he’d come, did you? He hasn’t participated in anything family related since last year. My asking wasn’t going to change his mind.”

“I understand,” Dimitri said. “I appreciate the attempt.”

“He did say he was coming to the celebration on the Esplanade.” Mary widened her eyes. “There’s that at least.”

Dimitri responded by pointing down at a scuff on her shoe. Mary ignored the unsightly blemish and checked the time on the wall clock instead. The numbers read: 6:22. Mary stood up and offered her hands to her hundred-and-twenty-year-old father. Dimitri normally resisted offers of physical assistance, but Mary stood in front of him such insistence, such an unwillingness to relent.

“Don’t give me that look,” she said. “It’s too long of a walk. Whether you like it or not, you need to get in your chair.”

“Fine,” Dimitri said as he took hold of her hands. “As long as the corridors remain clear, I’m at your mercy.”

2

“Your presence has been requested onstage. This is not optional, it’s an order, one which comes straight from the Directorate.”

Florin Holt pulled at Jason Epelle’s shirtsleeve for the second time in less than a minute. This most recent flare-up in their ongoing battle of wills was occurring atop a small stone bridge, smack dab in the center of the Esplanade, the *Horizon’s* multi-deck Earth preserve. Fellow partygoers were paying little attention to the standoff and kept brushing past the scene in a herd-like procession.

Florin restated her demands. Jason rolled his eyes and dove right back in to the conversation he’d been domineering with his brother-in-law, the ever-amiable Mikhail Kucherov.

With a grin, Florin tugged again at Jason’s billowing sleeve.

“Stop that,” he said, his tone sharp. “I’m on my way. I’ve told you that a bunch of times already.”

“Yet, here you are, still standing in place like a lummoX.”

Jason motioned back at her with a jab of his thumb. “She insults me?”

“With somewhat good reason,” Mikhail said.

Florin pulled his sleeve for a fourth, fifth, and sixth time—in quick succession. Jason’s shoulders hunched up and he spun backward in an exaggerated snit.

“Look, I don’t need a pain-in-the-butt lackey to—”

His thought process halted in mid-insult. He gazed down at the pair

of pale legs curving out of Florin's thigh-cut silk shorts.

"My goodness," Jason muttered. "You really should have approached from the front. I'd have been a *lot* more reasonable if I'd seen those beautiful things coming my way. Wow and *wow*. Keep dressing like this, and I'll follow you anywhere you want to go. You're a shapely young woman, that's something I didn't know about you. You wear long pants a lot. It's been hard to get a sense of those legs."

Florin propped her hands on her hips as Jason continued to leer.

"Did you actually think inappropriate compliments would distract me?"

He chuckled. "It was worth a try. You never know."

"Jay, just go where they need you to go," Mikhail said before peering out across the clearing on the far side of the bridge. Swathes of attendees were beginning to mingle toward a growing gathering at the front of the stage. No announcement had been made yet, but anyone who had been to one of these events before could tell, the evening's presentations were about to begin.

"Personally," Florin said to Jason, "I could care less if you ever do what you're supposed to do. But the Directorate, for some purpose that's never really been reasonably explained to me, seems to require your presence."

Jason curtsied. "I'm indispensable."

Before he could get himself upright again, Florin flailed out with a lightning strike, thumping both of her hands into the center of his chest, a move that sent the man teetering backwards. Jason had to snag the arm of a passerby to keep himself from toppling all the way over. Florin refused to let up, landing another, less powerful shove.

"Move it," she barked as Jason disappeared down the slope of the bridge.

Mikhail smiled at Florin. "You do look especially nice today." He smiled again and strolled away in the opposite direction.

Florin stood there stupefied. "Thanks," she said once he'd gotten too far away for her acknowledgment to be heard. She glanced down at her stylish new outfit and smoothed an upturned hem. Behind her, a loud and

familiar voice exploded above the party chatter.

"Florin! I need you, Florin."

Without delay, she galloped off to make her escape. At the foot of the bridge, her forward progress became impeded by the portly frame of a bearded senior citizen chatting among a throng of five toddlers. The call for her attention grew louder.

"Florin...wait!"

The voice was now close by, maybe just a meter or two behind her. Florin grimaced with defeat and trailed back up the bridge. Bodies parted and she soon found herself chest to chest with Vladimir Rossonov. The handsome young man's mouth was hanging open, ready to bellow out her name again and again.

"You got me," Florin said. "Now, what's so damn important?"

"Nothing's important. I just wanted to say hello."

"Vlad, I'm working. You know that I'm working."

Vladimir whirled around like a pinwheel, gesturing out at the thousand or more citizens milling about the park. "This is a party...a celebration. This is no time for work."

"Actually, it's the exact time for work—*my* work. Can you even comprehend how many people we've jammed inside here? Somebody has to manage this monstrosity."

Vladimir nodded. "I get you. And you're doing a superb job."

Florin kicked her head back and stared up at the artificial sky. "Frankly, I have *way* too many things going on right now. I don't have time for your nonsense."

Her head dropped back down as fast as it had risen and she walked away.

Vladimir charged after her. "Before you go, did you think any more about my big question?" He reached downward, struggling to take hold of her swaying hand.

"I've already told you no," she said.

"But you've had some time to think about it since then."

"You don't listen to me at all, do you?"

Vladimir got in front of her and dropped to one knee. “I love you and I want to marry you. A question like that demands a more considered answer.”

“You are such an annoying goof.” Florin gave him a shove and left with even more urgency this time. “You cannot do this to me while I’m working.”

“One last thing,” Vlad said. “Are we still getting together with everyone tomorrow?”

Florin whipped back around. “Yes. I never said that we weren’t. Now please, leave me alone. Go find someone else to humiliate.”

3

Walter Stoddard planted his boot on the bottom step of the stairwell as Trustee Laken Merriweather delivered another one of her rousing speeches from the Esplanade podium.

Behind Walter, shifting in and out of the dark, Rebecca Patterson paced in an imprecise rectangular pattern. The thick-bodied brunette had been shuddering and grumbling after every politically tinged utterance from the stage. The situation finally reached its boiling point when Laken made her annual call for a holiday celebrating the birthday of Dimitri Kuchеров. Rebecca heard this and let loose with a blood-piercing shriek. Walter turned and shushed her.

“I have every right to express my opinion,” Rebecca said.

“Not backstage you don’t. People can hear you.”

“I don’t care if people can hear me. And you shouldn’t care either.”

“But I do. So I beg of you, try being polite for once.”

“You just go along to get along, don’t you? I find this new you so disheartening sometimes.”

Walter shut his eyes. “Go ahead and say it. Whatever it is that’s on your mind. Just say it.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Rebecca’s voice deepened. “You should be speaking last, not *him*. That man should never speak before you. Not ever. It’s undemocratic.”

Walter ground his heel on the edge of the step. “And yet, for longer

than either of us have been alive, this voyage has been ‘that man’s’ life’s work. Not mine. His. That means Dimitri speaks whenever he wants to speak.”

“But you’re Magistrate now.” Rebecca crept over to the spot where Walter was standing and flicked the back of his salt and pepper hairline. “Who’s really in charge around here, you or him?”

“In this context, does it really matter? What you’re fussing about here is an issue of protocol. Founder of the Collective trumps everything else, including the office of Magistrate, understand?”

“I don’t like Dimitri,” Rebecca said.

“That fact has been well established.”

“He only cares about himself.”

“A point you’ve made on a near constant basis. Usually in public, and always as loud as humanly possible.”

“You used to like it when I got loud.”

Walter sighed at that and pushed away from the staircase. To dodge his sudden movement, Rebecca jumped to her left.

“I’m distracting you,” she said before scurrying after him and grabbing ahold of the back of his shirt. When he stopped, they both stopped.

“Why would you just drop by like this?” Walter said. “I mean, it’s always good to see you, Becca, but the timing here is strange.”

Rebecca fiddled with the curl of her hair. “What can I say? I’ve been thinking a lot about the old days. The bad days now, I suppose. The idea of you celebrating a day like today, even practically headlining the day, it’s more than a little ironic.”

“You’re not wrong about that,” Walter said. “But you not protesting a day like today is not exactly devoid of irony either.”

“Nah, all that’s just not in me anymore. Those old fights are dead. I lost. You lost as well, and then won. *Really* won.”

The crowd on the other side of the wall erupted in laughter over a snide reference Laken had just made about her venerated, but combative ex-husband, Trustee Jacob Holt.

“The old days have been on my mind as well,” Walter said. “I think

all either of us ever wanted was a little control over our lives. In the next few days, everyone on this ship will finally be given that opportunity, someplace beyond these manufactured walls and corridors. We're going to breathe fresh air. We're going to suffer the elements. We're going to build gorgeous cities and luxurious homes. The human race is planting roots on a brand new world. Now that's what I call success. That's what I call control."

Rebecca shook her finger at him. "Listen to you. Was that an excerpt from your speech?"

"Parts of it. So what?"

"For the record, the 'manufactured walls' bit gave you away. No one talks like that, not in real life." She wagged her finger a second time. "You cannot fool me."

Walter hiked up his shoulders. "Well, I hate to be rude, but Allison is going to be here any minute."

"Yikes, the wife and the first love—converging in the dark. That might prove awkward."

"Don't you have a husband and a newborn you can lecture and harangue?"

"The little one spits up when I lecture."

Onstage, Laken was wrapping up her remarks.

"Sorry, but you really should go," Walter said. "I have a speech to deliver. And Allison...you know."

"Of course." Rebecca made a move for the exit. "But just so you've been forewarned. I intend to cheer for you rather loudly. When everyone else is quiet, that'll be me you hear screeching like a madwoman."

"Hey, I'll take whatever adulation I can get. Knock yourself out."

The doorway opened for Rebecca. Light from the corridor poured backstage.

"I'm not kidding. I'm going to make a total spectacle of myself. And I'd better not catch you blushing either."

"That won't be a problem. I never blush."

"Oh, Walter. You're blushing right now."



BEFORE

Mikhail took a swipe at his eyes as he ducked back inside the hospital room. His teenage sister Mary was sitting slumped on the couch, an arm's reach away from their terminally ill mother. The patient, Maria Alvarez-Kuchero, was laid out on a gellular bed, unconscious for weeks, her lower body draped by a light green sheet. The etched wall behind her streamed with medical data, every piece of which keeping close check on Maria's fast-fading health.

"Who were you just talking to out there?" Mary asked.

Mikhail crossed over to his mother's bed. "Jocelyn."

"Are you guys boyfriend and girlfriend now, or what?" Mary looked right at him and grinned.

"Don't start in, okay? You know she's just my friend, and *only* my friend. The same way she's your friend."

Mikhail took another swipe at his eyes, which had become deeply reddened.

"You're upset," Mary said. "What exactly did Jocelyn say to you?"

"Nothing. She just wanted to make sure we were both okay. She wanted us to know that she cared about us, and would be there for us if we needed her."

"And that's making you cry?"

"It's making me feel, I guess. Lately, everything's been making me feel. And yet, for some stupid reason I seem to feel less in this room. It makes

no sense. This is the last place I want to be. The last place ever.”

Mary’s response to that was to draw her legs all the way onto the couch.

“Have we heard any word from Dad?” Mikhail asked.

“Not since last night. He told me he had a short meeting this morning. But he promised he would be here as soon as it was over.”

Mikhail glanced over at the information displays coursing above the bed. “It’s now eighteen past noon.”

“I know what time it is.”

“He does realize she could die today, doesn’t he? All the doctors say it’s coming soon. Her body isn’t going to last much longer.”

“He knows. He has to know.”

“Knowing is one thing. Acting like a human being is another.”

Mary swung her feet back onto the floor and rose off the couch. “You’re right. I’ll go get him. You’re upset, and he should be here, too.”

Mikhail swung around the front of the bed and cut Mary off.

“Don’t. It’s fine if it’s just us. It’s always been just Mom and us. If he shows up on his own, then good. If he doesn’t, what makes this different than any other day?”

“Momma makes it different,” Mary said. “She’s dying. That makes today crazy different.”

“Yeah, but Mom’s going whether he’s here or not.”

Mikhail took Mary by the hand and led her over to Maria. Taking turns, they caressed her long black hair. Her chest began to heave as her breath became unmistakably shallow.

Eight Years Later

4

Mary entered the monochromatic medical facility and found Mikhail sprawled out on the floor, his legs kicked out at the end of two room-long rows of mirroring stasis blocks.

Mary braced herself in the doorway for several seconds before pushing off and heading down the central walkway. Mikhail ignored or didn't notice his sister's intrusion. His gaze remained laser-locked on one of the dozens of ceramic chambers keeping various patients, for their various reasons, in deep cellular stasis.

The clicking of Mary's shoes filled the icy room with noise.

Mikhail reached out and touched the chamber in front of him, the one containing his wife and unborn child. Jocelyn Kucherov's distended belly—showing all nine months of fetal development—pressed flush against the transparent hatch of the hermetically sealed repository.

"Good morning," Mary said upon final approach.

Mikhail wrenched his hand away from the chamber, but gave no reply. That did not stop Mary.

"If there's a silver lining in this rift between you and father, at least I always know where I can find you. It may be a small thing, but I do feel better knowing where you are."

"There are no silver linings," Mikhail said. "Not with this. Never with this."

"Come on, must you always be so drab."

“And what else should I be? Do you actually think there’s something good that can come out of this situation? Nothing is good with this situation. And I won’t listen to your endless arguments to the contrary.”

Mary bent down and embraced him from behind. Mikhail remained deathly still.

“Do me a favor...would you *please* stop biting my head off every time we see one another? It’s a waste of energy, both yours and mine. There are only a few more days to go and Jocelyn will be woken back up. Then your child will be in your arms and maybe all this anger can finally be sated.”

“It won’t be. This anger is never going away.”

Mary leaned back against a neighboring chamber. “Do you have any idea how worrisome your behavior has become? I know you act normal and in control in public, but whenever it’s just you and me, all you do is fume and rage. You cannot allow a child to come into this world and experience the hatred you’re projecting right now.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mary. He locked up my wife...my *pregnant* wife. How am I supposed to feel anything but anger?”

“What you feel and what you express are two different things. Once that child is born you have to find a way to push the bitterness aside. And that’s not for me or for Father. It’s not even for Jocelyn.”

Mikhail slapped his hand down on the floor. “You’re making this sound like it’s my fault—when it’s not. *He* was the one who did this, all because his grandchild had to be born first—the first damn child born on the new world. As usual, he could not take no for an answer. He had to pass that law. He had to fool Jocelyn into coming in for an obstetrics appointment. We’d told him over and over it was against our wishes, but still he had his henchmen order the doctors to strap her down and knock her out so she would stop fighting to get away. I’ve watched all the recordings from when it happened. It was ugly, and I *bate* him for it.”

“I shouldn’t be here when you’re like this,” Mary said.

“Do you agree with what he did?”

“It’s not relevant what I think.”

“Nuh-uh. Try again. You cannot cop out like that. This wasn’t him

letting us down for the umpteenth time. This was something else. This was something cruel.”

“I know what it was.”

“Then be straight with me. Do you think any government should be allowed to hold an innocent person against their will for any reason, let alone this one.”

“Of course I don’t agree with what was done, and you know it.” Mary started fiddling with her bracelet, spinning it around and around her wrist. “We’ve been over this so many times, Mikhail.”

“And yet you still haven’t disowned him. You remain steadfast at his side, even though you know he’s a monster.”

“He’s not a monster. He’s our father.”

“Well, as a father, he’s been nothing but a monster—an uncaring old monster.”

Mary hunched down and kissed the top of Mikhail’s head. “I’m sorry, but I have to go. Rex has a doctor’s appointment.”

“Good,” Mikhail said. “Leave. I came in here to be alone.”

“So, you intend to keep punishing me for this as well?”

“I’m punishing Dimitri Kucherov and his cronies. Are you one of his cronies?”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Oh, you know. You’re just too ashamed to admit the truth while staring at his sleazy handiwork. But you’re loyal to him, loyal in the way a child is always loyal to a parent. Loyal in a way I will never be again.”

5

“Morgan Adams is pregnant, you idiot.”

Jason squirmed, pinned against the conference room cabinet by his mother, the honorable yet diminutive, Elisabeth Epelle. The declaration she’d just made—with all the accusation therein—had left Jason stone-faced, his eyes devoid of even the slightest sense of guilt or recognition.

“Who did you say was pregnant again?” he asked all innocently.

“You heard me.” Elisabeth yanked hard on his shirt collar, twisting the orange fabric into a big woolen wad. “Say something, damn you. Quit looking at me like a dunce and just admit it.”

“What am I supposed to admit?”

“Are you kidding me? Let’s start with the fact that your unsuspecting wife is six months pregnant. Add to that, you are *screwing* another woman. And now this tramp of yours is as pregnant as the woman you have pledged to share your life with. Try admitting one of those things. The very least you can do is admit something.”

“Mother.” Jason gave his shoulders a quick jerk and pried himself from her grasp. “Morgan and I are just friends. I’m telling you the truth. That baby cannot be mine.”

“Oh please, you lie as easily as you breathe. It’s like a compulsion with you. You get yourself into trouble, and all you can do is lie.”

“I’ve already told you. I’m not lying.”

“Yes, you are. Do you think I’d accuse you of something this terrible

without being certain? This ship is one big recording device, Jason. How could you be so careless? You might be able to shut cameras down when you enter a private residence, but there is no way to prevent yourself from being seen coming in and out of anywhere with a public passageway. Affairs of even the smallest magnitude cannot be kept secret once an investigation is initiated.”

Jason hesitated. “I’m under investigation? Me?”

“It was unavoidable, and out of my hands. The pregnancy diagnosis was passed onto the Directorate the moment Adams, a *divorcée*, refused to name a father when pressured on the issue by her physician. A routine investigation into her behavioral pattern was launched and your constant presence in her life kept popping up in the dimensionals. One clip in particular caught you both kissing as you left her house, two hours after entering it.”

“Shit,” Jason said as he was straightening out his shirt. “I guess I’m caught then. I never wanted this to touch you, Mother, not any of it. I swear I didn’t.”

Elisabeth shook her head. “Couldn’t you have just been honest with me from the beginning?”

“How could I? I was embarrassed. You’re my mother.”

“I’m also the only one who’s going to look out for you. How long have you been having sex with this woman?”

“A few months.”

“Since her divorce?”

“From before her divorce.”

“Son of mine.” Elisabeth backed up a step and exhaled. “I don’t know where to begin. You are a lunatic, an out-and-out lunatic. All the effort we’ve put into your career, and now you’ve sullied everything to have sex with someone other than your pregnant wife. My goodness, you’ve knocked up two women. You’re unbelievable.”

“I know, I know. I’m worthless.”

Elisabeth got stern. “Don’t you try to play me.”

“I wasn’t.”

"I think you were."

"Okay, I was. A little bit."

"Don't you do that, with me or with anybody else. You have to face up to what you've done. And Angela, she has to be told. I'm off to speak with her as soon as I'm done with you."

"I wish you wouldn't," Jason said. "I should be the one who tells her."

"If that's what you prefer, then fine. But someone needs to let her know, because this will be getting beyond my control sooner rather than later."

"And I get that, totally. I'll tell her tonight."

"I want to be clear here," Elisabeth said. "You are going to be reprimanded, Jay. Legally, you're a wedded male impregnating someone outside a marriage contract. There are inevitable consequences. Believe me when I tell you, public shame is hurtling your way."

The entryway door opened. Joy Epelle, Elisabeth's youngest, burst inside the conference room with Robin Hardy, the first of eighteen to arrive for the regularly scheduled morning briefing of the Transplant Operations group.

Elisabeth pointed at the door with one hand and held up two fingers with the other. Joy understood the unspoken request, snatching hold of Robin's arm and circling them both back out. The door closed behind them.

Jason took his seat at the head of the table. "I need to ask you something without you snapping at me. What about Morgan?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think I mean? Who's going to tell her this is a prosecutable thing now? She's a very sensitive person."

Elisabeth shut her eyes. "Jason, please don't tell me you have an emotional attachment to this woman."

"I've been sleeping with her for months. You should hope I have an attachment to her."

"An emotional attachment has never been a requirement for intercourse, young man."

"It's a requirement for me."

“Then you love this woman?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe.” He reached over and turned on his desktop. Its ignition set his strained expression aglow. “To be absolutely honest, I’m not sure what I feel about anyone right now, okay? I’m confused. I’ve been confused for a long time.”

“How wonderfully dramatic of you. But back here in the realm of reality, I suggest you stop being confused and start telling your wife what a despicable thing you’ve done. I will make sure the Ms. Adams is duly informed. She is no longer your concern, however. From this point forward, you will have nothing more to do with her. Consider that a formal dictate.”

Elisabeth sat down on the bench behind Jason and waved in the crowd that was gathering on the other side of the semiopaque double doors.

Jason swiveled backward in his chair. “I’m really sorry about this, Mother. I know this won’t be good for you when the next election comes along.”

A familiar cadre of managers and aides filed their way into the room.

Elisabeth lowered her voice to a whisper. “I can fend for myself. You pay attention to your marriage.”

“I will.”

“And stay away from Morgan Adams.”

“I will.”

“You’d better.”

6

Their mid-morning workout complete, the Rangers assembled themselves along the gymnasium wall. The men of the hour—Commander Camden Muran, Lieutenant Mikhail Kuchеров, and operatives Samuel Oates, Bernard Stalt, and Koron Aw—had been directed to hold tight and await further instruction on what was now being described as their ‘final training maneuvers.’

The unit passed the time by lobbing taunts and insults at one another. This went on until the woman known only as Kay emerged from her office and strutted across the practice mats, halting her procession a step behind the white and yellow out-of-bounds line. To a man, the Rangers fell silent.

“This here is what you idiots will be out searching for today.” Kay produced an oversized metallic ring from the lining of her coat. “You might have passed the Directorate’s piddling tests, but I still harbor doubts about each and every one of you. I expect to see a greater effort this time out.”

Samuel broke position and said, “Problem solved. I found that ring-thing you’re looking for. It’s right there in your hand. Exam over. You impressed or what?”

Kay appeared to be decades older than her men, but she whisked over to Samuel with astonishing dexterity and speed, tapping the ring twice against the operative’s dome-like skull.

“You want to play cute, do you? Go ahead. Grow some balls and try and take it from me.”

“No, thank you,” Samuel said.

Kay stepped back. “Then shut that fat trap of yours and take instruction like the good little flunky we all know you are.”

“Just let her finish explaining, man,” Camden said as he gave Samuel a kick. “What the hell is your problem?”

“His problems are irrelevant,” Kay said. “The only problem any of you should be worrying about right now is uncovering the location of this ring’s opposite number. Both have been fabricated from copper, an element that can be found in a few small pieces of jewelry and various other knickknacks, but is otherwise unused throughout the infrastructure of this ship. In other words, it’ll stand out like a sore thumb when the sensors in your field belts come into contact with it.”

“There are stacks of copper plating stowed in the Depots,” Mikhail said. “Rows and rows of the stuff.”

“And its presence there might confuse your sensors, Lieutenant.”

Mikhail was squinting at her. “What else have you done? You wouldn’t just simply hide something and send us out looking for it, not without rigging the game. You’d definitely set up obstacles.”

“Any obstacles are yours to discover.”

Mikhail turned to Bernard Stalt. “Is Leo on duty in Maintenance today?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll check the duty schedule.”

Bernard made an attempt to step away. Kay jumped out and pressed her forearm against his rib cage, catching the fleet-footed Ranger in mid-stride.

“You can check the schedule once you’ve left the gym. Not before. Got it?”

Camden whispered to Mikhail, “You were right. Leo, he’s involved somehow.”

“Think singularly at your own peril,” Kay told the team. “There are agents throughout the ship attempting to impede your progress. It would be a mistake to focus too strongly on any one individual.”

“Yeah, but it’d be an even bigger mistake to not concentrate on Leo at

all,” Camden said.

“Is there a time limit on the search?” Koron asked.

“Get it done as fast as you can. Limits are for the ladies.”

Samuel cackled. “Says the great Lady Kay.”

Kay lunged for him, but Samuel was ready this time. He skittered around Camden and hid behind him.

Mikhail nudged Samuel forward. “Come on, you dope. Let’s move.”

Kay was twirling the ring around her finger. “Your arrival drop is only two days away, boys. It’d be sad if you had to miss your historic trip to the surface all because you couldn’t find one irrelevant little ring. What do you all think? Wouldn’t that be a crying shame?”

In ragged formation, the five Rangers drifted toward the gymnasium door.

“We’ll be back in no time,” Mikhail said. “*With* the ring.”

Koron threw up his fist. “Yep, all we need is five minutes or so.”

“You shall have your ring soon, milady,” Samuel said after he had shuffled safely through the door.

“Remember,” Kay called out. “You are out and about with the public today. Whatever else happens, do not cause a panic.”

Camden was the last to leave. “Us, cause a panic? Perish the thought.”

7

The Directorate had been seated front row center. Chief Theorist Meyer Wells completed his opening statement and pattered over to the side of the stage. As the houselights were going down, he spoke a classified code word and a snippet of survey footage began to play in smeared fits and starts.

The Trustees looked at one another in exasperation.

Walter sunk down in his seat and grouched, “The swashing and blurring are *still* all over your transmission, Meyer. I thought you told us the problem had been fixed.”

“Not fixed—drastically improved. As you are all aware, the forager imaging nodes have been malfunctioning from the instant atmospheric descent begins. However, this transmission batch is different, so you need to watch. It does clear up.”

Completely clears up or clears up enough to justify keeping that lofty job title of yours? Grand-chief-scientist-guy-who-cannot-get-a-simple-camera-to-work.”

Walter’s light jab elicited laughter from several of the more frustrated Trustees.

Meyer smiled knowingly and tipped his head at the fluctuating display. “You’re about to see Verdan, Mr. Magistrate—your new home. I suggest you start paying close attention.”

Almost as soon as Meyer had finished speaking, an aerial view of a

green-hued coastline materialized out of the distortion, crystal clear and pristine. The astonished Trustees began to react.

“There it is,” Jacob Holt said.

“Oh my,” Walter exclaimed.

“Verdan.” Laken Merriweather’s eyes were glimmering with emotion.

“It’s so green,” Deborah Summers said. “Come to think about it, though, I guess it should be green.”

Without warning, the footage reverted back to nothingness.

“Wait a second.” Walter gestured up at the stage. “It’s gone. Where did it go?”

“That’s all the footage we received.” Meyer spoke an additional command. “Let me play it for you again, slowed way down this time.”

The image wound back to the point where the interference had dissipated. On this pass through, viewed at a different frame rate, the details became more observable—choppy emerald waters, a cratered mountain-side, a spiraling thicket of a jungle-like plant life, and rain, a seemingly impenetrable downpour of rain.

“Amazing,” Laken said. Everyone around her nodded in agreement.

“How did you do that?” Jacob asked Meyer. “It’s been months and months of these probes with no luck whatsoever.”

The transmission footage paused right before the distortion could return. When the houselights came back on, Meyer was beaming.

“How did I do this you ask? I turned off the forager’s propulsion drive. It was as simple as that.”

“Off?” Jonas Vickery said, his eyes still adjusting to the brightness of the room. “I’m confused.”

“Yes, what do you mean when you say off?” Deborah asked.

“Off is off,” Meyer said. “When the probe entered the atmosphere I ordered the *Vanguard* to kill the device’s propulsion system, allowing the forager to free-fall to the surface.”

“And that worked?”

“Somewhat, it seems. You all saw the footage. I’d hoped the cameras would function during the entire descent, but all we received back was that

short flash of perfection.”

Walter sat forward. “Why would killing the drive give us anything at all?”

“I can’t answer that, not with any certainty. I killed the drive and it worked. That’s the extent of what I know so far. It was an impulse decision stemming from equal parts malaise and desperation. I didn’t know I was going to do it until I was actually giving the order. Call it an unplanned for impulse.”

“Don’t be modest now,” Laken said. “Impulses of that sort have to come from somewhere.”

Her ex-husband Jacob bristled at that. “Who cares what motivated him? It’s irrelevant. What’s required here are concrete answers, not desperate hunches. The lives of ten human beings continue to hang in the balance.”

“But these pictures could be helpful on that as well.” Meyer walked out in front of the frozen probe footage as it was zooming in on the northern banks of a zigzagging riverfront. “Look up along the right corner. I’ve circled the areas. See the crushed vegetation and the glints of metal? The supply cans landed. That means the spire carrying the Constructs could have landed as well. Probably did land as well.”

“This is hope then?” Deborah said.

Meyer nodded. “I think hope is exactly what this is.”

“Hope is for suckers,” Jacob said. “This isn’t proof the Constructs are still alive. It’s wishing and dreaming, and I won’t stand for it. It’s been far too long since the Constructs’ last broadcast. I require voice contact before I’ll feel anything close to relief.”

“Which is why we need to drop more probes,” Meyer said. “I’ve been in near constant communication with the *Vanguard*’s ligate. She says they still have a dozen foragers remaining in the ship’s compliment of probing mechanics. I could toss every one of them down, in the same manner, from slightly different points in the atmosphere, and we could end up with actual footage of where the Constructs landed.”

“Or didn’t land,” two different Trustees said.

Meyer wandered back to his spot at the side of the screen. "That's right. That's a strong a possibility as anything else."

"Is this the only plan you have?" Walter said. "We are meant to invest all our efforts on these broken-down old probes?"

"The *Vanguard's* probes are our sole option at the moment, yes. But we'll be there ourselves soon. Once in orbit, we'll be able to float scanners into the atmosphere and test the elemental make-up while still tethered to the *Horizon*. We can also drop our own probes, the designs of which have been advanced radically over the course of this voyage. I could go on. There's just so much more we can do once this ship is in orbit."

Dimitri, who had remained silent for the majority of the presentation, raised his hand. "Nonetheless, in the end, this problem will require human exploration to solve. That's where all these roads lead, correct?"

Meyer withered. "Yes, Mr. Kuchеров. Boots on the ground. Without direct communication, that's the only way we're ever going to know anything for sure."

8

Mary had been waiting for the better part of fifteen minutes when the door beneath her finally slid open.

“Are you still here?” a voice cried out.

Mary glanced down as Courtney Cutler, her lifelong best friend—and the underling she had stopped by to chastise—entered the building in a flurry, arms pumping madly in an over-articulated display of all-out panic.

“I see you up there, sitting in front of my desk. You must really be stewing.”

Courtney rounded the rail and scaled up the staircase. Her pace was swift. After years of near constant tardiness, Courtney had become skilled at making a show out of hustling-to-it.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” she said as she finished her ascent.

“First of all, I am not stewing,” Mary said. “And secondly, it’s not a problem. I needed to get out of my office for a few minutes anyway. Our fathers, both yours and mine, have been running me ragged all morning.”

Courtney swept by and grazed Mary’s arm with her painted fingernails. “Doing their hatchet work, I presume?”

“What else? It’s become their most cherished bloodsport of late.”

Mary uncrossed her legs and placed her feet flat onto the floor.

Courtney slipped behind her desk. “I started keeping out of Dad’s way during business hours. It’s made my life *so* much easier.”

“Unfortunately, that only passes his complaints on to me, avoiding you

for about as long as it takes for me to show up here, under orders to get your sorry butt in gear.”

“He’s asking for the pharmacological allotments, isn’t he?”

“He is.”

“They’re mostly completed.” Courtney looked down and started to clear off her cluttered desktop. “I’ll finish them as soon as I’ve found my display screen.”

She scooped up a day-old lunch plate and dropped into the trash.

“I hate to be a nag,” Mary said. “But when you swap them over to him, I need them sent to me as well.”

“As proof you’ve hurried me.”

“We’ve been through this before, haven’t we?”

“Far too many times.”

The entranceway below opened and Camden and Samuel barged into the office, a blatant disregard of the social protocol to announce oneself before entering a physical space you did not occupy or supervise. The Ranger partners gazed up at the two women conferring around the elevated work area.

“Caught you both,” Camden said.

“I can search down here,” Samuel said before crossing out of sight.

Camden grunted his approval and raced up the stairs. He was at the top of the landing in a matter of seconds.

“What are you up to now?” Mary asked him.

Camden bounded over to the desk. “The devilish Miss Courtney was seen talking to Kay yesterday.”

Mary held still for a second, and then said, “So?”

“Kay sent us out to look for a ring.”

Courtney deposited another pile of trash into the receptacle. “Wow, that’s quite the daunting task you’ve been given. Is this what occupies you tough guys all day now? Games of hide-and-seek?”

Camden propped his palms on the corner of the desktop. His hulking body cast a giant shadow over the workstation.

“Tell me, Dr. Cutler. What were you doing talking to Kay yesterday?”

"That's none of your business, is it?"

"It sort of is. I need an answer to win."

"If I tell you, will you leave?"

"Right away."

"Fine. I saw Kay to get her approval of the Ranger health and fitness reports. Everyone passed but you."

Camden stood all the way up and slapped at his breastbone. "Try again, beautiful. I'm the heartiest of all Rangers. I know I passed."

"There's no trace of any copper anywhere," Samuel said from below.

Courtney peered down at the man, and then shifted her confusion back over to Camden. "I thought you were looking for a ring."

"A copper ring."

"Tricky."

Camden sidestepped over to Mary. "Love you, wifey."

"I know you do." She reached up and patted his arm. "Now go play elsewhere, dearest."

"I believe I shall." Camden posed at the top of the stairs before vaulting downward.

Mary waited. Once the door had closed, she said, "What-a-flipping-dolt."

"You married him," Courtney said.

"And had *three* children with him. What's wrong with me? What's going to be wrong with them?"

Courtney motioned down at the space she had cleared around her desktop display. "I should probably start finishing that supply thingy."

Mary got up. "And I need to go harass the next slacker on my list."

"Have fun with that. And make sure you're rougher on them than you were on me."

“I’ll say it, since none of the rest of you appear to have the guts. I don’t mind being the bad guy.”

With her feet dangling out over the three hundred meter drop below, Florin thumped her backside against the lip of the container stack. Her five closest friends there were with her, surrounded by an unending array of identical storage towers. In the girders above, a portable bulb provided limited illumination in what was otherwise a pitch black and off-limits warehouse space.

“I will do it, you know,” Florin said. “I will. I’m not going to wait any longer either. We all agreed to do it tonight, so someone has to get the ball rolling.”

Vladimir, the boy who had embarrassed Florin at the arrival celebration, was cuddling with her from behind, his legs wrapped like a twist tie around her waist.

“Do it if you’re going to,” he said. “But please, for once, can you do it gently?”

“I’ll do it any way I want to do it.” Florin grabbed onto the meaty part of his calf and pinched it.

Joy Epelle and Matt Merriweather, the long-standing couple of the group, were lying on their backs and gazing up at the gridded ceiling.

“Actually, maybe I should be the one to do it,” Joy said. The volume she was speaking at ticked up a notch. “Helen...Jance.”

Jance Ling halted his oblivious stroll around the perimeter of the container stack. “What did I do?” he said.

“Not a damn thing,” Florin said. “And with a beautiful, single girl so close by.”

Helen Baker was sitting off by herself, as far away as she could get. When Florin said what she said, Helen put her hands to her face and keeled forward.

Florin pointed over at her. “Everyone see that reaction? Helen knows what we’re about to say, doesn’t she?”

Helen kept her hands up, and her face hidden. “Yeah, and I’ve told you before, keep out of my business.”

“What’s going on here?” Jance asked. “What am I being blamed for now?”

“We’re blaming you because you’re dense. You don’t see what’s right in front of you.” Florin tossed her head back and yelled, “You and Helen should be together—as a couple, in love, *doing it*. *Humpy, humpy, you dummy*.”

Florin’s remark echoed throughout the spooky old compartment. Jance just stood there snapping his fingers as his friends stared at him in anticipation.

Not two beats later, only millimeters from the heel of Jance’s shoe, a hand slapped down on the edge of the container. Jance wheeled around and squealed. The rest of the surprised teenagers observed quietly as a muscular figure pulled himself onto their perch.

“Who are you?” Florin asked the mystery man.

“Who are you?” the man asked back.

“I’m Florin Holt. My father runs the Depot decks.”

“Does your father know you’re in here messing around?”

“I don’t, *ub*—”

Moving on, the man made his way across the stack.

Joy sat up next to Matt and said, “Hey, I know you. You’re Leonid Bratsk. You’re not supposed to be in here either.”

Leo doffed his non-existent cap and stepped to the right. A metallic

ring hung from the back of his belt. "I won't tell if you won't tell."

"Why would we tell?" Matt said.

"Good question." Leo backed over to the far corner of the stack and climbed down, vanishing as quickly as he'd appeared.

"Forget you ever saw me, kiddies. Go back to your fun."

Jance sauntered over to Joy and Matt and sat down. "What fun is he talking about? Another round of you matchmaking idiots butting your stupid noses into my life."

"Don't act like you're the victim here," Florin said. "We all know you like Helen. It's as obvious as anything. But you're just too chicken to do anything about it. That's why we're here, to push you. To make you do what you should have been doing all along."

Helen slid closer to Vlad and Florin. "Are we all going to just ignore the large, scary man who just stomped his way through here?"

Joy shrugged. "That was only Mr. Bratsk. He's not as scary as his reputation. He's really nice when you bump into him in public."

"But you know what he did, right?" Helen said. "Who he hurt?"

"Who cares what he did...*geez*." Florin flounced about, causing the strap of her blouse to slip off her shoulder. "Don't get us wandering off on one of your tangents, Helen. You know what this is about. It's about you and the blockhead here. There will be no more avoiding, from either of you."

"Oh, please," Jance said. "Talk about avoiding. You're the one who's really avoiding. Poor Vlad has asked you to marry him and you avoid that by not being straight with him. He's also your boyfriend, and you avoid that truth *all* the time."

Florin breathed in and brought her legs back up onto the container. "I guess I need to clear a few things up. First and foremost, Vlad is *not* my boyfriend. He never has been. He's a guy I'm intimate with. He's my lover. And as to his proposal, I've already given him an answer, which was a straightforward no. Whether Mr. I'll-Love-You-Forever can accept that particular answer has no relevance to this conversation whatsoever."

"Avoider," Jance said.

"It's true." Matt nodded. "You do avoid a lot. It's hard to defend you on this one, cuz."

"It's hard for me, too," Joy said.

Vladimir nuzzled his face against Florin's hair.

"They see what you don't see," he told her. "As long as we're still sleeping together, your answer is always going to be muddled. And I will love you forever. That's not something you should be making fun of me about."

"I'm not making fun." Florin pushed Vladimir backward and kissed him with some genuine passion. "You mean a lot to me. You do."

"If that's the case, then you need to say yes. You need to say you'll marry me."

Florin kissed him again, and then pulled back. "How did this become about me? We all agreed this was supposed to be about Helen and Jance."

"Tough," Jance said. "That's what you get for interfering."

"Yes or no?" Vladimir said. "I need a final answer. Here in front of our friends, will you or will you not marry me?"

The bulb above them flickered.

Florin slid leftward and created some space between she and Vlad. "I can't. I'm being as direct with you as I can possibly be. I am never going to marry you. I will never, *ever* say yes. That's something you need to learn to accept. If that means we can't see each other anymore, then I guess we're not seeing each other anymore."

Jerald Epelle wriggled on his back in the playpen, laughing maniacally after knocking over a wall of blocks he'd stacked in the corner of his 'personal destruction area.'

His father Jason scrutinized the production from above, allowing his son the requisite five minutes of showing off that was insisted upon whenever grown-ups entered anywhere within the two-year-old's restricted line of sight.

"That was incredible," Jason said. "Real impressive, kiddo."

Jerald scrambled back onto all fours, in a rush to re-stack the numbered blocks. Jason held steady while the encore performance was being meticulously prepared.

All ready to go, Jerald paused for dramatic effect before kicking out at the blocks and knocking two of them completely out of his pen. Jason retrieved the upended toys—numbers one and eleven—and returned them to the enclosure. Jerald rolled end over end in exaltation as his father tiptoed his way toward the bedroom in the back.

"That one was even better," Jason said as he hastened his retreat. "I'm off to see Mommy. I'll only be gone a minute."

The overhead lights in the Epelle master bedroom were faded low. Jason's wife Angela was seated on a bench in front of the dresser mirror applying a modest coat of mauve lipstick. Her outfit for the evening was powder blue, a pantsuit that had been taken out across the midsection.

Jason trudged inward and pulled off his shirt.

"You have given birth to a demolitionist, honey. He knocked two blocks right out of the pen this time."

"He knocked one out for me earlier." Angela was watching Jason through the mirror. "Apparently, I was less impressed than you were."

"One needs to be proud of something." Jason came to a stop in front of their bed and took off his shoe. "How was your day?"

"The usual." Angela swiveled around on the bench and reached down for one of her own shoes. "Your mother buzzed me an hour or so ago."

Jason feigned his surprise. "She did?"

"Yeah. She was being her cryptic self, claiming you have this big secret you need to tell me. It's vital I hear about it supposedly. I asked her to just spill the beans herself and save me the wait, but she refused to give anything up. She said it was your job to do the telling."

"Really?" Jason had removed his pants and was back on his feet, heading for the closet dressed only in his boxers.

Angela slipped on a second shoe. "I've been worried sick since the moment she called. Her tone was kind of strange. She was not in a good mood, and she doesn't call often. Generally, she only calls when you've done something wrong."

"That's not the only reason she calls."

"It's the only reason she calls me."

Jason unhooked a black dinner jacket and slacks combo from his end of the closet. He remained where he was for the moment, safely out of sight.

"So," Angela said. "What is that she wanted you to tell me?"

"Honestly, I have no idea."

"Come on. How can you have no idea?"

Jason walked out of the closet and stripped the jacket off its hanger and flung it across the bed. "For starters, Mom has been in meetings with the Directorate all afternoon. I haven't seen her. Yeah, I had a quick run-in with her this morning, but now is the first I'm hearing of any secret."

"It was supposedly a *vital* secret."

“Whatever kind of secret it is.”

Angela shook her head. “Jay, I know that you’re lying to me. Your mother’s call came in just a little while ago. She wasn’t in any meeting.”

“I can’t believe you don’t trust me,” he said. “I’m not lying. They do allow breaks during meetings, you know. They even allow personal calls.”

Angela lifted herself off the bench. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter. Your mother will be at dinner. I’ll just find out then.”

She bent down and took a second look at herself in the mirror.

“Actually, she’s not coming tonight,” Jason said as he stepped into his slacks. “As I tried to tell you before, Mom’s busy with the Directorate all evening. No one is going to see her until tomorrow morning at the earliest.”

“Tonight or tomorrow, the truth is coming out eventually.” Angela wound her way out of the room.

Jason retrieved his dinner jacket. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“There’s no sign of him.”

Mikhail was crouched down low in the bushes, camouflaged amid the two-story domiciles blanketing the pseudo-exterior of the Green Village residential deck, the bottommost living area on board the *Horizon*. The surrounding streets and sidewalks bustled with local citizenry, scurrying to and fro for various public and private meals.

Mikhail completed an additional survey of the interlocking homes and repeated his appraisal. “I don’t see the guy. Did you get that, Cam? I do not see him anywhere.”

The hushed voice of Camden Muran came online, deep within Mikhail’s ear. “I heard you. I just needed a second to think. The Core’s telling us he’s here at home, but we haven’t seen any sign of him—and his roommate claims he’s still at work.”

“The roommate could be lying. He’s Leo’s friend. We cannot trust him.”

“Or maybe we can. Travis was acting all put out when I asked if Leo was hiding inside. And I’ve already knocked twice. If I knock again, he’ll go whine to the Sergeant.”

“Does that matter right now? Leo’s got to be in there somewhere. It’s impossible for someone to separate themselves from their link.”

“I’d be in complete agreement with you if this was anyone but Leo.” Camden’s breathing was becoming more and more audible. “Bernard, you

still linked up? Where are you?”

“About four blocks east,” a third voice said. “On the back side of the village.”

“I want you to come around and cover the rear exit. Mikhail, you need to get yourself up front with me. Hustle it...both of you.”

Mikhail came out of his crouch. A gray-haired woman who was strolling by at the time screamed, frightened by the sudden appearance of an unknown male hiding among the shrubbery.

Mikhail held out his hands. “My apologies, ma’am. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Once she recognized who Mikhail was, the woman quieted down. Mikhail gave her a quick salute and ran off.

“Who were you talking to just then?” Camden asked.

“A lady I just scared half to death.”

“Would you stop being so damned friendly and get your ass over here. I need you, Mikhail.”

“I get it. I’m on my way.”

Mikhail shot across lawn after lawn, dodging at least a half dozen citizens along the way. Leo Bratsk’s home grew nearer, only three lots ahead. Camden was already there, standing out in the center of the roadway.

Looking up, Mikhail spotted a figure on the top of Leo’s home.

“He’s on the roof, Cam. Do you see?”

Camden’s head jerked upward. At that same instant, from out of nowhere, Hollis Craddock, a former rugby teammate of Leo’s, charged ahead and tackled the Ranger Commander. The two tumbled around together until Hollis had wrestled Camden into an unbreakable hold in the grass.

Mikhail increased his stride.

As if on cue, Leo dropped a wire-thin line and rappelled down the side of his home, hitting the front lawn a split second after he’d jumped. Camden continued to struggle with Hollis, but could not manage to pull himself free. Leo ran past them, the prized copper ring flapping tauntingly on his belt.

“Get *after* him,” Camden shouted.

Neglecting years of training, Mikhail abandoned his flank and focused his full attention on Leo, allowing a tall woman in a plain brown worker's uniform to slip in on his right, a pushcart dinner tray utilized as a crude secondary disguise. The woman, Tella Webb, another apparent associate of Leo's, swung her leg out and tripped the unsuspecting Ranger. Mikhail toppled over and smacked face first into the curb.

"You're done." Tella pressed her boot against the back of Mikhail's neck. "Don't make me stomp you any harder."

Mikhail went limp as a trail of blood trickled into his mouth.

"Nice move there," he said. "I don't think we've ever met, at least not formally. I'm Mikhail Kucherov."

Tella ignored him.

"Aren't you going to introduce yourself?" Mikhail asked her.

"Why should I?" Tella was keeping a close eye on Leo as he picked up steam in the distance. "Ask around about me, if you're so interested. I believe the two of us are about to become the talk of the town. Mr. Perfect taken down by a scrawny little commoner. The gossip mill is gonna feast on this one for quite some time."

12

Standing in the doorway, Walter unbuttoned his collar. Allison Stoddard, his spouse of more than thirty years, was scrambling from kitchen cabinet to kitchen cabinet, restocking dishes and plates that had been washed and dried while Walter had been saying his extended goodbyes outside.

"Courtney and the kids just left," he said.

"I kind of figured." Allison put the last plate back into place.

"I could tell there was something in the air tonight," Walter said. "On the way out, Jimmy informed me of his intention to become an artist once his coursework is completed. It might be painting, or it could end up being sculpting, but I should expect him to do something creative with his life."

"He's worried you'll be upset with his decision."

"And why would such a thing upset me?"

"Why do you think?" Allison turned around and rinsed her hands off in the sink. "You pontificate on and on about how the Kuchеров children have this blessed responsibility to pledge their lives to politics. A statement like that does not exist in a vacuum. Jimmy hears it, and thinks you expect him to be a politician, like his grandfather."

"There's a big difference between our family and the Kuchеровs."

"Not to a child there isn't."

Walter placed his hand on the recently cleaned counter. He was humming. "Should I have a heart-to-heart with him? I assumed he'd know I wasn't referring to him when I made my proclamations. His mother is a

physician. Clearly, I'm not too pushy about my family's career choices."

Allison backed away from the sink, her wet fingers dripping at her side. "You do realize, your own daughter works for you, the Collective's chief politician. Yes, she's a trained physician, but her career's been made more administrative than I'm sure she'd prefer."

"Point taken. I guess I manipulate even when I don't mean to manipulate. I'll speak to Jimmy. I promise to be frank and honest with him. I want the boy to live a life of his own choosing."

Allison dried her hands on a hanging dish towel. "Before we go upstairs, there's something else I need to speak to you about. I heard this strange rumor. Did Rebecca Patterson stop by to see you before your speech yesterday?"

Walter nodded. "She did, right before you arrived actually. I'm kind of surprised the two of you didn't run into each other."

Allison came right up to him and cupped his cheek. "My darling, since when are you and Rebecca Patterson on speaking terms?"

Walter took a moment. "I should have told you before now, I know. We first spoke after the birth of her daughter. I peeked in at the hospital to offer my congratulations, and perhaps an olive leaf. We got to talking, apologizing mostly."

"I see," Allison said.

"It's nothing intimate, believe me."

Allison let go of his face. "Please, I'm well aware of what she meant to you. I wasn't living in a cave back then. I saw how hot the two of you ran. Rebecca and Walter, the great rabble-rousers. Inseparable. Perfect for one another. The two of you had one of those special kind of loves."

"More like a special kind of disaster. There were good reasons why we didn't stay together."

"Agreed. And once you had finally faced those reasons, you went and married the more politically palatable alternative."

"That's not true. That's completely, absolutely untrue."

"It's more true than it's not."

"No, it isn't. I love you, Allie, and you know that. The feelings between

us have never wavered.”

“Oh, Walter. You do live in your own world sometimes.”

He clutched onto her hip. “Listen to me, there’s only one thing you need to know about Rebecca and me. That woman and I *still* can’t be in the same room together without arguing. It’s pathetic.”

“Nice try,” Allison said. “But it was never just plain-old arguing with you two, now was it? No, it was passion. It was heat. It was the kind of feeling that never goes away. I get that. I’ve always gotten that. I just can’t compete with it. I never could.”

She removed his hand from her person and stalked off.

Walter chased after her. “Allison.”

“Just leave me be,” she said as she headed up the stairs. “I’m begging you. Can you just leave me the hell alone?”



BEFORE

“Tell us the story,” Dimitri said. “Tell us how Kay plucked you from the crowd.”

Leo sat back in the padded chair and locked eyes with Mary, the beautiful young woman seated opposite him at the Kucherov family dining table.

“If you don’t mind, sir,” Leo said. “Could we put my story off for another minute or two? Your daughter was in the middle of talking about her etiquette lessons, and I was enjoying hearing about that. They seem way more intense than any of Kay’s training sessions, and far less civilized. I didn’t even know etiquette training was still a requirement these days. Nobody I know has to do it.”

“You know me now,” Mary said. “And etiquette lessons are a strict requirement in this house.”

Leo touched the knot in his tie and smiled. “I guess we do know each other now. Before tonight, though, I only knew of you. Really, when it comes down to it, we’ve only just met.”

“But doesn’t it feel like we’re already the best of friends?”

Mary winked at Leo. Everyone at the table noticed.

“Wowza, sis,” Mikhail said from the far end of the table. “When did you become such a flirt?”

“I wasn’t flirting. I was just being friendly. You should try it sometime.” Mary leaned across the table. “Just so you’re aware, Commander Bratsk,

my brother is a jerk who has no respect for anyone. He can also be mean and spiteful for no reason at all. I consider this to be among his worst qualities. Keep that in mind when you're ordering the lout around."

Mikhail made a choking noise and said, "I know you're trying to be funny, sis, but humor is not your thing. And for the record, Leo's as mean and as spiteful as I am. That's the way Kay wants us to be."

Dimitri cleared his throat and the teasing ceased.

"Sir, I apologize." Leo gave the man at the head of the table a firm nod. "I should've just told you the story.

Since the moment Leo had arrived, Mary had been watching him like a hawk. Only fifteen years old, she was mature for her years, and had made a concerted effort to dress glamorously for the dinner party. The tight white skirt and revealing cream-colored blouse were uncharacteristic of her normal choices in attire, but striking enough for even her father to offer his compliments when she made her grand entrance via the stairs.

Mikhail deposited his napkin next his half-finished dinner plate. "I have a suggestion. Since Leo's our guest—and for some reason seems to enjoy listening to Mary's ramblings about forks and spoons—I say we let her keep rambling. I know you like to control things, Dad, but if you hadn't noticed, everyone seems to be enjoying themselves for once."

"I did notice that. That notwithstanding, this dinner is not being held in Mary's honor, it's being held in Leonid's."

"Which is why I say we let him be the one who decides what we talk about."

"I want to thank you all for inviting me," Leo said. "It's been a pleasure to spend time here. The meal was terrific. I cannot thank everyone enough."

"Oh, I believe there are many ways you could thank us." Dimitri picked up his wine glass. "To begin with, you could the story of the first time you met Kay."

Mikhail grabbed his own glass. "Actually, come to think of it, I'd rather hear about the first time you met Kay, Dad. I know there's a story there, or so the rumors claim. Would you care to enlighten us on this top-secret

subject?”

“Leonid first.” Dimitri took a sip of his wine and motioned at their guest. “Any time you’re ready to share with us, young man. We cannot wait to hear from you.”

Mary was grinning. “Yes, Commander. We’re all just prickling with excitement.”

Leo breathed in. “It happened several years ago—meeting Kay that is. The rugby team I was playing for had just won the tournament championship. Kay saw something in the way we played together and wanted to reform us into some sort of military unit. I didn’t know what she was talking about at the time, but she’s such an unusual person, and I was curious, so I played along. Weeks of interviews followed, some even with you, sir.”

Leo dipped his head at Dimitri, who nodded back.

“It took a while for me to be told what the unit’s real purpose was going to be, but once I had all the facts, I was kind of bowled over by the prospect. To be a part of the Verdan landing team, it was a real vertical leap for someone like me. And now it’s gone far beyond some woman’s whim to reshape a rugby team. This is an opportunity to make a lasting mark on history, and I’m thrilled to be called upon.”

Leo stopped speaking and glanced around the table. There was no reaction from anyone, not Dimitri, Mikhail, or even Mary, his biggest fan.

“That’s all there is really,” Leo added in summation. “Sorry, I guess it wasn’t that interesting of a story after all.”

“But it’s *such* an interesting story,” Dimitri said. “You just skipped over the part where Kay saw you—”

His neck twitched. A call was coming through. Dimitri held up his hand to silence the group. “Walter...good evening.”

Leo looked to Mary as she he mouthed the words ‘I’m sorry.’

“Dad tends to prioritize work, even at home,” Mikhail said. “He doesn’t mean anything by it—at least I assume he doesn’t. Mary and I have sort of gotten used to being cut off and dismissed as if we weren’t even there. Eventually, you’ll get used to it, too.”

“Excellent news,” Dimitri said after he’d tapped out of the call. “Now

that we've finished with dinner, Walter Stoddard and his wife are going to be dropping by to wish our new Commander well. They should be arriving any second now."

Dimitri stood up, faster than he should have. Once he'd braced himself, he said, "They're bringing Courtney as well, Mary. I'm going to meet them at the door. Anyone care to join me?"

Mikhail got up and lent his father a hand. Before they knew it, Mary and Leo were all alone at the table.

"So, the Stoddards are on their way over," Mary said. "I'll bet you can't contain yourself."

Voices could be heard entering in the other room.

Leo smiled and said, "The times he interviewed me, Magistrate Stoddard seemed like a pretty nice guy. I don't think I've ever met his wife before."

"Well, you're about to. Prepare yourself, it's going to be about as exciting as your Kay story was."

Leo cowered a little. "I know. I was dreading having to tell it. There's just nothing interesting about the way we met. I tried to stick with your etiquette class story, but your father kind of forced my hand."

"My etiquette story wasn't exactly riveting either. It was just basic small talk. You know, me finding anything I could to keep Dad from speechifying."

Leo pushed his chair back. "Me, I liked what you had to say, and the way you said it. I think you have a great sense of humor. I don't know what your brother is talking about."

"Thank you, but Mikhail's right. I'm not all that funny. Not normally, anyway."

The voices in the other room grew louder. Leo stood up.

"Maybe if you have some free time in the next few days, we could get together and talk about some incidents in our life that are a bit more interesting than etiquette and field training."

Mary stood as well, smoothing out her skirt as she rose. "That sounds really great, Leo. It honestly does. Personally, I'd love for us to hang out.

But my father, he might not approve. To be blunt, I'm pretty sure he'd outright forbid it."

Leo moved closer to her until they were just millimeters apart. "You think? He'd forbid us from having a conversation? Why's that? We're talking right now, under his own roof."

"True, but you don't know my father."

"I know him somewhat. I think he likes me."

"Oh, he does. I can tell. But if he started not to."

"Sure." Leo eased back a step. "I get what you're saying. There's no pressure. It was just a suggestion."

"Don't be like that. Talking with you is something that I—"

Leo held out his hands and stopped her there. "No reason to explain. All I wanted was for us to get to know each other better."

"And I want that, too. We just have to be careful about how we go about this."

From the living room, Dimitri called out with a firm request for anyone still at the table to come out and socialize with everyone else. Mary led the way as Leo entered to a rousing round of applause.

Five Years Later

Kay told Leo to hold onto the ring. She would do the same with hers. The two of them then lined up in front of the closed gymnasium doors.

"How bad was it?" she asked him.

"You mean you weren't watching live."

"I couldn't bring myself to. And I know I asked you to do this for me. But this late in the game, an ass-kicking was only going to depress me."

Leo grinned. "Boy, have you mellowed."

"Well, it doesn't take a genius to figure out you were going slaughter those dolts."

"Is that compassion I'm hearing? I must say, sir, that's sensitive and downright girlie behavior."

Kay shot him the dirtiest of looks. "You should not mock me, you know. If you keep mocking me, I'll have no choice but to smack you one."

"You should smack yourself for being so soft."

"Maybe," she said.

"There's no maybe about it. You were never this soft on me."

"Because you have a thicker hide than they do. Now please, stop mocking me and make your damn report."

Leo's grin grew wider. "The pursuit itself, I'd say it was fairly strenuous. I ran the men around the ship for a few hours, and then holed up in the Depots. That's where Sammo almost caught me, believe it or not. After that, I waited out in plain sight at my place and had Hollis and Tella take

them down, pinning their ears back in public, just like you wanted.”

“And they’re on their way back here? You’re certain of that?”

“Tella was supposed to fill them in on where you and I would be waiting, so I can only assume that they are. Tella always does what she’s supposed to do.”

“I’ll bet,” Kay said. “I hear she has some other skills as well.”

“And then some. We’ll have to watch the recordings after this, but she totally laid out Mikhail. I was already in flight, so I was only able to witness it out of the corner of my eye. But, man, she really flattened him.”

“Good. It’s exactly what they needed, all of them. I know you haven’t been around the team much lately, but things have gotten far too overbearing. Not a one of these idiots are taking the next few days seriously enough. To the so-called ‘Chosen Ones,’ a glorious outcome has never been in doubt. You can see it written all over their faces, there’s this supreme confidence they have that makes me want to strangle each and every one of them.”

“Confidence isn’t the worst quality this team could possess.”

“To me, to is. Doubt sharpens the senses. Nobody knows what to expect on this moon. Verdan could be nothing but a big, green marshmallow—or it could be hostile as hell. I need these guys focused on that moment where everything about this potential debacle will be put to the test.”

“I assume there’s still no word from the Constructs.”

“None that I know of. Dimitri hasn’t told me if there has been. I’d assume he’d want to run any new information past me immediately.”

“The radio silence,” Leo said. “It’s troubling.”

“It is,” Kay said. She held steady for a second, and then started shaking her head. “You always cut right to it, don’t you? It should have been you, you know. You’re the only one who can command this mission properly.”

“Don’t, sir. That’s all in the past.”

“But it’s not in the past. Nothing about this can be in the past until this landing has been secured and accomplished. Not hearing from the advance team is troubling, you’re right. What the hell is going on down there? I mean it. What in the holy hell is going on down there? The dangers ahead,

they could be staggering. Why can't anyone see that?"

"Just have the guys tread carefully. It's all anyone can realistically do."

"No, I could do more. I could strong-arm Dimitri and *make* him put you back on the squad."

Leo re-squared his shoulders. "He wouldn't, and I wouldn't want him to. I got the punishment I deserved."

"Okay, but that's debatable. Yeah, for a split second you lost control. There's no doubt about that. But the rest of us on this ship shouldn't be made to suffer for your mistakes. It's a waste of our best resource. It's a waste of you."

"It is what it is," Leo said. "I'm sorry I let you all down."

Above the doorframe, a red warning light went off.

"They're here," Kay said. "Late as ever."

Leo furrowed his brow. "Arms forward then. Show them the rings. Let these arrogant pricks see what they can and cannot do."

The Next Afternoon

Helen charged into Transplant headquarters with a bouquet of sunflowers cradled in her arms. Florin, who had been noodling at her desk, abandoned the post-landing shipment schedules and stood up to greet her friend.

“Brought your stash by to brag, have you? Jance must have been out picking all morning.”

“These aren’t mine,” Helen said as she set the flowers onto Florin’s workstation. They’d been collected in a translucent, pear-shaped vase.

“Whose are they then?”

“Don’t ask me. I assume they’re yours, or Mary’s. They were sitting outside when I came up. I think there’s a message attached.”

Helen spun the bouquet counterclockwise so Florin could activate the engraved notation. Once she had, a short paragraph lit up: *‘For Florin. A beautiful impulse for a beautiful girl.’*

Florin rolled her eyes. “Vladimir...the sap.”

“I don’t think it was him,” Helen said. “I just ran into Vlad a little while ago and he was pestering me about how to get you to change your mind. This was on the other side of the ship. There’s no way he could have beaten me over here.”

“I’m confused,” Florin said. “It’s such a Vlad thing to do.”

“It’s someone else who sent them. It has to be.”

“All right, but who?”

"Maybe it's someone else you're having sex with."

"I am not having sex with anyone but Vlad."

Helen snickered. "We both know that's not true. About ten times over."

"No, not ten." Florin brushed the tips of the flowers. "Not even close to ten."

"However many it is. Do you know who it could be? You *have* to know who it could be."

"I don't." Florin sat back down. "But I know how to find out."

She tapped her desktop three times, until the Core voice requested password authorization.

"Close your ears, please."

Helen obliged halfheartedly.

"Breakaway," Florin said.

"Dimensional access secured," the Core responded.

Florin gave her friend a stern look. "That's the office's code word. I'm going to change it the second you leave."

"Spoilsport."

Florin and Helen watched as thirty-eight squares of security clips blinked one by one onto her mainframe. A quick perusal led to several images of a man in his late twenties, dark haired and slender, depositing the bouquet beside the entranceway doors.

"Derek Lucas," Florin said.

"You're sleeping with Derek Lucas?"

Florin met Helen's disbelieving gaze. "No, I've never slept with the guy. I swear, it never happened. Not even once."

Morgan Adams ducked behind the trunk of a blooming magnolia tree. It was a precarious hiding spot, at best. Everyone on the village patio had been watching her as she scrambled from tree to tree, including Jason and Joy Epelle, who were just finishing up a late afternoon lunch.

Joy said to her brother, "She's still there, watching you."

"Don't judge." His back to the tree, Jason sat forward. "It's not her fault."

"Damn right it isn't. It's *yours*."

"And don't judge me either. This is about as unusual as a situation can get. It makes sense how she's acting. I've been ignoring her calls, and I'm not entirely certain anyone has talked to her yet. Mom said she was gonna."

"As long as you yourself don't do the talking. Mother already wants to throttle you."

Jason said something under his breath and pushed aside what was left of his sandwich. "I didn't tell Angela last night. Mom was expecting me to, but I couldn't go through with it."

Joy just stared at him. "You're a crazy person, you know. A horn-dog crazy person."

"Stop it. It's not like that. I care about this woman."

"I'm not entirely sure which woman you are referring to at the moment, but either way you are *loco* crazy."

Jason raised his napkin and dabbed at his face. His mouth had been

hanging open so long spittle had started to trail down his chin. One dab became two. A third dab came attached with a whimper.

"Oh, buck up, you big baby." Joy reached across the table and gave the top of his hand a smack. "Tell me why you chickened out with Angela."

His napkin was still up near his mouth, which garbled his words. "I was scared. I promised myself that I would tell her, but you know how I am. She asked me about it right away, too. Mom had called ahead."

"Of course she did."

He drew the napkin away. "I just couldn't hurt her. I care for her too much. When presented with the choice of lying or telling the truth, a lie is always easier on the person about to be walloped, isn't it?"

"Sometimes...*maybe*. But in this situation, the lie is easier for you. And the easier-for-you part is only temporary. There's no way Angela isn't going to find out. If Mom is true to form, she's probably already been told."

Jason's eyes widened. "You think? I haven't heard a peep from Angela all morning. Maybe that's why."

"I don't think so. Angela would never confront you over a link. She'll wait to get you in person, and *then* cut your neck."

"That's not funny."

"Yeah, you're right. There are worse places she might cut."

Jason whimpered again. "You're my sister. Aren't you supposed to be nice to me at a time like this?"

"No, I'm supposed to be tough on you at a time like this. I'm supposed to back my sister-in-law, whom I adore, at a time like this. I'm a woman, like Mother, Jay. What you have done is so fundamentally offensive."

"I didn't mean to," he said.

"Well, if you have a brain in your head, you will not use gems like 'I didn't mean to' when Angela comes at you screaming. The excuses in your admittedly limited quiver are going to need to be a bit more inspired, and much more from the heart."

"What should I say then?"

Joy was about to respond when something caught her eye over at the magnolia tree.

“Uh-oh. Don’t look, but you-know-who is coming our way.”

Morgan was already in full stride, holding something spherical in her closed left fist.

“She’s on final approach,” Joy said.

Morgan’s grip fell loose, revealing a small orange clawed between her fingers. She careened past Jason and dropped the orange onto the center of the table. It bounced once before rolling toward Joy. Morgan continued forward and disappeared from view.

“An orange?” Joy nudged the piece of fruit with her knuckle. “What the heck is this? Is she out of her mind?”

“It’s a signal,” Jason said. “Our signal.”

“An orange is your signal?”

“Yep, we’ve used it before. She’s telling me where she wants to meet. In the hothouse, ASAP.” Jason picked the orange up and set it in his lap. “She is not out of her mind, by the way.”

“Maybe not. But you’re out of yours if you meet her again.”

“I have to,” he said.

“You don’t have to. You really don’t.”

“That’s the thing, though. I think I do.”

Walter was the first to exit, steps ahead of the oncoming stampede. The daily Civilities meeting had just broken up, and its varied personnel had come pouring out into the courtyard.

Never the most agile of men, Walter allowed himself to get caught up in the flow. Eventually, he found himself drawn over to a thin wooden bench. He appropriated the space at the same moment his daughter Courtney whisked by. She kept waving at him until she was all the way down the street.

The courtyard soon emptied and Walter gazed up at the twenty-meter high ceilings. A digital cloud mass was moving in. He gnawed on his lower lip and gave his knee an extra-hard slap. Thirty more seconds of delay elapsed before Walter finally activated his link.

“Rebecca Patterson, call.”

He ran his fingers through his hair as he waited for a response.

“Walter J. Stoddard,” the voice in his ear said. “Now isn’t this a surprise? I feel so honored, a call from the king of the universe.”

“Are you busy, Becca?”

“Not as busy as I assume you should be.”

“I’m taking a break. I needed a moment to relax.”

“I don’t believe you. You’ve never been all that concerned about relaxation. What are you really up to? You’re not in your office. I can hear the fake wind and bird noises. I’ll bet you’re in between buildings somewhere,

hiding out.”

“Wrong. I’m seated on a bench, where anyone with two good eyes can see me. I hide from no man, or woman.”

“Shucks,” Rebecca said. “I was hoping this was going to be more covert.”

“I realize that you’re teasing me, but please don’t say that again. I’m in enough trouble as it is.”

“All right, now I’m interested. Trouble. Tell me more.”

“Are you alone?”

“Alone in my den. Alan’s at work. No one is listening in, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Walter shut his eyes and said, “Allison knows that you and I have been talking.”

“Oh, and is that a problem?”

“It shouldn’t have been, but I hadn’t talked to her about it yet. Then, some busybody tells her you stopped by to see me before my speech. To say the least, she’s not thrilled that you and I are on speaking terms again.”

“I’m kind of surprised it’s such a big deal,” Rebecca said. “Alan knows, and he doesn’t appear to mind. You and I hadn’t spoken in decades. He understands how much I missed you. He’s happy we established some common ground. He’s been his same old wonderful self about all of it.”

“Unfortunately, Allison is not quite that understanding.”

“Have you done anything unrelated to annoy her? Knowing you, that’s always a possibility. Maybe she’s actually mad about something else.”

“No, she’s mad about this. She and I get along well otherwise. Our marriage is sound.”

“What is it that you want from me, Walter? Why are you calling?”

“To make a request. I wanted to know if you and Alan would come over to our place for dinner some evening. I think it’d be a good way to calm Allison’s fears, to see that you’re as happily married as she and I are.”

There was a long pause on the line.

“I don’t know. That sounds an awful lot like a favor to me. And I don’t remember owing you any favors, Mr. Magistrate.”

“How about if we call it a gesture instead? We’re supposed to be friends now, correct? Shouldn’t our spouses be friends as well?”

“I don’t see any reason why not.”

“So, you’ll come?”

“Alan is busy with his designs for the new settlement, as you are no doubt well aware. But I don’t see why we can’t squeeze some time in for dinner.”

“Thank you,” Walter said.

“My pleasure. An evening of patching holes in my former beau’s marriage, how could any ex-girlfriend say no to that?”

Mikhail had gotten up and had never come back. The injury to his mouth had been his excuse. The cuts and abrasions from his curbside fall turned out to be relatively minor, but Mikhail had milked them for all they were worth.

After ten minutes had passed, Mary went to check on her brother and tracked him down to an antique rocker in the living room. When he refused to speak to her, she used that as her own excuse to bow out.

The party, a pre-launch Ranger feast, showed the first signs of wrapping up when the children from the conglomerated families began tearing in and out of the entry room, ignoring the familiar “sad man” plopped in the corner.

The other four members of the five-man landing squad were released by their spouses and meandered out of the dining room. Koron came up on one side of Mikhail. Bernard the other. Camden and Samuel took one look at their teammates’ sour expression and made a hasty retreat.

Koron said, “What’s up, boyo?”

“Not much.” Mikhail yawned. “Just full from dinner. I’ve been sitting here watching the kids run around like maniacs.”

“Is everything all right? You don’t seem that enthused.”

“There are things on my mind, I guess.”

“This isn’t about what Leo’s girl did to you, is it?” Bernard said.

“No. It’s not about my busted lip either. It’s about what you think it’s

about. Jocelyn and the baby. I'm sorry. I know nobody likes it when I mope."

"You're not moping," Bernard said. "Not in any way that I can tell."

"I am, though. I came out here so I wouldn't ruin anybody else's fun. I really do apologize, guys. I've worked hard to keep my struggles compartmentalized."

"You don't have to do that, not here," Koron said. "My house is your house. I want you to be yourself when you're here. The good and the bad."

Mikhail looked over at him and brought his hands together in a clap. "Nope. Enough of the pity party. I think I need to go thank your wife, Koron."

Mikhail shot up like a rocket and barreled into the kitchen. With Bernard and Koron in tow, he made his way over to the three wives. Betty Aw, Melindan Stalt, and Willow Oates were all standing together in a row, arranging plates in the dishwasher. Camden and Samuel were at a small table on the flip side of the breakfast bar with fresh bottles of beer in their grasps.

Before Mikhail could say anything, a thunderous crash emanated from the wall behind Camden.

"Kei and Karel are fighting again," Betty said. "Husband, can you?"

Koron flexed his biceps. "My pleasure. I gotta go bust some skulls. Anyone care to lend a hand?"

Bernard accepted the offer, and they were off.

Betty shouted after them, "No spanking, either one of you. Just get them to *stop* with the roughhousing."

Koron's voice had faded as he raced down the hallway. "Gotcha. No blood."

Mikhail approached Koron's wife. "Betty, I wanted to thank you for dinner. It was wonderful. I appreciate you having me." He bent down and kissed her on the cheek. "Excuse my messed up mouth. You're the best. Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome," she said. "You're always welcome."

Willow pressed her forefinger against her own cheek. "Hey, I want one

as well. Betty didn't do this by herself."

"Me first," Melindan said as she stepped between Mikhail and Willow. "I did more than these two combined. And don't even think about wasting my time with a peck on the cheek. I want mine right on the lips, handsome."

With a smile, Mikhail did as he was told



BEFORE

“Don’t even start. I couldn’t tell you about this. I know you too well. You’d have just rejected the idea, without thinking or caring about how I actually felt.”

Mary was sitting with her father on the edge of her bed. Less than an hour earlier she’d been glimpsed by an unidentified citizen who had informed Dimitri about a secluded dinner date she was having with one Leonid Bratsk. According to Mary’s own admission, this was the sixth time the two of them had spent time alone together, and a serious romance had blossomed.

“I should have known I couldn’t have anything for myself,” Mary said.

“Do you understand why I’m so against the two of you seeing one another?” Dimitri asked.

“Of course. You like to control things.”

“That is not the issue here, young lady.”

“It is, Dad. It *is* is.”

“Well, think again. I’m against the two of you seeing one another because of the deep familial differences. Under no circumstances will you romantically intermingle with this young man. True, Leonid is a strong and responsible person, more than equipped to lead our landing team on Verdan. But his bloodline, it is not up to Kucherov stock. His great-grandfather was never even supposed to take part in this voyage. His selection sprang from his replacement status, which to my mind is no status at all.

Do you understand what I'm telling you? Leonid would never have been on this ship if it weren't for someone else having second thoughts. The two of you don't belong together, and I will do everything in my power to keep it that way."

"Do you realize this is why I never tell you anything? You always get so superior and snobby. You can't help yourself."

"I think you didn't inform me because you understand in your heart of hearts that Leonid is wrong for you."

"Believe me, that is not what I think at all. But what would you know? It's not as if you've ever seen me as a real person. I'm just a chess piece to you. It's the same for Mikhail. We get no say in anything. You just expect us to be whatever it is that you want us to be, no questions asked."

"That particular interpretation is your brother talking."

"It's me talking also. Me, a girl who likes someone outside of her family's precious inner circle. A girl who is finally sick to death of her father trying to manage every aspect of her life."

"What is that you expect me to do then? Disregard my years of experience? To act against everything I've ever believed in?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I expect you to do. You should forgo your stupid, arrogant prejudices and let me do what I want to do for once."

Dimitri nodded. "All right, you have a point. I can be flexible. We can try it your way."

"You're just saying that."

"I am not. If you agree to do something for me, then I will do something for you."

"What is it that you want me to do?"

"I want you to stop seeing Leonid."

Mary looked over at him and clenched her teeth. "Just stop. I'm not going to allow you to hoodwink me."

"Hear me out, Mary. This is a serious proposal I'm making here, and a fair one. If you and Leonid take a break for a while, I will consider allowing you to see one another at a later date. In the meantime, you shall begin dating a few men of my own choosing. These will be gentlemen who I see

as potential husbands for you.”

“I’ll bet you already have a list compiled. You’ve probably been keeping one since I was still in diapers.”

“As a matter of fact, I have been. There’s one for Mikhail as well. You two are the Collective’s future leaders. Who you marry is of the utmost importance. I would never leave such a thing to chance.”

“You’ve never left anything to chance.”

Dimitri puffed out his chest. “I’m pleased that you have taken notice of that fact. I take pride in my preparedness, and so should you.”

“Oh, yes, it’s my *favorite* thing about you.”

“Your sarcasm aside, do we have a deal? Will you and Leonid take a break and give me a chance to wield my vaunted matchmaking skills?”

Mary threw her arm back and grabbed one of her pillows. “What kind of names are you talking about here? You have to give me at least one before I’ll agree.” She paused, pulling the pillow tight. “And don’t make it someone from the Four Families either. That would be lame, and obvious, and kind of make my point for me.”

“What about Kale Vickery? He’s from a decent family. And he’s strapping and athletic like someone else we will not mention.”

“He also just got married. You need to keep that list of yours updated, Dad.”

Dimitri bobbed his head. “What about Camden Muran? He’s not married.”

“No, but he’s divorced, with *kids*. And he’s a way older than me. Also, the Murans are a part of what...you can say it, the Four Families.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the Four Families.”

“I never said that there was. But hey, why limit my already limited choices?”

“Fine, I promise to widen my parameters then, as long as we have ourselves an agreement. You and Leonid will take a break until further notice. I see this as our best way to proceed.”

“I don’t, but it’s not like you’re giving me much choice. I’ll respect your wishes, for now.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

“But you need to be well aware that I’m never going to give up on Leo. I have feelings for him, Dad. *Real* feelings. So while you march out your sorry band of suitors, I’m going to spend all my energy convincing you what a great guy he is. And I’m going to keep doing it until I wear you down. I’m falling in love with this man. I think you should understand that. I’m only going along with this to sway you—and because there’s no way you could ever find anyone better than Leo. You couldn’t even find anyone better than him when you were searching for someone to command the Rangers. You looked high and low, and after all the hemming and hawing, you still had to go with everybody else’s first choice. That’s the way it’s going to be here. There’s no one better than Leo. No one anywhere.”

“Daughter dear, with open eyes and a dash of reasonable thinking, a deaf, dumb, and blind person could find you a better match for you than Leonid Bratsk.”

Mary smiled and let that one go.

Dimitri got up and limped over to the door. “If we’re done here, I think it’s about time for you to place a call. Leonid needs to be informed about our arrangement. The ground rules are simple, you are *not* to see one another.”

“We are not to see one another for a *while*,” Mary said as she freed one of her hands from the pillow.

“Until I agree otherwise,” Dimitri insisted.

Mary pressed her ear. “Leo Bratsk, call.” After a momentary wait, she said, “Hi. Sorry to be coming at you with this out of nowhere, but there’s something I need to tell you. It’s something bad, although maybe it could also turn into something good.”

Mary listened for a second.

“Yeah, he found out. He knows everything.”

She listened some more.

“I know, but maybe it’s not as bad as all that. Crazy enough, he just offered us a way forward.”

Five Years Later

Camden knelt down in the dark and nuzzled his face against the mattress. Mary stirred, but did not wake. The corner of a blue and green comforter was all that was covering her otherwise naked frame.

Snoring next to Mary was another nude woman, her head hidden among a strewn collection of floral print scarves. Camden kept still, observing the two female bodies until Mary's breathing had begun to sputter. He blew gently on her cheek and her eyes opened in a sudden, agitated snap.

"You left dinner without saying goodbye," he whispered.

Mary was still half unconscious. "This was my night, my free night."

"It was your free night *after* dinner."

"It's my free night full stop. I went to the dinner for Mikhail, remember? That's the *only* reason I went."

"Okay, and then you abandoned him. The next time any of us saw him he was sulking in that rickety old antique."

The figure on the other side of the bed twitched and said, "Shut up, you two. People are trying to snooze."

Camden took in another eye full. "I see you, Courtney. I see *all* of you."

Dr. Courtney Cutler's legs kicked out as she reached down for the covers.

"Don't be shy on my account," Camden said. "You have a gorgeous body. There's no reason to hide it away."

Courtney pulled hard on the comforter, and in the process, almost jostled Mary off the bed.

"Careful," Mary said. "I'm as exposed as you are."

Once she'd reclaimed a majority of the bedding, Courtney used it to curl up into the fetal position. "Go to sleep. Both of you."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Camden leapt up and started to remove his shirt.

"Don't even think about it," Mary said.

Camden held his hands out innocently. "What? She's the one who offered."

"Because I wanted you out of here, ya big oaf. Get outta here. *Go!*"

"There are two naked ladies in this bed, and you expect me to just leave?"

Mary chuckled. "Don't push your luck, okay? You aren't even supposed to be here. It violates the agreement."

Camden tucked his shirt back in. "I know, but I was worried." He maneuvered around the nightstand and backed up against the wall. "You took off so suddenly. I thought you and Mikhail had another one of your knock-down, drag-outs."

"We're fine. We didn't fight, at least."

"Good."

"And the kids are okay?"

"You bet. They're asleep at my place."

"Asleep?" Mary flipped over and struggled to find him again in the dark. "Are you out of your mind? The children are too young to be left on their own. You know that."

"And they're not alone. Give me some credit. I left Sammo and Willow to keep watch."

"Did you tell Sam and Willow where you were going?"

"Of course not. They think I'm out checking on some emergency with Emily and the other kids."

"They cannot know about this, Cam. No one can ever know about this."

“And they won’t. No one but the three of us have any idea about the agreement, I promise. I haven’t said a word. So if anyone knows anything, they haven’t heard it from me.”

