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SKYWARD FLIGHT: NOVELLA ONE

DELACORTE PRESS

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About the Authors

For Cortana Olds, my first reader.

—JP

One

The day the delver came, I stood staring up at the stars.

Even after all these months, I wasn't accustomed to living in the sky. I'd grown up underground, in a cavern so deep it could take hours to reach the surface. I'd felt safe there, buried beneath kilometers of rock, other caverns forming a buffer above the one where I lived—down where nothing could reach us.

Now everyone called me FM, but my parents named me Freyja, after the warrior goddess of my ancient heritage. I was never much of a warrior. Everyone expected I'd take the pilot's test and hoped that I'd graduate, but after that I surprised them by continuing to fly. As a full pilot, I could have had any job I wanted in the safety of the caverns. Yet I'd chosen to move from the surface of the planet—open and foreign and exposed—up to one of the enormous platforms that orbited above it, sheltering the surface from the sky. My father had taken to saying I was skysick, but it was the opposite—the sky terrified me. It was so big and wide I could fall into it and be swallowed up.

Above me, the other platforms that dominated the skies crossed over each other again, blocking my view of the eternal blackness dotted with the strange white stars I'd only heard of before I joined the Defiant Defence Force. My alarm went off—the beeping alert from my radio that my flight was scheduled for immediate takeoff. It was normal for flights to be called up at random—I'd been responding to sirens at a moment's notice since my first day as a cadet.

But today, half of my flight was missing. The rest of us had assumed this would afford us some unofficial R&R; while our flightleader, Jorgen, was planetside, surely we'd be called up last.

Apparently we'd guessed wrong. When I reached the landing bay, I immediately understood why. It wasn't only our flight that had been called

up. Every fighter was readied, the maintenance crew working their way through preflight checks at double speed while pilots ran for their ships and jumped into their cockpits.

I looked for the rest of my flight. Without a flightleader, we couldn't take off until we knew who was in command. There were four other members of my flight currently in residence on Platform Prime: Kimmalyn, who was part of my original flight, and our three newer members: Sadie, T-Stall, and Catnip. Nedd and Arturo were planetside with Jorgen, so Kimmalyn and I were the most likely to be given command, but I didn't want it, and I knew Kimmalyn didn't either.

I didn't see any of my flightmates at the moment, but my friend Lizard from Nightmare Flight waved at me from the open hatch of her cockpit. Lizard had bright blue eyes and waist-length black hair. I didn't know how she kept it so long—mine started to bother me if I let it grow to shoulder length. Lizard's real name was Leiko, but like me she went by her callsign almost all of the time.

“FM!” Lizard called. “They're combining your flight with ours. Nose said to wave you all down as you came in and tell you to set your radios to our channel.”

Thank the stars. I would have followed any flightleader, of course, but I'd flown under Nose before, and a lot of the members of Nightmare Flight were my friends. Lizard was close to my age—she'd been in cadet training right before me. The sophomore class tended to be hard on the newest pilots, but Skyward Flight was something of a legend thanks to our flightmate, Spin, which earned us respect most newly minted pilots could only dream of.

“Any idea what's happening?” I asked Lizard.

“No clue,” she said. “But Nose is already in the air. We'd better get up there.”

“Thanks, Lizard,” I said. I ran for my fighter and found Kimmalyn already in her cockpit across the way. As soon as I climbed into mine, I saw the light blinking and switched my radio to her private channel.

“FM,” Kimmalyn said as I readied my fighter. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“No idea,” I said. “An attack of some kind?” We often dealt with small groups of Krell fighters, though only a really massive attack would justify calling us all up at once.

“I don’t know either,” Kimmalyn said. “But I just saw Spin. She’s back.”

I blinked, my hands pausing on the controls. Spensa had managed to use her strange psychic powers to leave our doomed little planet and run some crazy spy mission, trying to steal hyperdrive technology from the enemy. Until we had that technology we were marooned here, fish in a growth vat waiting to be speared. Spin had been gone for weeks, and I knew Jorgen and Admiral Cobb were worried she’d never return.

“Did she bring us a hyperdrive?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Kimmalyn said. “But I doubt it’s a coincidence we’re being called up now. I’m guessing she brought trouble with her. Like the Saint always says, ‘Trouble follows its own.’ ”

Kimmalyn was probably right. As glad as I was to hear Spensa was back, I didn’t think it was a good sign for any of us. If disaster struck, generally Spin was right there in the middle of it. Not that she *caused* it necessarily, but it did seem to follow her around.

I engaged my acclivity ring, then boosted out of the landing bay to join the mass of other ships in the air. The platform itself was high above the planet, part of the massive layers of platforms and debris that shut out almost all view of the sky from the surface below.

Scud, there were a lot of ships up here. Whatever trouble had followed Spin home, Admiral Cobb was sparing no one to stop it. If this was the day the Superiority had chosen to destroy us, we were going to have to show them exactly how dangerous we were.

I tuned in to Nightmare Flight’s channel, and Kimmalyn and I flew to the coordinates Nose gave us, a pocket between some of the nearby platforms. Most of the rest of Skyward Flight was already there, including T-Stall and Catnip—cool guys who were a blast to hang out with, but a little lacking in

the common sense department—and Sadie, who had been flying as my wingmate in the weeks since Spin had left.

“Welcome to Nightmare Flight,” Nose said to the five of us. “Quirk, you’ll be Sushi’s wingmate today.”

“Understood,” Kimmalyyn said.

“We’re all here,” Nose said. “We’re going to follow our nav path out of the platforms and cut across to the right flank of the battlefield. Sound off.”

One by one the members of Nightmare Flight called in, giving their ship numbers and callsigns. We’d switched numbers in Skyward Flight several times. I was Skyward Five currently, and the members of my flight kept our Skyward numbers, sounding off in order after Nightmare Flight finished.

We flew at Mag-3 in a line astern formation, weaving between the layers of platforms, and then Nose gave us a heading on the far side of the battlefield. We loosened our formation, flying in a wide V away from Detritus’s autonomous gun platforms and then cutting across the curvature of the planet to approach the incoming ships.

As we did, I could see the two battleships that had been watching us for the past several weeks out in the blackness of space—monstrous, looming shapes totally unlike our sleek fighters, clearly not made to deal with atmosphere and air resistance. We didn’t have anything like that on Detritus. Our biggest transport ships didn’t carry more than a few dozen passengers.

Beyond them I could now see another long, boxy ship—newly arrived. It was hard to make out against the black, but there were smaller ships out there as well, congregated in a cluster. Probably approaching us at high speeds, though it was difficult to tell at this distance, even on my monitors.

“Our orders are to come up the right flank and engage the enemy,” Nose said. “They’re fielding a lot of drones, but also fifty piloted spacecraft.”

Fifty? We were used to fighting large contingents of drones with a few enemy aces, but not *fifty* piloted ships.

“Flight Command says they have intel that the piloted craft aren’t enemy aces.” Nose said. “But we also don’t know *what* they are, so we’re to engage, drawing as many as possible away from Platform Prime.”

Some of the other flights congregated just outside the reach of the gun platforms, waiting for orders. This first approach would be an experiment then. If Command didn't know what these craft were, they'd need to study their behavior before they could commit their entire force. It made sense from a strategic point of view.

But it was a lot less comforting being the subject of the experiment. The cavern where I'd grown up was home to a research facility that tested everything from new toothpaste recipes to the effects of toxic chemicals. Some of my Disputer friends talked about raiding the place someday and releasing all the lab rats, whose lives were sad and often short. I saw one once that had escaped. It had chewed off most of the fur from its hind legs, which were covered in boils from some chemical reaction. Not, I hoped, from the toothpaste.

Sometimes I identified with those rats.

As we made our sweep above the platforms, my wingmate, Sadie, called on a private channel. "What does Nose mean, they don't know what these things are?" she asked. "How do they know they're not aces then?"

"I don't know," I replied. "But I think we're going to be among the first to find out."

Sadie's channel went quiet, and then a moment later the comm light for her channel brightened again. "I wish the others were here."

"By the others, you mean Spin," I said. I tried not to tease her about her obvious adoration of Spensa. The others, especially Nedd, tried less.

"I mean, she's an incredible fighter! Don't you think our chances would be better if she were here?"

"Quirk said she saw Spin right before we were called up. So she probably *is* here."

But not flying with us. What did *that* mean?

"Really?" Sadie said. "That has to increase our chances, right?"

Sadie had done some fighting with us, but we'd seen fewer and fewer Krell attacks lately, especially since the battleships arrived. "Probably," I said. "But our chances increase a lot more if we don't think about them and instead focus on what's in front of us."

“Right,” Sadie said. “Focus. That’s what Spin would do.”

“Also shout graphic and violent things at the enemies. So I suppose you could try that.”

“That’s right! Down with you, vile...space-dwelling...ships of...vileness! May you all die painful, fiery deaths! How was that?”

“That was definitely something,” I said. “Did it make you feel better?”

“A little. I think I need to practice. May you all explode in big fiery explosions, approaching not-ace ships of whateverness!”

“Uh, Sentry? Maybe practice on your own and just share the highlights, okay?”

“Oh, right,” Sadie said. “Sure thing.”

The radio went quiet, leaving me alone with my thoughts. What I said to Sadie about focusing was true, but I’d always been better at dispensing advice than following it.

“Ready, flight?” Nose said.

“Skyward Five, ready,” I responded. I listened to other voices over the radio doing the same. There were more of us than usual, but it still felt strange to be missing Jorgen, Nedd, and Arturo.

I didn’t think any of us—aside from maybe T-Stall—were stupid enough to believe the official excuse for their absence. You didn’t send the flightleader *and* his two assistants for R&R at the same time unless there was a very good reason.

As we approached the right side of the enemy formations, several ships broke off and headed straight for us.

“Sentry, FM,” Nose said on the general channel, “take point and engage the enemy, then move to evasive maneuvers. T-Stall, Catnip, follow up. See if you can draw them into a bait and switch.”

Sadie and I broke out of formation, launching toward the enemy on overburn. Immediately four ships chased after us as we led them along the outside of the platforms surrounding the planet.

Sadie and I began evasive maneuvers, weaving about so the ships behind us couldn’t get a clean shot with their destructors. I checked my proximity

sensors. Of the four ships following us, two were drones and two were piloted ships, the ones we usually assumed were enemy aces.

“FM and Sentry, hold course.” Nose said. “Quirk, pick them off.”

“Yes, sir!” Kimmalyn said, and a few seconds later the ship following me the closest took a hit and veered off to avoid Kimmalyn’s fire.

“We’re about to pass a gun platform,” I said on a channel to Sadie. “Let’s see if we can get Quirk a little auto support.”

“I’ll cover you,” Sadie said. She moved into position, with me closest to the planet, soaring above the many platforms and hunks of debris that covered Detritus like a loose fragmented shell. I continued my erratic course, dodging bursts of destructor fire. With each bank toward the planet I moved a little farther in, using the readings on my dash to gauge exactly how close I was edging to the gun platform. Most of those platforms were autonomous and would target us the same as the enemy. Engineering Corps hadn’t yet been able to break into the systems to bring them under our control. The enemy ships—drone and pilot alike—knew enough to avoid the gun platforms, but sometimes when we engaged them in enough of a chase we could get them to—

There.

One of the ships tailing me banked too far to the right, and the gun emplacement on the nearby platform fired, the ship disappearing from my sensors in a silent explosion. Kimmalyn fired on the other drone, while Sadie engaged the final ship in a smart series of maneuvers to shift it out in front of me. I shot it with my light-lance, then catapulted myself around it, using my momentum to send it sailing into range of the auto turrets. The platform fired, and the ship burst into fragments, air tanks igniting in a fiery blaze.

“Nice work,” Sadie said.

I was pretty sure it was *passable* work, but I wasn’t going to say that to her, not in the middle of a battle. She might take it as an insult, and she needed to keep her morale up.

“Thanks,” I said. “You too.”

“You did most of it.”

Sadie was a better pilot than she gave herself credit for, but I wasn't going to have that conversation in the middle of a battle either.

We made a sharp turn and accelerated back toward our flight and the right flank of the battle. Other flights were now engaging the enemy ships, and from the look of things the battle was going well.

If this was the best the Superiority had to send against us, maybe we stood a chance after all.

Sadie and I flew toward Nose and her wingmate, assisting them in shaking a couple of tails. Sadie soared in close to one of the enemy ships and used her IMP to take out their shield, then cut away toward the edge of the battle while I pressed forward, firing my destructors at the now-defenseless ship.

"Quirk, can you cover Sentry?" I asked Kimmalyne over the general channel.

"Quirk's busy," Lizard said. "I'm on it."

The ship in front of me lit up with an explosion above its acclivity ring, and with no air resistance to slow it down, the wreckage continued sailing in the direction it had been going. I cut away, flying out to join Sadie and Lizard, reaching them just as Sadie reignited her shield.

"Nice work," Nose said over the general channel. "Skyward Flight, it's always a pleasure."

I smiled. We worked well as a group, though we didn't fly together regularly. Before I joined the DDF, I hadn't understood the mentality that pushed people to fight as one, to keep doing so even as their friends died around them. I'd never felt that violence was the best way to solve problems, though I understood that violence was the *only* solution that kept us alive when the Krell kept trying to bomb us out of existence. Still, I'd found the rhetoric about glory disturbing, the way the National Assembly seemed to justify anything they wanted by saying it would help us fight the Krell. I had thought pilots were sheep. Skilled, determined, well-respected sheep who did what they were driven to do because they didn't know any better.

Now though, I understood the glue that held us together, and it wasn't stupidity. It was the bond shared by people who faced death together. It was a sense of belonging, of being a piece of something bigger, something important, though I still wasn't convinced everything about it was good. I'd never felt that I needed a military to tell me my place in the world before, and I still didn't.

But there was something about knowing that without me my friends would be worse off that kept me flying even when it terrified me.

"New orders," Nose said over the general channel. "We're to move to evasive maneuvers *only* and then turn off our comms."

Excuse me? "Nose, did you say turn *off* our comms?"

"Those are the orders, FM," Nose said. "All comms off. Do not turn them on under any circumstances."

That couldn't be right. Without the ability to communicate, we couldn't work together as a flight. We'd end up scattered across the battlefield. Good pilots are good communicators. I learned that from Cobb. Without the ability to talk to each other—

Well, it wasn't *exactly* like flying blind, but it was a hell of a lot closer than I liked.

"Are we going to retreat?" Lizard asked.

That would be more manageable. If we could head back beyond the gun platforms we could at least hide, or make our way to Platform Prime under the shelter of the rubble belt.

"Negative," Nose said. "Comms off. Maintain evasive maneuvers. Try to keep the ships busy and await further instructions."

"Instructions?" I said. "How are you going to give us instructions if our *comms* are off?"

"Pilots, we need to go dark," Nose said. "The order comes straight from Admiral Cobb. Stick with your wingmate. If you get stranded, find another member of the flight and stay together. We'll reassemble on the flip side. Nose out."

Scud. "Sentry," I said over a private channel. "You heard Nose. We'll have to stay close together." I had no idea what Command was up to, but

Cobb wouldn't give an order like that without a good reason. "Follow my lead." I was the senior pilot. It was my job to keep her alive.

"Oh—okay," Sadie said. She sounded close to panicking, and I couldn't blame her. Terror crawled its way up my throat as I put my hand over the comm button.

And then I turned it off.

Two

The world went silent except for the hum of my instruments. The ships around me made no sound as the battle raged on. For the first time I envied Spensa her AI-equipped ship. It chattered like Kimmalyn after too many desserts, but at least it wasn't...silent.

Sadie and I flew in close formation so we didn't lose sight of each other. The battle in front of me fractured; ships that had been flying together broke off into wingmate pairs, while the enemy formations stayed mostly the same, chasing our fighters in groups of three or four. They outnumbered us, but we flew better, leading them around in circles.

Sadie would be waiting for my lead. I needed to think of a plan, figure out how to use these new orders to our advantage and communicate it by the way I flew, since we couldn't talk.

But stars, I couldn't take this silence.

I reached around to the belt loop of my jumpsuit. I never used my transmitter while I was flying—Jorgen wouldn't be happy if I transmitted unnecessary noise over the comm. My transmitter didn't emit a ranged signal, but it did something even better.

It played *music*. Handheld transmitters were expensive and rare. My father had given it to me when I made pilot—I used it more than he did when I lived at home. Today I wanted something peppy, something that definitely couldn't be played at my funeral by some three-piece band.

So I turned on one of my favorites, a song my father said was classified as “big band,” though many of the other songs featured far more instruments. I thought I understood: the band wasn't big because of the number of players (which was still more than ever played together in the Detritus caverns), but because of the sounds they made, loud and punchy, like the music itself was trying to swing you around and toss you.

I tapped my feet against the floor, listening to the beat as I flew around the outskirts of the battle, watching and waiting for my move. Our orders were to stick to evasive maneuvers, but there were plenty of tricks we could pull that would do damage to the enemies while still being considered evasive.

I found my opening when three ships peeled off the mass of the main battle and bolted toward us. I darted out front, my head nodding to the rhythm of the drums, and the ships chased after me, leaving Sadie behind to shoot with her destructors. She still overused those—Cobb hadn't taught her as a cadet, so we'd had to give her some extra coaching after she made pilot to get her up to speed.

The destructors wouldn't do much while the Krell had their shields up, but there was no way I could use my IMP and still claim I was being evasive. The IMP would take out my shield along with the Krell's, and I didn't dare do that with my comms down—there was no way I'd be able to call for help if I got myself into real trouble.

We were supposed to fly defensively, but that didn't mean I had to let these ships shoot us out of the sky. I bobbed my head to the beat and circled around to some debris that floated above the platforms, out of reach of the gun emplacements.

I grabbed one of the enemy drone pilot ships with my light-lance and fired my thrusters in its direction, dragging it after me toward the rock. Sadie dashed ahead, kiting the other two ships after her as I raced toward the debris. Then I rotated my thrusters and cut the light-lance at the last moment, propelling myself downward beneath the debris while the Krell ship crashed into the rock above me.

I overshot. My GravCaps maxed out and I was struck by g-forces that forced blood upward toward my head. For a moment my vision went red, but I reduced my speed and managed to maintain consciousness, though the music warped in my ears and the lights on my ship controls swam before my eyes.

I began to recover, my head still swimming, and found Sadie flying toward me, the other two ships no longer on her tail. I didn't know if she'd

lost them or taken them out while I was distracted, but I was glad either way. I lifted my finger to call her to tell her so before I remembered.

Silence. We were flying in silence.

And I still didn't understand *why*. Sadie and I swung around as the music crashed toward a crescendo, and we soared toward the main battlefield again.

My proximity sensors beeped over the music, warning me of incoming ships headed straight for me at high speed. I didn't dare turn the music up any louder, though I wanted to. I adopted a weaving pattern, moving in rhythm with a trumpeting horn—and the first enemy ship matched my flight pattern, almost as if it wanted to run right into me. I went into a dive, Sadie following after me—

And pulled out right as one of our own fighters passed in front of my nose.

Nightmare Seven. Lizard's ship. Four Superiority fighters followed after her, only one of them breaking away to pepper me with destructor fire.

Scud. Where was Lizard's wingmate? She'd flown so close to get my attention, because she couldn't radio in for help. I pivoted my boosters, veering off in Lizard's direction. Behind me, Sadie launched a barrage of destructor fire at the lone ship near us, the blasts seeming to shoot in time with a snare drum. Sadie executed an Ahlstrom loop to turn herself around and follow after me. That ship might chase her, but I had to trust her to deal with one tail.

With four ships behind her, Lizard was in much bigger trouble, and she needed help. We were better trained, but the Superiority forces had always had more powerful destructors and stronger shields. I accelerated to Mag-4 to catch up with the ships. Ahead of me, Lizard spun in a rolling twin-scissor, trying to shake her tails, but they stuck with her. This group were all piloted ships, and they were working together better than the Krell drones we usually fought. As Lizard pulled out of the scissor, one of the Krell pegged her with a destructor shot.

We had to help her. She still had a shield, but it was weakening. Lizard knew what she was doing—she was already headed toward the gun

platforms where we could push the ships close enough to take fire. We were too far from them though. She wasn't going to make it.

My whole body jittering to the syncopation of the music, I opened fire on the nearest Krell, forcing the ship to take evasive action and lose its bead on Lizard. Sadie caught up to me and then pulled ahead, speeding forward.

She was making herself a target, giving me an opening to take care of the other ships while she and Lizard took the destructor fire. It was a risky move—even though Sadie still had a full shield, the Krell destructors could quickly destroy it. If I'd had my radio, I would have yelled at her to pull back and stop being so reckless. Jorgen would never have approved that maneuver.

But I couldn't. I couldn't tell her anything. Instead I followed after her, darting forward to engage one of the other Krell fighters.

We were approaching the gun platforms now as one of the Krell fighters took the bait and went after Sadie instead. Sadie executed a perfect twin-S, dodging the destructor fire.

I missed with the light-lance, and the other two ships bore down on Lizard, both unloading their destructors on her at once.

Lizard evaded many of the blasts, but not enough. With a blink of light, Lizard's shield went down.

I put my hand over the comm button, then pulled it back. We were on our own. I hit my overburn, speeding out in front of Lizard and trying to draw away the Krell fighters. If they followed me, I could evade them while Lizard escaped and got her shield up.

It didn't work. The Krell maintained their focus on Lizard, and a destructor blast hit her boosters, sending the ship spinning toward the planet. I watched helplessly as Lizard's ship spiraled into range of the gun platforms and exploded in a fiery burst. A crash of cymbals seemed to punctuate the explosion.

"No," I whispered. *No.*

Sadie's ship pulled close to mine. Lizard was gone, just like that. She'd never again tell me my boots looked stupid with my jumpsuit or challenge

Nedd to a tower-building contest with algae strips. Nothing was going to change that.

I couldn't even call in to Nose to let her know. We wouldn't be able to retrieve Lizard's pin—a ship destroyed like that in the vacuum wouldn't even be good for salvage. She would get only a symbolic ceremony, not a real pilot's funeral.

I focused on the music, though it was now nearing the end of the song, the music building up, the drums punching in an off-kilter syncopation. The ships that took out Lizard were turning around now, though Sadie seemed to have shaken the one that was after her. Together Sadie and I wove back and forth until the ships gave up on us and went to seek easier targets.

The song ended, and silence echoed in my ears.

Lizard was gone. I'd never hear her voice again. I reached for my transmitter, starting another song. I chose a haunting piece played by an instrument my father called a piano. He'd shown me an image of one from the records, but I couldn't imagine how a large bench with buttons made notes like the ones in the song—nimble and lilting and all working together like a well-tuned machine.

This music was much more sedate than the big band music, but I'd suddenly lost the desire for pep. I pulled ahead of Sadie, leading her away from the battlefield. I needed a moment to clear my head. A lack of focus would get us both killed. I could grieve later—now I had to concentrate. I had to keep Sadie alive. I had to—

Suddenly, the blackness of space seemed to *shift*. As if the layers of space itself were being pulled apart, the whole of the battle before me rippled, one layer separating from another, distorting in waves and bends. I shook my head, afraid for a moment that the g-forces might have had some delayed mental effects. What would I do if I had an emergency out here? I couldn't radio for help. I couldn't request to retreat.

And so, even with Sadie flying at my wing, I was still completely and utterly alone when the deep shadow darkened the blackness of space, passing over it like a shroud. In the distance, beyond the circling ships, a mass appeared—another ship maybe, but unlike any I'd ever seen. A core

with spires jutting from it like the head of a mace, enormous—perhaps as big as Detritus, but far enough away that it was difficult to tell. The mass was immediately obscured by clouds of dust and shapes that didn't exist—*couldn't* exist—that undulated as the folds of reality seemed to separate and reform across the battlefield, rippling out into the vastness of space. The piano music rose and fell, providing an eerie soundtrack.

Scud, what was *that*?

My finger hovered over the comm switch, trembling. The explosion of Lizard's ship played over and over in my head, even as I tried to banish it. Was I losing my mind? Was this some kind of trauma response? I had to talk to *someone*, didn't I? I had to report what I was seeing, though as I watched the reactions of the other ships in the battlefield, I became increasingly certain I wasn't hallucinating.

I wasn't the only one faltering. Ships that had been engaged in maneuvers flew off course, scattering. The battlefield widened as many ships skittered away from the main fight, probably trying to avoid being shot down while they reconciled themselves to what they were seeing.

Or tried. I didn't know that there was any way to reconcile myself to *this*. It couldn't be real—the colors and shapes were too maddening, too impossible.

It had to be a hologram, or an illusion like the one that had fooled Spensa's father, convincing him to attack his own people. Except those tactics were supposed to only affect cytonics, people with defects—or assets, we were starting to learn—in their minds that let them travel and communicate across the vastness of the universe. Those shouldn't be able to affect everyone.

And if this was a hologram, it was scudding *big*. What would be projecting that? The enemy battleships? They hadn't done anything like that in the weeks they'd been parked above Detritus, and besides, the vision seemed to be having the same effect on Defiant and Superiority ships alike. I fired my destructors once and watched the dust ripple around the path of the blast, reacting to the force.

The dust at least was real. But what was it, and where had it come from?

I startled as Sadie's ship shot out in front of me, then dropped back. She was flying dangerously close, near enough I could look out my window and see through the glass of her canopy.

Sadie looked right at me, eyes wide in terror. I didn't know what to do—I couldn't talk to her. Instead I simply shook my head. I didn't know what was happening. From the looks of it, *nobody* knew what was happening.

And then with no preamble, the folds of space seemed to ripple, and the strange phenomenon vanished. The battlefield reformed once more, clear and crisp, all the dust moving away as if sucked into the cracks in reality from whence it came.

My finger shook above my comm switch, but then I dropped my hand, gripping the dash. I'd been ordered to turn off my comms, and I hadn't been ordered to turn them back on.

For a moment the ships seemed to regroup, both enemy and friendly drawing back together, like they were all remembering we were supposed to be fighting each other.

And then the enemy force turned, almost as one, and started to withdraw toward the enormous carrier ship. Generally when the enemy withdrew, we didn't chase them, but we also didn't withdraw without orders.

Was it safe to turn comms back on? I scanned the battlefield, looking for other members of our flight, and found Nose and her wingmate hitting overburn, bolting toward us. When she got close, she reversed her thrusters to slow down and pulled up next to me, T-Stall and Catnip following behind her. Nose frantically waved a hand at me, pointing at her own radio.

I switched off my transmitter and flipped my radio on. "Nose?" I said. "What the *scud* was that?"

"Command says delver," Nose said. "I don't know what that means, but I've heard rumors."

We'd all heard the rumors. Kimmalyne and some of the other members of Skyward Flight had been there when the engineers managed to break the encryption on the footage of what had happened to the people who used to live on our forgotten planet. I'd missed the footage, but I'd heard about it. Some giant thing had materialized in the space outside the planet and

devoured everyone and everything who lived here. I'd expected it to be more...substantial, I guess. More material. That had hardly seemed like a creature at all.

If *that* was what this had been, why were we still alive?

"Nose," I said. "Lizard went down over by the gun platforms. The Krell got her. We tried to save her, but—"

"Copy, FM," Nose said. "You're sure she didn't survive?"

I swallowed. "Affirmative. She spiraled into range of the gun platform. Her ship was annihilated."

The radio was silent again. Nose was Lizard's flightleader. I'd failed to save Lizard, but Nose hadn't even been there.

She'd feel as responsible for her loss as I did, maybe more.

"FM? Nose?" Sadie said, only now getting the message it was safe to turn her radio back on. "What just happened?"

"I'm sure we'll know more soon," Nose said. "Orders are to regroup, hold until we know the enemy is leaving, then head on back to base."

That made sense. We couldn't abandon the battlefield if they intended to rally and keep fighting.

The concern turned out to be unnecessary. The Superiority fleet gathered at the carrier ship, and then the carrier ship blinked out of existence as if it had never been there at all.

"They had a hyperdrive," I said to Kimmalyn on a private channel. "Maybe we should have been trying to steal it."

"Spin might have found us one," Kimmalyn said.

I hoped she had, because the confusion of this fight made it clearer than ever that we were completely out of our depth. Yeah, we were better pilots than the enemy, and we had gained some ground by taking the fight into space. Platform Prime was a convenient place from which to fight, but it was also vulnerable to attack. It was one small step, barely meaningful if we didn't find a way to get off this rock—if we couldn't find a way to take the fight *to* our enemy rather than merely defending ourselves.

In general, I found self-defense to be a much more admirable pursuit than invasion, but a fish could only live in a vat for so long before it was

fried.

We were trapped on Detritus, while the enemy could travel anywhere in the universe, had every resource at their disposal. We needed more. More resources. More pilots. More help. More than we could muster with only what remained of the Defiant fleet after it crashed here almost a century ago.

We lost Lizard today; we were dwindling one by one. I was a pilot. I could follow orders. And my team was the best there was, even when pieces of it were missing. But I also wasn't stupid.

I might not have Cobb's experience or Spensa's vision, but I knew if we didn't figure out how to change the course of the war soon, humanity wasn't going to survive.

Three

Four days after the battle, I wandered toward the mess hall on the labyrinthine Platform Prime. I didn't know what this structure had been built for, but whoever constructed it obviously hadn't felt a powerful need to be able to get anywhere quickly or easily without a very detailed map.

I was still in something of a daze. The battle had been labeled a big success by basically everyone because the delver had not, in fact, wiped us all out of existence. But that merely made us *lucky*, a whole lot luckier than all the people who'd died the last time a delver visited Detritus—when it had destroyed the entire civilization that had lived here before us. And while we didn't really know why it had come here or why it had left, we were alive, and hadn't been completely annihilated by it or the Superiority. I should have been happy.

But we weren't *all* alive. Lizard wasn't the first friend I'd lost in battle, and she wasn't the first I'd blamed on myself, even though logically I knew neither Bim's nor Hurl's death had been my fault. The delver had gone, but it could reappear anytime. The Superiority forces had fled, but they too might come back without warning. And when they did, my friends and I would be out there fighting back. We were pilots. We were the only things standing between the last of our species and total extinction.

I knew the *reason* for what we did—and I believed in it, much as I hated what it had done to us as a people. It seemed like that should make me feel better.

But I didn't feel better. All I felt was empty.

After Hurl's death, our whole flight had been given mandatory leave. No one had been given leave this time—not Nightmare Flight, not us, not anyone. That meant Command was worried that the delver would return, that the Superiority would attack. And yet Jorgen, Nedd, and Arturo were still on their mysterious trip planetside. Spensa had disappeared again when

the delver did, and Kimmalyyn said even Cobb didn't know where she'd gone this time.

Which was why, when I first heard the soft trill of Spensa's pet, Doomslug, I thought I was imagining it.

The sound came from up the corridor, just around the corner in the opposite direction of the mess hall. Before Spensa left on her secret mission, Doomslug used to turn up all over the base here on Platform Prime. I once found her hanging out in the women's room near the cleansing pods, sleeping on one of the heat vents. She liked to perch on my shoulder to listen to music from my transmitter through my headset, and if I offered her flatfish caviar, she'd stay for over an hour.

My parents probably would have been horrified that I fed their expensive gift to a slug, but Doomslug enjoyed the caviar, I enjoyed sharing, and my parents didn't know about it—so everybody won.

I turned the corner and there was Doomslug, curled up by the ventilation grate, warm air blowing the bright blue spines that ran down her back.

"Hey, girl," I said, kneeling down next to her. The slug turned toward the sound of my voice—I wasn't sure if she could *see* or only sense—and I pulled my hand back.

This slug had blue markings down the sides of its face that almost looked like gills, while Doomslug's face was all yellow. It wasn't Doomslug, but another slug of the same kind.

I blinked down at it. I'd never seen one of these slugs before Spensa brought hers up to Platform Prime. She'd found it in the surface cavern where she'd stayed when she was denied permission to live on Alta Base with the rest of our squad of cadets.

What would *another* of those slugs be doing *here*?

"Hey, buddy," I said, extending my fingers and letting the slug examine them with its bulbous face. The truth was, I had no idea how to determine the sex of a slug, if they indeed had one at all. I wasn't sure if Spensa had actually discerned Doomslug's sex, or arbitrarily decided to refer to her as female.

I slipped my fingers down under the slug's chin—it had more of a fleshy bulb than a head, having no bone structure at all, but it did have a little point of flesh where the chin *might* be. The flesh withdrew slightly at my touch, and then the slug slid forward, leaning in as I scratched its leathery skin. “What are you doing here?”

“Here,” the slug trilled softly. Doomslug did that too—repeated words and sounds. This one had a quieter voice, or maybe it was in a quieter mood.

The slug flinched slightly as footsteps pounded down a nearby corridor. The footsteps came closer, and the slug slipped back against my knees, hugging its body to me, though it was a bit too large to conceal itself entirely. Jorgen Weight, my flightleader, came barreling around the corner. Jorgen and I grew up in the same cavern and went to the same primary school, so we'd known each other tangentially since we were kids. Jorgen had deep brown skin and curly black hair, and right now was sweating like he'd just run laps around the orchard outside Alta Base. He skidded to a halt and put his hands on his knees, breathing hard. “There it is,” he said, looking down at the slug. “That's the last one. I think.”

“The last one?” The slug huddled against me, and I scooped it up into my arms, keeping my fingers away from its face. Its mouth wasn't visible, but Doomslug had opened an orifice there when she devoured the caviar. I'd seen her rows of sharp-but-flexible teeth, and while I didn't know if these things were prone to biting, I didn't want to find out.

“Yeah,” Jorgen said. “Those devils are slippery. I don't know how they keep getting out of their crate.”

Huh. “Collecting more pets for Spensa?” I asked. That seemed a little pathetic, even for Jorgen. He and Spensa had been drooling over each other since before we left Alta. I was pretty sure Jorgen thought it was a well-kept secret.

“Not exactly,” Jorgen said.

“Seriously, though, where have you been?” There had to be an explanation beyond what Command had told us.

Jorgen sighed. “Come on. If you can get that thing back into the crate with the others, I’ll fill you in.”

I looked down at the slug, and its face pivoted docilely toward me. I wanted to know what Jorgen and the others had been doing planetside, and getting the slug into a crate didn’t seem like a monumental task. I knew a good trade when I heard one.

“You got it,” I told him, and followed him down the hallway into a mostly empty room with two large crates stacked in the center and more piled against the wall. On top of the stack in the center sat Nedd, one of our assistant flightleaders. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and made me feel small beside him, something few people could do. Arturo, our other assistant flightleader, leaned against the wall by the door. He was several inches shorter than me, with tanned skin and dark hair.

“FM!” Nedd shouted, much louder than was necessary. “It’s good to see you!”

“You too,” I said, with much less gusto, while Arturo gave Nedd a look.

Nedd was an expert at not taking hints. About a month ago during leave, he’d cornered me and asked if I wanted to go out. I’d been aware of his interest for a while; Nedd is cute and all, but not really my type, so I’d finally told him outright that I’d rather be friends. He’d taken it pretty well, but ever since then he’d been overly friendly to me, like he wanted to prove how not-weird the situation was by making it...more weird.

Which was exactly why I had ignored his interest to begin with.

Jorgen motioned for Nedd to climb off the knee-high crates. “Do we have them all now?”

“I don’t know,” Nedd said. “I thought maybe if I sat on them they would stay put—but the lid was closed all the way here, so I don’t know how we lost them to begin with.”

“They’re slippery,” I said. Though they weren’t, not literally. As I ran my hand down the slug’s back, it felt more like petting a well-polished pair of leather boots. “Doomslug used to get out of Spensa’s room all the time, even with the door locked.” I turned to Jorgen. “But I think you owe me an explanation.”

“Not until the slug is in the crate,” Jorgen said, pulling off the lid and pointing inside.

“Crate!” a couple of slugs trilled, their voices echoes of each other.

I still didn’t see what the big deal was about putting the slug in the box, but I gave its head one more scritch and then nestled it in the crate—

With so many other slugs that they filled the box, all crawling over each other. There were several yellow and blue ones, but also other colors I’d never seen—some purple with orange spines and others red with black stripes.

“Where did you get them?” I asked. “And why are they here?” I was guessing Cobb wasn’t starting some kind of pilot support-animal program—not that I would have minded having a slug for myself. For creatures that looked so inhuman, they were remarkably friendly and comforting.

Or maybe I’d been starved for the comforts of home for far, far too long.

“I don’t know what Cobb told you about where we went,” Jorgen began.

“That you were on leave for R&R,” I said. “*All three* of you. Simultaneously. Which I don’t believe for a moment.”

“Good,” Nedd said. “Because if that trip was supposed to be restful—”

“We went looking for something down in the caverns,” Jorgen said. “Something that makes the same vibration that Spensa heard from the stars.”

I stared at him. “You went searching for something that makes a vibration no one can hear but her?”

Jorgen looked nervously down at the floor.

“*Oh*,” I said.

“Yeah,” Jorgen said. “I have the defect, same as Spensa.”

“I’m telling you, you shouldn’t call it that,” Arturo said. “If you can move yourself across the universe with your mind, that’s not defective. It’s *awesome*.”

“*Theoretically* I can travel across the universe,” Jorgen said. “In practice, I have no idea how to do that. Spensa’s done it, but she’s not here to explain. And the vibrations I felt came from...” He looked dubiously at the crate full of slugs. “These.”

I smothered a snicker. “So Spensa talks to the stars, and you talk to... slugs.”

Jorgen looked like he was already sorry for telling me this, so I kept talking, trying to make it better. “I mean, they’re cute slugs. And you have a whole crate of them, so that’s—”

“Good,” a voice said from the hallway. Cobb filled the doorway, wearing his admiral’s uniform and regarding us all with a stern expression. “That’s very good.” Cobb limped into the room followed by Rig, who had been part of our flight when we all started school together, but had since joined the Engineering Corps. His real name was Rodge, but our flight all referred to him by his callsign, same as they did with me. Rig was almost as tall as Nedd, lanky with pale skin and bright red hair. He was cute in a nerdy sort of way. Everyone said he was basically a genius. I wished we’d had a chance to get to know each other better before he’d left Skyward Flight.

Cobb stared into the crate at the slugs. “Apparently these things are called taynix. Why are they all different colors?”

Jorgen looked horrified at not having an answer to this question. “I don’t know. I assume they’re different kinds? Why do we have different colored hair, sir?”

“I’m sorry I asked,” Cobb said. “But they’re all cytonic? You’re sure?”

“We found them all in that same area,” Jorgen said. “The caves where I heard the...sounds. It’s harder for me to hear one or two of them at a time, but the whole crate sort of...vibrates. It’s difficult to describe.”

Rig looked at them thoughtfully. “It could be that only the one kind is cytonic in nature—or it could be that the colors are incidental, and they all have the same natural affinities.”

Huh. That was definitely the most words I had ever heard come out of Rig’s mouth at one time. Apparently he wasn’t some kind of mostly mute genius.

“I have no idea what kind of affinity that would be,” Jorgen said. “But I brought them back so you could experiment on them.”

“*Experiment* on them?” I asked. “You’re not going to hurt them, are you?”

“No,” Cobb said. “These creatures are far too valuable to waste. They’re hyperdrives.”

We all stared at him. Well, all of us but Rig, who apparently already knew. Rig looked around at all of us, but when he met my eyes he suddenly developed an interest in his fingernails.

“Sir?” Jorgen asked. “The slugs are hyperdrives? How do you know?”

“Spensa told me,” Cobb said.

“Spensa’s back?” Jorgen asked. He sounded so adorably hopeful that even Nedd, socially clueless as he was, had to have noticed.

“She *was* back,” Cobb said. I was ninety-nine percent sure that Cobb also knew about Jorgen and Spensa’s mutual crush-fest, but chose not to say anything about it. Or maybe he did say something about it, just not in front of the rest of us. “She showed up right before the Superiority fleet, and then left with them. She was unable to steal the hyperdrive technology, but she did learn that these things”—he gestured to the crate—“are the key.”

“She left,” Jorgen said. “Where did she go?”

“We don’t know,” Rig said.

Jorgen’s face fell instantly, and Rig looked sympathetic. He and Spensa grew up together. They were close, and I’d always suspected Rig had a crush on her, because he followed her around like a puppy. I wondered if Spensa talked to him about what was going on between her and Jorgen. It was hard to imagine Spensa talking about her feelings...ever.

“I love Spin as much as the next guy,” Nedd said, though I was pretty sure he didn’t. “But are we not a little more concerned with the fact that we’re sitting on a crate full of hyperdrives?”

“You’re not sitting on it anymore,” Arturo pointed out.

“And it’s a good thing, because if it’s true, these slugs are worth more than all the ships in the DDF combined!”

“They certainly are,” Cobb said. “But these things are worth nothing if we can’t figure out how they work.”

That was true from a tactical standpoint, but I didn’t like that he thought of these living beings as pieces of equipment that had no value unless they

were useful. I really didn't like the idea that they might be experimented on like the lab rats back home.

"I don't know," Rig mused. "It's possible the Superiority is somehow extracting the cytonic organs from them and using *those* to build hyperdrives. But M-Bot's hyperdrive was in a box. Maybe it's the cage they used to house the slugs before using them to transport?"

"Hey Jorg," Nedd said, "where do you suppose you keep your cytonic organs?"

"Shut up, Nedd," Arturo said, probably because Jorgen was way too reserved to tell Nedd to shove it in front of Cobb, though Cobb didn't blink an eye.

"The slugs are actually pretty intelligent," I said. Doomslug mostly parroted sounds, but one time I taught her how to say "please" before I gave her each bite of caviar. It was adorable. "They're definitely not *things*."

"Things!" one of the slugs said from the crate.

"You are not helping yourself," I told it.

"I don't care if they're geniuses," Cobb said. "We need to figure out how to use them to get off this planet before the Superiority comes back with a force we can't handle. They already did that once. If they hadn't turned around and left on their own, that might have been our end. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Jorgen said, and the rest of us echoed him. The truth was, it wasn't my decision. Like with my friends, there was very little I could do to protect these slugs.

"Rigmarole and Jorgen, I'm putting you in charge of the investigation."

"Sir?" Jorgen said. "I don't know anything about animals—"

"The Assembly wants us to put our focus on defending ourselves, and I can't blame them for that. So, the Engineering Corps is busy working on the platform defenses. They're lending us Rig because he has the most experience with this technology through his work with M-Bot. And you're a cytonic, and the slugs are a cytonic...*thing*." Cobb waved his arm in the direction of the slugs, somehow managing to sound authoritative even though he didn't know the right term. I wasn't sure there *was* a right term. This was entirely new territory for all of us.

“Sir, I’d like to help,” I said.

Cobb looked me over. “Fine. FM will also help. I want a report on your progress in twenty-four hours.”

Rig paled. “I’m not sure we’ll have results in—”

“Just a report of what you’ve learned. I know you and your pals in engineering would like a month to poke around and design experiments, but we don’t have that kind of time. Do I make myself understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Rig said.

“First, we need to figure out how to prevent them from escaping,” Jorgen said. “They keep getting out of the crate.”

“I hope you’ll have something more for me by tomorrow than whether you were able to keep an animal in a cage,” Cobb said.

“You don’t have experience with these animals, sir.”

It was weird how they kept escaping. The crate *looked* pretty secure, and I didn’t think the slugs were strong enough to lift the lid. Certainly not with Nedd sitting on it. Even Nedd would have noticed *that*.

“Do you think they’re hyperjumping?” I asked.

Jorgen and Cobb blinked at me, and then we all looked down at the slugs. One of the purple and orange ones climbed on the back of one of its friends, its bulbous face crinkling at us speculatively.

“Doomslug used to escape from Spensa’s bunk all the time,” I added. “And has anyone ever seen these things travel around? They just seem to... *appear* places.”

“Yeah, that would explain it,” Jorgen said. “The one FM found sure got away fast.”

“If that’s the case,” Rig said, “maybe we *don’t* try to contain them, and see what we can observe.”

Cobb clapped Rig and Jorgen on their shoulders. “I’ll leave that to you.”

“Sir?” One of Cobb’s aides stood in the hallway, peering into the room. “You have guests waiting for you in the command center.”

“What guests?” Cobb asked.

The aide looked around at the rest of us, as if she wasn’t sure she should say. “The National Assembly sent some representatives to talk to you about

the defense effort, sir. Jeshua Weight is with them.”

We all looked at Jorgen. His mother was a famous pilot who’d fought in the Battle of Alta alongside Cobb. She was a legend, even among pilots. Now she mostly worked with her husband, Jorgen’s father, who was a leader of the National Assembly.

“Did you know your mom was here?” Nedd asked.

“No,” Jorgen said. “I’ve been with you for days, remember?”

“I dunno,” Nedd said. “Didn’t Spensa’s grandmother say she could, like, read people’s minds?”

“I can’t do that,” Jorgen snapped. He sounded more upset with himself than irritated with Nedd, as if being a cytonic should have come with a manual.

This was Jorgen. He probably *did* think being a cytonic should have come with a manual.

“I’m not going to keep her waiting,” Cobb said. “I expect that report by tomorrow.” And he strode out of the room, leaving us all standing around the crate full of slugs.

“All right,” Jorgen said, nodding purposefully. “Rig wants to observe the slugs to see what happens when they escape. Nedd, Arturo, and I will get these crates to the engineering bay, and then Rig can set up his equipment.”

“What am I going to do?” I asked. I wasn’t going to *complain* if I wasn’t asked to carry boxes, but I definitely wasn’t going to let Jorgen leave me out.

“You can be in charge of keeping the slugs in the crate,” Jorgen said. “Finding them if they escape, maybe tagging them all somehow so we can keep track of them.”

He looked at Rig. I assumed he was making things up when he talked about Rig setting up “equipment,” but I didn’t know much about what they did in engineering, so I wasn’t going to point that out and reveal my own ignorance.

Rig looked suddenly uncomfortable. “That sounds great.”

He didn’t seem like he thought it was great. He seemed like he thought I might be too incompetent to babysit the taynix. But Jorgen nodded as if

nothing was amiss.

“All right. You heard Cobb. Let’s get moving.” Jorgen counted the slugs in the crate. “Scud, we’re missing one again.”

They all looked at me. It might have been easier to be assigned to carry the boxes. “I’ll go look for it, I guess.”

“We’ll probably want to have her put a marker wherever she finds the slugs,” Rig said. “So we can get a reading on their habitual distances.”

“*She* is standing right here,” I said. “And if you give me a marker, I’ll leave it when I find one.”

“Oh—okay,” Rig said. He looked abashed, but still refused to meet my eyes.

Apparently my interest in getting to know him wasn’t returned. That was a shame—there was a serious dearth of cute nerdy guys my age to hang out with up here on Platform Prime. Especially ones I hadn’t spent the last few months watching have contests to see how many callsigns they could utter in one belch.

I told myself it didn’t matter. I had work to do, so I spun around and stalked out, off to find myself a taynix.

Four

Over the next few hours, I became certain that the slugs were teleporting out of the box. The yellow and blue ones would periodically disappear, regardless of whether the lid was on or off. Sometimes I'd find them slithering around some other part of the engineering bay. Sometimes I'd find them out in the hall, or down the corridor. A few times I had to venture all the way up to the command center or out to the landing bay to find the slugs chilling on someone's chair or on the wing of a ship.

There didn't seem to be any way to stop them from doing this, but only the yellow and blue ones had a penchant for wandering. The others remained in their crate, crawling over one another. The teleporting slugs seemed to leave less often when I played them music from my transmitter, so I left it looping a slow melodic song next to the crate. The slugs trilled along, echoing the notes. If the music bothered the engineers, they seemed to accept it as a necessary part of the scientific process, because they didn't ask me to turn it off.

I returned to the engineering bay with my most frequent traveler, the slug with the blue gill-like markings. The slug shivered slightly—a lot of them did that after I found them, especially if I did it quickly. They'd startle when I approached, like they were frightened of something.

Retrieving them from all over the platform wasn't my favorite pastime, but it kept my mind off of Lizard, so I was grateful for it.

"Well," I said to Rig, "at least you've got a lot of data about how far they go."

Rig sat at his desk, looking over what I assumed was an array of said data, though it could have been something else for all I knew. He didn't even glance up. "Yeah," he said. "Thanks."

I scowled at the back of his head. Since Jorgen had gotten called away to talk to his mother shortly after we arrived in engineering, Rig was back to

talking in single-syllable sentences.

Maybe I wasn't the most scintillating person around, but it still stung that he seemed to barely notice I was here. Or worse, he did notice and wasn't happy about it.

I scritch'd my most recent escapee—who I had named Gill for obvious reasons—on the head, and then counted the slugs. I had all of them again—or at least all that had been there when I took over responsibility for them. They'd been disappearing with greater frequency over time, and I thought I knew why.

"I think it's time to feed them," I said to Rig, not taking my eyes off the slugs. I was still waiting to catch one of them teleporting away, which they never seemed to do while I was looking. "Do you know how we do that?"

Rig did look at me then, but only to give me a wide-eyed look of terror, similar to Jorgen's when Cobb asked why the slugs were different colors.

"Do you know how to feed them?" I asked again. "I think they're wandering away faster because they're hungry, and I don't have enough caviar for all of them."

"Caviar?" Rig asked. "Why would you—"

"There're mushrooms in one of the crates," Jorgen said, and I turned around to find him standing in the doorway. "We assumed that's what they eat because there were a ton of them in the cavern where we found them. They seem to like them well enough." He walked over to one of the other boxes and pulled off the lid. Sure enough, it was filled with wide-capped mushrooms in various shades of cream and brown.

Gill trilled eagerly. I gave him the first taste and then dropped several more mushrooms into one of the slug crates. The slugs migrated toward the mushrooms, all clustering together. Hopefully that would motivate them to stay put for a while.

"How was the thing with your mom?" I asked Jorgen.

"Complicated. Apparently the National Assembly was frightened by the appearance of the delver, and now they want to have more say in what the DDF is doing. Cobb doesn't like it."

I understood why—it wasn't like the National Assembly had any practical experience with the Superiority, let alone a delver.

Then again, neither did the rest of us.

“There's more,” Jorgen said. “The assembly has been able to monitor some of the information on the Superiority datanets. They say *Spensa* was the one who turned the delver away from Detritus. Then she apparently turned it on *them*.”

Rig and I both gaped at him. “Do you think that's true?” I asked.

“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “If anyone could figure out how to wrangle a space monster, it would be her.”

That was fair. *Spensa* was a little mythic in the things she pulled off. If I didn't know her well, I would have thought she was something better than human.

“If so,” Jorgen said, “we need her back. The Superiority doesn't seem to know where she went. They do seem to know she's not here. They're reaching out to all their people, telling them they need to mobilize and destroy us while our cytonic is gone.”

“They don't know we have you,” I said.

A shadow passed over Jorgen's face. “And I'm no good to us unless I figure out how to use my powers. Or we learn how to use *these*.”

“Is that what your mother wants?” I asked. “To oversee the development of the hyperdrives?”

“She wants to oversee *everything*,” Jorgen said. “Or the Assembly does. I think they decided since my mom was in the DDF for so long, she'd be a good liaison as they begin negotiations.”

“And you don't agree?”

“I think it makes sense,” Jorgen said. “But she's...less happy I admitted to Cobb that I have the defect. It's supposed to be a family secret.”

I understood why they'd kept the secret this long. After all, the Superiority had taken advantage of *Spensa's* father, using his powers to turn him against his allies. That...couldn't happen to Jorgen...could it? “But you can't keep it a secret now, can you? You're basically our only hope.”

“Spensa was a better hope,” Jorgen said. “I think my mom’s worried about what’s going to happen to me if I start experimenting with my powers.”

That also made sense. I wondered if Jorgen’s parents were behind the move to keep the engineers focused on defense and away from hyperdrives, which would put Jorgen in more danger.

“Spensa will find her way home,” I said. “She did it before, and she’ll do it again.”

Jorgen gave me a suspicious look, like he wondered why I was trying to comfort him about Spensa. If Rig hadn’t been sitting right there, I might have told him I knew how he felt about her. Rig was watching us curiously from his desk—I think this was the longest he’d ever bothered to look at me at one time.

“Of course she’ll be fine,” Jorgen said. “And Cobb and the National Assembly will figure out what to do. We just need to learn how to turn these slugs into hyperdrives.”

“No pressure,” I said. We both looked down at the slugs, which had finished their mushrooms and were slithering around the large crate, looking for more. I tossed a few more in the box, and they set about devouring them while I fed the other crate of slugs as well.

Jorgen sighed and turned to Rig. “What do we know so far?”

“Not a lot,” Rig said. “I’ve gathered the data FM generated with the trackers. The slugs don’t tend to go far, the farthest distance being about two hundred meters, but most went less than twenty.”

“But we think they’re hyperjumping,” Jorgen said.

“I don’t know how else to explain it,” I said. “Unless they suddenly move *really* fast when we aren’t looking. And probably invisibly. And can open crates and close them again.”

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “So if they already hyperjump, we probably aren’t going to need to cut them up. We just need to figure out how to get them to do it over bigger distances and to go where we want them to.”

“And to take you with them,” Rig said.

“Right.”

“How would you get it to go where you want?” I asked. “It’s not like you can give it directions.” The slugs were smart enough to mimic basic words and get themselves out of small spaces, but I wouldn’t exactly want to give one a map and then sit back and trust it to send me across the universe.

“When Spensa left for Starsight, the alien girl Alanik put some coordinates into her mind,” Jorgen said. “She did it cytonically, I guess. The way that Spensa’s grandmother said she could hear Spensa talking to her all the way from Starsight. I don’t know how to do that—but if we could give them to the slugs...”

“Too bad we can’t ask the alien girl,” Rig said, and Jorgen nodded.

Alanik had been shot down by the gun platforms upon arrival, and was still in the medical bay, unconscious. I think the medtechs were hoping she would heal on her own, since they didn’t know enough about her anatomy to do much besides keep her medically sedated and wait.

The slugs finished their second round of mushrooms and snuffled around for more. We would clearly have to send a team to harvest more. Hopefully there were a lot of these to be had somewhere in the caverns. The slugs seemed to have been surviving down there okay.

I grabbed a few more mushrooms out of the crate and saw the layer of mushroom below it...moving. When I lifted it up, I found two more yellow and blue slugs, looking fat and happy and lying on an extra-large half-eaten cap.

“Well, aren’t you clever,” I said. If the slugs were going off looking for food, at least some of them had found it. I pulled out the two slugs—one of which had an especially long blue comb down its back, which flopped over to one side as it snoozed—and placed them back in a slug crate.

“So,” Rig said. “I’ve constructed a box out of the same metal used in the one M-Bot indicated was his hyperdrive.”

Jorgen looked the thing over intently. “What does it do?”

“Nothing,” Rig said. “It’s just a box.”

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “So what was its purpose in M-Bot’s design?”

“My guess,” Rig said, “is that it’s supposed to contain the slug so it doesn’t zip all over the ship, or teleport outside the hull and die in space.

Even if they can survive without atmosphere, a pilot could get stranded if his slug wandered away from him mid-flight.”

Rig was all chatty again, now that *Jorgen* was here. Had I done something to offend him? I had no idea what that could be.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “So the slugs can’t hyperjump out of the box.”

“That’s the theory,” Rig said. “We’ll have to put some in it to make sure. I also think the box may cause the slug to take the ship with it when it hyperjumps, but I’m not sure how.”

“So we don’t know how to make it move,” Jorgen said, “but if it decided to, it might teleport the whole box?”

“Possibly,” Rig said. “We’ll have to try it and find out.”

“Great,” Jorgen said. “FM, grab a couple slugs and put them into Rig’s box.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. It came out more sarcastic than I intended. I *had* volunteered to be the slug handler, after all. Jorgen gave me a sharp look, but I ignored him and lifted two more blue and yellow slugs out of the crate. These two were less skittish than some of the others, and let me stroke them for a few moments before I placed them into Rig’s box and fastened the dark metal lid.

Both Rig and Jorgen stared at it.

“I think we’ll notice if the box hyperjumps away,” I said. Which it might have been more likely to do if I hadn’t *just* fed them. I decided not to bring that up.

“Good point,” Jorgen said.

Rig looked nervously at me, and then at Jorgen. “Maybe you should try to make one of them move on purpose. Even if you don’t know any coordinates, could you try to figure out how to communicate with it?”

“You want me to talk to a slug.” Jorgen stared down at the slugs in the crate.

“I talk to them,” I said. “You don’t have to make it sound like it’s crazy. It might be easier with one of the ones you can see. That way you can get to know it.”

Jorgen gave me a look that said he thought maybe I *was* crazy, but he still leaned over the crate, considering the slugs. The red and black slugs had finished with the mushrooms the fastest, and were now lounging about trilling softly. The way they sang almost sounded like music, though it was lower and deeper than the trills of the yellow and blue ones. The purple ones' tones were somewhere in between. Their voices all together were calming, in an eerie sort of way.

"Anyone have a suggestion as to how I should do this?" Jorgen asked.

"You could start by befriending one," I said. "Maybe give it a name?"

"They aren't my *friends*," Jorgen said. "We're not naming the test subjects."

"I already did," I told him, pointing to one of the slugs. "This one is Gill. And I'm thinking those two"—I pointed to the extra-fat slugs I'd found in the mushroom crate—"should be Happy and Chubs."

Rig smiled, and both his cheeks dimpled adorably. He was really cute when he wasn't snubbing me.

Focus, FM. "Your turn," I told Jorgen. "You name one."

"Really?" Jorgen said. "This is supposed to help me figure out how to talk to the slugs *with my mind*?"

I put a hand on my hip. I understood that he liked to study everything out before he did it, but he was being a baby. "Do you have any better ideas?"

He groaned, but reached in and picked up one of the purple and orange ones. It gave a shrill squeak.

"You're squeezing it too tight," I said.

"I don't think I'm doing any irreparable harm to it."

"No. But if you were a little bit more gentle with them, they might like you better."

"I don't care if they like me!" Jorgen said. "I only want to figure out how to use them so we have the tools we need to fight against the Superiority."

I narrowed my eyes at him. Usually I thought Jorgen was a really good commander. A little too stiff, a little too interested in running things by the book, but he cared about the pilots in his flight, and he went out of his way

to make sure we were all okay even when it made him personally uncomfortable to do so.

But Spensa had nicknamed him Jerkface on our first day as cadets, and at this moment I felt the callsign was well deserved.

“It’s okay,” I said to the slug in his hand, mostly to bother him. “That’s how they treat the rest of us here too.”

“All right!” Rig said. “So, Jorgen, do you feel anything? Like, that vibration you were talking about earlier?”

“I don’t know,” Jorgen said. “I mean, I can hear the mass of them... humming, I guess. Singing in my mind.”

“Can you hum back to it?” I asked.

Jorgen glared at me, even though it was a perfectly reasonable question.

I held up my hands. “We’re supposed to be experimenting with them, aren’t we? You could at least try.”

“Fine, but I’m not naming it.”

“Fine!” the slug trilled at Jorgen.

“I think maybe you just did,” I said. “Fine.”

“Fine!” the slug enthusiastically agreed.

“Okay, *Fine*,” Jorgen said. “Be quiet now. I’m going to hum to it.”

Jorgen squinted at Fine, then closed his eyes. He kept them closed for a moment and then he started to hum, a noise I would have described as off-key if it wasn’t so completely tuneless.

Kimmalyne appeared in the doorway. “Is he constipated?” she asked. Probably Nedd and Arturo had mentioned to her what we were doing with the slugs, so she’d stopped by to check it out.

Jorgen’s eyes popped open and he dropped Fine into the crate—a good two feet down. The slug gave a low, grumpy trill. I reached in and scratched its back in apology on Jorgen’s behalf, though Jorgen didn’t seem the least bit apologetic.

“No,” I told Kimmalyne. “He’s trying to commune with the slugs. Cytonically.”

“Close the door!” Jorgen said. “We don’t have to announce that to everyone.”

“Did the humming seem to do anything?” Rig asked.

“It made me feel stupid,” Jorgen said.

“It’s like the Saint says,” Kimmalyln added, “ ‘I feel, therefore I am.’ ”

Jorgen squinted at her, but Kimmalyln just smiled at him innocently.

Jorgen sighed and looked over at the hyperdrive box. “What about those slugs? Are they still in there?”

I opened the lid and peered inside. “Yes. Both of them. And they appear to be asleep.” One of them made a soft wheezing sound with its comb that I thought might be a snore.

Jorgen looked down at the crate. “Maybe this would be easier if there were fewer of them. I can’t focus on this many at once. FM, pull out three of them, one of each color.”

At least I was more gentle with them than he was. Rig brought me a cardboard box and I gingerly picked up purple Fine, yellow Gill, and one of the red and black slugs who was as yet unnamed.

“I’m going to hum at them,” Jorgen said. “And you all are going to keep your comments to yourself. That is an order.”

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyln said.

I bit my lips to keep from snickering. Jorgen’s hum sounded like a wounded animal.

Finally Jorgen sighed. “This isn’t working. Maybe I should have some time alone with them.”

“I still think you should try treating them nicer,” I told him. “Bond with them.”

Jorgen rolled his eyes. “I don’t see how that’s going to help.”

“Spensa has a bond with her slug, right? Maybe that’s how she found out it was a hyperdrive.”

“We don’t have any idea how Spensa found out Doomslug was a hyperdrive.”

“I’m just trying to help,” I said. “You’re the one who appointed me slug welfare specialist.”

Jorgen stared at me. “What?”

I thought what I'd said was obvious. "Slug welfare specialist. I'm here to take care of the slugs."

"FM," Jorgen said, "you don't know any more about these slugs than we do."

"I do so," I said. "I was friends with Spensa's slug."

"You were..."

"*Friends*," I repeated. "With Doomslug. You remember her?"

"Of course I remember her," Jorgen said. "That thing was supposed to stay in Spensa's bunk, but it would show up all over the platform. I found it in my cockpit once, and I couldn't get it to leave! Every time I tried to catch it, the thing kept shrieking 'Jerkface' at me. I swear Spensa trained it to do that on purpose."

"See?" I said. "Clearly you have no experience handling these animals. But Doomslug and I had a *relationship*. She used to sit on my arm and purr while I fed her caviar."

Jorgen looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "The slugs *purr*?"

"I mean, they *trill*, but it was a purr-like trill—"

"And you fed her *caviar*? Where did you even *get* caviar?"

"My parents send it to me, okay?" I said. "The bottom line is that without Spensa, I'm the next best person to help you handle the slugs. And I think if you make them comfortable—"

"We're not trying to make them comfortable. We're trying to develop *hyperdrives*. Spensa said these things—"

"They are animals, not things."

"—these *animals* are the key to getting us off Detritus. And in case you didn't notice, we need to develop them as quickly as possible, because we were just visited by a *delver*, and it might return at any time to destroy us."

"I don't think it's coming back," Rig said.

We both looked over at him.

"You said Spensa drove it off, right?" he said. "She'll have figured out a way to keep it away from us."

Yeah, okay. He definitely had a crush on Spensa. Which was fine. It wasn't like I was trying to date the boy—that wasn't a pressing concern,

what with the Krell on our doorstep—but a conversation would have been nice.

Jorgen sighed. “Maybe. But even Spensa can’t keep the Superiority away from us forever. These slugs are our most important lead.”

“Exactly,” I said. “So we need to make sure we’re treating them with the respect they deserve.”

“I simply think,” Jorgen said, “that we shouldn’t let your affection for the slugs get in the way of our progress.”

“I wasn’t aware you were making progress,” I said.

“Maybe we *would* be if we were focusing on the slugs instead of having this conversation,” Jorgen said. “We selected a box of three slugs—”

“Two slugs,” Rig said.

Jorgen blinked at him.

“Technically,” Rig clarified, “there are only two slugs in this box.”

Jorgen looked into the box, where there were in fact only two taynix—Fine and the red and black one.

“Clearly the slug welfare specialist isn’t doing her job,” Jorgen said. “You were supposed to get them to *stay* in the *box*.”

“Fine,” I said.

“No,” Rig said. “Fine is still here; it’s the other one.”

Kimmalyln laughed. Maybe Rig did have a sense of humor after all. But when I grinned at him, his cheeks grew pink, like he’d messed up somehow by joking with me.

Had someone *told* him not to talk to me?

I looked around, but Gill appeared to have hyperjumped out of sight. “All right, I’ll go find him, but—”

“Hey!” Jorgen said. I looked down to find that the red and black slug had eased its way out of the box and was now carefully sampling Jorgen’s bootlace. He reached down to pick it up, squeezing it too tightly again.

“Jorgen, you need to be more—”

“FM,” he said, raising his voice, “I’ve *got it*—”

“*Got it*,” the slug trilled.

Jorgen looked at the slug with a long-suffering expression.

And then the slug exploded.

The slug itself stayed intact and unharmed, but something *pushed* out of it, like it sent the air itself spinning in all directions.

Jorgen dropped the slug and jumped back as ribbons of red opened up on his forearms and cheeks and across his nose. Rig startled, and even Kimmalyyn looked terrified. The cuts weren't particularly *deep*, but there were many of them, like they'd been opened by the soft touch of a dozen razor blades.

We all stared at Jorgen. The slug crawled placidly across the floor.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I think you should name that one *Boomslug*," Kimmalyyn said.

"I think you need to go to the infirmary," Rig added.

Jorgen pressed his fingertips to his nose, smearing blood in a streak across his face. "FM, do you think you can get the slug back into the crate?"

"Sure," I said. I bent down and let Boomslug inspect my hand before gingerly lifting it into the crate with the others.

"Good," Jorgen said. "Meeting adjourned." And then he strode out of the room with little rivulets of blood still running down his skin.

Five

After I put Fine back in the crate and replaced the lid, I followed Jorgen to the infirmary. I had no idea what that slug had done to him—Doomslug had never done anything similar that I was aware of—but Jorgen was stressed out enough *before* being cut to ribbons. This couldn't help.

When I arrived in the doorway, the medtechs were applying tiny bandages to his cuts and questioning him about what happened.

"It's classified," Jorgen told them.

I supposed that was true—and it meant he didn't have to explain he'd been cut because he'd startled a slug. I looked through the glass into the room across the way where the alien girl lay asleep on a stretcher. She was humanoid, though her skin was a pale violet color and her hair was an unnatural white, matching the color of the growths that protruded from her cheeks. She looked so strange, with high cheekbones and a wide forehead that were almost human, but also definitely *not*. The effect was disturbing, even in her sleep.

"You can tell Command he'll be fine," one of the med techs said to me as they left the room. It made sense they thought I was waiting to report back, but Command wasn't aware there was a problem yet.

With Jorgen's face all bandaged, that wasn't going to last long, and I worried about what it meant for the slugs.

I turned to look into the room. Jorgen was still sitting on the cot alone. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," Jorgen said, looking at his reflection in the glass window. "Fantastic." One corner of his mouth turned up. "Though clearly I should have listened to you about not squeezing the slugs."

"I didn't expect it to hurt you though," I said. Doomslug had hung around Spensa enough to be startled a time or two, and she'd never

exploded. Then again, only the yellow and blue slugs seemed to hyperjump, so maybe only the red and black ones...exploded?

"I don't know if that's all there was to it," Jorgen said. "I was still trying to focus on that vibration, you know? The one I can definitely *not* approximate by humming."

"That much is clear."

Jorgen's smile grew more genuine, though it pulled a bit at a cut on his lip and he winced. "But I feel it in my mind. It's hard to pinpoint one of them at a time because the vibration is so soft, but I was trying to get it to... talk to me, I guess. Like you were saying."

That sounded incredibly difficult. No wonder he was frustrated. "So you think when you talked to it, you convinced it to explode?"

"Sometimes I have that effect on people. Just ask Spensa."

I laughed, and Jorgen joined me. Despite what people thought of him, Jorgen did have a sense of humor. He was simply too uptight to let it out most of the time.

"I do think it would help if you built a relationship with them," I said. "They're not machine parts. You can't expect to plug them in and make them work. They're living creatures."

"So says the slug welfare specialist."

"That's right. And speaking of their welfare..." I sighed. "Do you think this will put them at risk? If people think they're dangerous..."

Jorgen shook his head. "It won't matter. If the taynix are really the secret to intergalactic travel, then we have to continue to experiment with them, no matter how dangerous they are. Though I may wear gloves next time. And a face mask."

"Maybe Cobb could find you some full-body armor."

"That might be nice."

"It's possible only the yellow ones are hyperdrives," I said. "The different colors might indicate different powers. Doomslug never exploded."

Jorgen nodded. "That's a plausible theory. We have enough of the yellow kind to work with those first. We can worry about the other kinds later." He

looked up at me, fixing his dark eyes on me like he saw right through me. “Why are you so worried about the tynix anyway?”

I shrugged. “I’m not.”

“You appointed yourself slug welfare specialist, but you’re going to tell me you don’t care?”

“You appointed me slug welfare specialist.”

“FM, I told you to keep them in a crate. That makes you a slug *location* specialist. You made up the welfare part all on your own.”

I crossed my arms and leaned against the door frame. “I just think we shouldn’t treat them like they’re machines. If they can get us off this planet before the Superiority succeeds in destroying us, we have to do everything in our power to make that happen. But they’re living creatures. We don’t have to be monsters while we do it, do we?”

“Of course we don’t.” Jorgen winced. “And if I’d listened to you, maybe I wouldn’t have gotten my face sliced up. Tell me the truth. How bad is it?”

“The medical people said you’d be fine.”

“Right, but I look ridiculous.”

He had little pieces of plastic tape holding his face together, so it was kind of true. “Hey, girls like scars, right?”

Jorgen closed his eyes.

Right. There was only one girl whose opinion he cared about, and she wasn’t here to appreciate them.

Though, now that I thought about it... “I mean, really, if there was ever a girl who was going to appreciate a scar, it’s Spensa, am I right?”

Jorgen gave me one satisfying look of shock and horror that I’d called him out before he recovered and turned the conversation back on me. “I think we were discussing your sudden obsession with animal rights.”

“I think we were discussing your face, but if you want to talk about animal rights—”

Jorgen’s eyes caught on something behind me, and I turned to find one of Cobb’s aides standing in the hallway. “Admiral Cobb needs you in the command center,” she said to Jorgen. “Should I tell him you’re indisposed?”

Jorgen groaned. “No, tell him I’m coming. He’s going to hear about this eventually.”

“What do you think it’s about?” I asked. “It’s too early for your report.”

“Come with me and find out,” Jorgen said. “You can help me explain what happened to my face. Since you’re the slug welfare specialist and all.”

I still needed to hunt down Gill plus any others that had liberated themselves in the meantime. But I wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity to find out what Cobb’s plans were. I followed Jorgen down to Cobb’s command center, which was a large room with a wide table and a holoprojector at the front.

Cobb was seated at the table with two of his aides on either side of him. Across the table from him was a woman with dark skin and black hair that matched Jorgen’s, though she wore hers in twists along her scalp.

Jeshua Weight, Jorgen’s mother, was one of the most decorated pilots ever to retire from the DDF. Her political power had only increased when her husband joined the National Assembly. She had two other people with her—I guessed from their expensive clothing they were either minor politicians or other liaisons sent to speak on the National Assembly’s behalf.

Rig stood with one of the other engineers at the head of the table, fidgeting nervously. “We think we’re close to getting the planetary defense systems working,” Rig said. “The encryption is tough to crack, but we’ve broken some of the code, and we’re trying to make sense of what we’re looking at. It’s much more complicated than any of the programming we use in the caverns, and we’re not exactly sure what a lot of it does.”

Rig was apparently also capable of speaking in Cobb’s presence, though I could tell he was nervous. People tended to assume that anyone who passed the pilot’s test would be comfortable with public attention—or at least accustomed to it—but I didn’t think that was true in Rig’s case. At least he wasn’t trying to pretend *they* didn’t exist, even if he looked like he wished *he* didn’t.

“Presumably the code is what causes the gun platforms to shoot ships from the sky, yes?” Jeshua said in an even voice. “So if you can crack it, we

would be able to use those guns in our favor. It would help us a lot to be able to use those turrets the way we use the anti-aircraft guns around Alta.”

“That’s the hope,” Rig said. “We’re also working on reviving an old shielding system that might help us to protect the planet from future attacks. A lot of it is still a mystery to us, so we can’t promise anything.”

Jeshua didn’t look pleased about that, though Rig and the other engineers were clearly doing all they could.

“Thank you for your report,” Cobb said. He looked over at Jorgen and me standing by the door. “Son, what in the North Star’s Light happened to you?”

Jorgen winced. “We had a little incident with one of the taynix. Apparently they need to be handled carefully.”

Jeshua looked alarmed. “You didn’t tell me these creatures were dangerous,” she said to Cobb.

“They’re hyperdrives,” Cobb said. “I’d imagine they’re very dangerous.”

This did not seem to make Jeshua feel any better. “Perhaps someone more *qualified* should be conducting these experiments.” She eyed Jorgen with a look of disapproval. Jorgen somehow managed to stand at attention and appear like he was shrinking into himself at the same time. Which made sense—his mother had basically announced that he wasn’t capable of doing his job.

It wasn’t exactly my place to speak in this meeting, but Jorgen had asked me to help explain. “The slug reacted poorly when Jorgen tried to communicate with it cytonically,” I said. “But we’re working on some theories to keep it from happening again.”

Jeshua narrowed her eyes at me. “Who are you?”

“She’s one of the pilots in Jorgen’s flight,” Cobb said. “She’s helping Jorgen and Rig with the slug experiments.”

“FM has some experience working with the taynix,” Jorgen said. “She’s helping us figure out how best to handle them.”

Jeshua looked over Jorgen’s patched-up face and made a tsking sound. “She’s obviously not doing a very good job.”

I bristled, but kept my mouth shut.

“It’s not her fault,” Rig cut in. “It’s the nature of the scientific process. We have to try things out, or we won’t get results.”

Huh. Apparently Rig didn’t hate me, if he was willing to defend me to the brass. He was clearly more comfortable talking about things he understood, and none of us understood the taynix and the hyperdrives very well. Maybe if I found a minute to ask him about his other work, he’d stop treating me like a pariah.

“We don’t have a report for you yet,” Jorgen added. “We’re still working on it.”

“That’s fine,” Cobb said. “That isn’t why I called for you. There’s something I need you to hear.”

Cobb nodded to one of his aides, who pushed some buttons on the holographic projector. Instead of a hologram though, an audio recording began.

“Admiral Cobb,” a voice said. It was strangely accented and oddly even, like it might not be entirely real. “This is Minister Cuna. I’m sorry our earlier communication was interrupted. I was betrayed by the same people who sent the delver to your planet and am no longer able to hyperjump. I have information from your agent, Spensa. She asked me to come to your planet to offer aid, but I have been attacked by our mutual enemies and am unable to reach you as planned. Instead, I must ask for your help. My people and I are marooned on the abandoned outpost at Sunreach, and the radicals in control of the Superiority government are hunting for me. I fear we have very little time. If you can reach us, I offer you all the help I can give in return. We are located at—”

The voice read a few coordinates, but then the recording cut off.

“Is that it?” Jorgen asked.

Cobb nodded. “Even if we had the full location, I don’t know how to reach them without a functional hyperdrive. We were wondering if you felt anything from it. Any of those vibrations you keep talking about?”

Jeshua’s face darkened when Cobb asked Jorgen about his cytonic abilities, but she didn’t interrupt him.

“No,” Jorgen said. “Should I?”

“My previous communications from Minister Cuna came via radio,” Cobb said, “but this one came through the platform’s old communications systems. They’re probably using some kind of faster-than-light communication device. If it uses cytonic technology, we thought there might be some component only a cytonic could hear.”

Jorgen shook his head. “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t feel anything.”

“How did we receive it?” I asked. “Do we have an FTL communicator?”

I probably didn’t have the authority to ask that question, but Rig answered it anyway. “Not that we know of,” Rig said. “But there are a lot of things the platform systems are capable of that we haven’t been able to figure out yet. The message was routed through one of the receptors in the communications system.”

“So we received it,” Cobb said, “but we don’t exactly know how. Engineering is trying to figure out if we have the ability to respond.”

Interesting. If we’d been able to get up here and investigate the platforms surrounding the planet years ago, we might have been better able to figure out how to defend ourselves.

Which was probably one of the reasons the Superiority had been so intent on keeping us in the caverns below the planet’s surface.

“What are we going to do if we can answer?” Jorgen asked.

“We don’t know for certain what this person’s intentions are,” Cobb said. “It might be a trap. Alternatively, it might be our only lead on an ally, and stars know we could use a few of those right now.”

“If this person is indeed a minister,” Jeshua said, “perhaps we could use their connections to reach people higher up in the Superiority government, to find a way to reach an agreement.”

An agreement?

Jorgen’s shock echoed my own. “You’re going to try to *talk* to the Superiority?”

Jeshua nodded. “We’ve been fighting this war for too long. Continuing the way we are will only result in our extinction. Now that we know more about the forces we’re facing, the National Assembly believes we should

start considering the political implications of the situation, along with the military ones.”

In principle I agreed, but I hadn’t seen any evidence that the Superiority wanted to negotiate with us. Especially if they’d been the reason for the delver’s appearance.

Cobb cleared his throat. He had to hate this, but he was too good at his job to betray that on his face. “We’ll try to respond, but getting those coordinates does us no good if we can’t *get* there, and we can’t do that without a hyperdrive.” Cobb focused on Jorgen. “Spensa felt coordinates in her mind, and then she was able to travel to them. I was hoping that recording might do something similar for you, but if not, we’re going to have to go through with our other plan.”

“Other plan, sir?” Jorgen said.

Jeshua nodded. They’d obviously already discussed this. “Yes,” she said. “The alien who crashed here is the only one among us who might be able to produce coordinates that would allow us to reach this person. We’re going to need to wake her up.”

Six

The next morning, I was paged to the medical bay almost immediately upon waking. I found Jorgen standing outside, looking into Alanik's room through the glass. The bandages on his face were new and clean, but still numerous. "They say her wounds have mostly healed," he said. "They've been keeping her sedated, but now they're bringing her around. Cobb suggested that I talk to her since we're both cytonics. I could use your help. You're...better with people than I am."

"Of course," I said. That was quite the admission for Jorgen, who never liked to appear less than perfect. But this was a delicate situation—Alanik had been unconscious for weeks now, and we didn't know much about her. "Will we be able to speak to her?"

Jorgen held up a pin. "Rig says this is a translator. Spensa took the one Alanik was wearing when she crashed, but the engineers found more in her ship. It should make it so we can understand each other."

That would make things a lot easier. "Any particular tactic you think we should use to talk to her?"

"No idea. Do you have a suggestion?"

"I think maybe we should try to convey that we're friends first. Help her feel like we're all on the same side." I didn't know much about what had gone on between Alanik and Spensa. "We are, right?"

"I hope so," Jorgen said. "That sounds like a good tactic. Thanks."

One of the doctors stepped out of the medical bay and nodded to Jorgen. "She's waking. She may be disoriented at first, so don't be surprised if she has a hard time talking."

Jorgen gave the doctor a crisp nod and then we walked into Alanik's room, stopping at her bedside.

The yellow overhead lights cast eerie shadows over Alanik's strange features. With her cheeks oddly pronounced, her skin that strange shade of

violet with white growths protruding from her skin like crystals, she was beautiful in an unnerving sort of way. She stirred, murmuring something softly, and then opened her eyes.

They looked human, except for their violet color. I'd never seen a human with eyes quite that pale and arresting. She looked up at us in confusion.

Jorgen glanced at me. He wanted me to take point on this.

"Alanik," I said. "My name is FM. I'm glad you're awake."

Jorgen held the pin awkwardly between us, and it translated the words into a lilting language I'd never heard. Maybe I should have used my real name, but I had become accustomed to everyone using my callsign. Besides, to an alien, "FM" probably wouldn't seem any more strange than "Freyja."

Alanik squinted at me, still confused. If she was alarmed by the many bandages on Jorgen's face, she didn't show it. Probably a lot of things here looked strange to her, so what was one more? "Human," she said. "Where is...the other one?"

"Spensa," I said. "She left. You gave her coordinates, and she went to take your place."

Alanik closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, she looked more focused. More alert. "Where am I?"

"In a medical facility," I told her. "On a platform above a planet called Detritus. You were shot down by autonomous platforms. That wasn't my people. We can't control them. The guns shoot at us too."

Alanik nodded. "Humans," she said again. "How have you survived?"

"With difficulty," I said. "We've been defending this planet against the Superiority for years."

"We were allies once," Alanik said. "My people were punished for working with you. The Superiority...they say they want peace, but in truth they oppress us. Their peace is only control."

"Yes," I said. "And they want my people dead. We need your help."

Alanik's eyes narrowed slightly. "I need to contact my people," she said. "The other one...Spensa...may have already arrived at Starsight. They are expecting me to check in, and I will need to tell them what's happened."

Jorgen and I exchanged a glance. Alanik thought it was still the same day as she'd arrived. "About that," I said. "You were injured in the crash, and our doctors have been trying to help you, but they didn't know much about your physiology. They've been keeping you in a coma, giving you a chance to heal."

Alanik looked at me in horror. "How long?"

How long? I looked to Jorgen. "About nineteen days," he said.

"That long?" Alanik struggled to sit, though the tubes and wires attaching her to the medical monitor got in her way. She grabbed at them with her slender hands, and I noticed her nails were made of the same white substance that protruded from her cheeks. They were sharp and pointed, almost like talons.

"We need your help," Jorgen said again. "We're all trapped here."

Alanik stared at him. "You aren't trapped," she said. "You are cytonic, same as Spensa. Can you—"

Jorgen shook his head. "I can't do anything," he said. "I've only just learned about my powers, and I don't know how to use them. I need you to teach me, so we can get my people off this planet. I need your help."

He looked at me, but I didn't know what to say beyond that. He'd made a pretty good case. "Please," I added. "You said we were allies, right? Well, we need allies now, and it sounds like your people do too. We have a message from someone in the Superiority, a faction that wants to help us. But we don't know how to reach them—"

"Don't trust them!" Alanik said. She pulled at the tubes on her chest, tugging them free. Thankfully they seemed to only be sensors, though she had a needle in her arm hooked up to an IV. As she shifted it, a spot of dark blood formed on the bandage that held it in place. "You can't trust them. They say they want to help, but they don't. They only want control. You can't—"

She broke off as a shadow darkened the window to the hallway. I turned and saw Cobb standing there with Jorgen's mother. They were speaking quietly enough that we couldn't hear them through the glass, but Jeshua Weight did not look happy.

“Okay,” I said, trying to hold Alanik’s attention. I reached down and took her hand, hoping this wasn’t some sort of cultural taboo to her people, but she didn’t pull away. “We can’t trust them. This is why we need your help. You know more than we do, so we need you to guide us. We don’t know how to use the powers, but we do have ships, and resources. We can help you in return.”

“FM,” Jorgen said. He gave me a warning look, and I knew I’d gone too far. We couldn’t promise her resources. That would be up to Command and the National Assembly. I might have just lied to her. It could be a tactically sound decision to make promises to Alanik’s people, but I didn’t have the authority to do that.

Jeshua knocked on the glass and gestured to the door, which I’d closed behind me. Jorgen sighed, set the pin down on the edge of Alanik’s bed sheet, and walked to the door, stepping out into the hall to talk to his mother.

Alanik was still holding my hand. Her lavender skin looked so strange against mine, but the anatomy of her hand was human. She was a person, same as me. Alien, but familiar. She was far from home, alone and frightened. I could imagine what that would feel like.

“What were you going to do when you reached Starsight?” I asked her.

Alanik hesitated. “I am a spy for my people,” she said. “We need their hyperdrive technology. Without it, they isolate us on our planet. They deny us passage on their ships. They control our imports, our economy, our ability to progress. We need to know their secrets.”

“So the hyperdrives,” I said. “You don’t know how they work.”

“No,” Alanik said. “That was what I was going to learn. But if it has been weeks, the opportunity may have passed.”

It had—Spensa had taken her place, pretended to be Alanik. Sharing the information Spensa had discovered—the very secrets Alanik had intended to steal—might go a long way toward building goodwill between us.

But I definitely didn’t have clearance to do that. I glanced out the window and found Jorgen talking to Cobb and his mother. From the look of it, Jeshua was doing most of the talking.

“Are you also a prisoner here?” Alanik asked.

I looked down at her. “You’re not a prisoner,” I said. “We were trying to help you.”

Alanik shook her head. “All of you. You are prisoners on this planet, dependent on the Superiority.”

Oh, that. “More than your people, I think,” I said. “They don’t trade with us. They’ve attacked us for years, making us fight them to survive. We live underground, using only the resources of this planet and the means we had with us when our ships crashed here—that was generations ago.”

“So you are desperate,” Alanik said. “You will do anything to escape.”

It was true, but I didn’t like the way she said it. “We want to work together,” I said.

“You want to speak with the Superiority,” she said. “To respond to their message.”

“We have a message from someone,” I said. “If you would listen to it, maybe you could help us figure out if that person is—”

“You will make a deal with them,” Alanik said. “You will do it because their false peace is better than your war.”

That was startlingly similar to what Jeshua Weight had said the National Assembly wanted to do.

“Have other planets tried that?” I asked.

“Yes,” Alanik said. “My people were punished because we fought alongside yours. Some on my planet think it is better to go along with the Superiority. To accept their peace. But their peace is a tool to maintain their power.”

“We don’t want that kind of peace,” I said. The decision wasn’t up to me, so I was surprised by the strength of my response. “They’ve murdered my friends, our people. They tried to wipe out our entire planet, and I’m still not sure why we survived. I don’t want to work with them, Alanik, and I don’t think others will either. We aren’t a peaceful people. We will fight.”

That should have been the opposite of what I wanted. It was the opposite of what my Disputer friends stood for.

Maybe my time in the DDF had changed me the way they all said it would. Several of them had tried to talk me out of taking the pilot's test. They said the DDF would make me see things their way, compromise my ideals. I thought becoming a pilot would give me more authority to speak up for those ideals, so I did it anyway.

And here I was, arguing for war instead of peace.

Alanik had it right though. Not all peace was of equal value. I wasn't going to trade one cage for another. I hoped that in the end, the warlike nature of the Defiant League would protect us from that kind of prison, even if it certainly also had its downsides.

Alanik's eyes met mine, staring at me intently. And I thought for a moment that she believed me.

The door opened, and Jorgen motioned to me. "FM," he said, "Command wants to talk to her."

Alanik looked at me, as if gauging my reaction, so I tried not to look alarmed. I squeezed her hand and then stepped away, but I didn't leave the room. I wasn't going to leave unless Cobb ordered me to.

He and Jeshua strode into the room, and Jeshua stared at Alanik with obvious disdain. I glanced at Jorgen, who hovered by the door, and he shrugged. He couldn't do anything about this, and neither could I.

"It's Alanik, is that right?" Cobb asked.

Alanik narrowed her eyes at him. "Who are you, and why have you kept me here?"

"We were trying to help you, Alanik," I said. "We were just—"

"We need to know who you are," Jeshua said. "And where you come from."

Alanik sat up straighter. She'd removed all the sensors except the needle in her arm, but she appeared to be growing stronger and more alert the longer she was awake. Hopefully she'd healed enough that we weren't putting her in danger by overtaxing her. "I am Alanik of the UrDail," she said. "And you are?"

"I am Admiral Cobb," Cobb said. "And this is—"

“It does not matter who we are,” Jeshua said. “We need you to tell us what you know about hyperdrives and the Superiority’s faster-than-light communication.”

I closed my eyes. I was pretty sure from my conversation with Alanik that we knew more about hyperdrives than she did. I looked over at Jorgen. We should have coordinated before this conversation, made a plan.

He shook his head. We couldn’t stop this from happening.

“I am your prisoner, then,” Alanik said. “You intend to use me.”

“We only want to exchange information,” Cobb said. “We have a mutual enemy.”

“This isn’t an exchange,” Jeshua said, cutting him off. “Tell us what you know, and we’ll let you go.”

Alanik straightened up further. “You’ll let me go,” she repeated. “You think you can hold me here?”

“We have your ship,” she said. “We will negotiate for your release if you will cooperate with us.”

Did Alanik need her ship to transport herself to her planet? The slugs clearly didn’t need ships to hyperjump.

“Mom,” Jorgen said. “I think—”

“You know nothing,” Alanik said.

Jeshua straightened to her full height—which wasn’t especially tall—and looked down her nose at Alanik. “You’re not doing yourself any favors here.”

“Mom—” Jorgen said. Alanik looked over at him and Jorgen cried out, squeezing his eyes shut and putting a hand to his forehead between the bandages. I took a step toward her—I didn’t know what she was doing to him, but she was obviously an accomplished cytonic. We barely knew what they were capable of.

“What are you doing to my son?” Jeshua said, grabbing Jorgen by the arm.

Jorgen collided with the doorframe, opening his eyes wide.

And then Alanik disappeared. One moment she was there and the next she was gone, leaving the bandage and the IV needle to fall against the

sheets, the dark stain of her blood spreading onto the white fabric.

“Seriously?” I said. “Why did you do that?”

“FM,” Cobb said. His tone held a warning—I obviously wasn’t supposed to speak to Jeshua Weight that way—but at the moment I didn’t care.

“I was making progress with her,” I said. “She might have helped us.”

Jeshua was still focused on Jorgen. “What did she do to you?”

“She was talking to me, that’s all,” Jorgen said. “Speaking in my mind.”

“What did she say?”

We all stared at him, and Jorgen hesitated. “Not much,” he said. “Just that she didn’t trust us.”

Cobb raised an eyebrow at him. Jorgen wasn’t a particularly good liar, but if he decided to withhold information from his superiors, he must have a scudding good reason for it.

“What are we going to do now?” I asked Cobb. “She was our only chance at communicating with Cuna, wasn’t she?”

“What did she say when you were talking to her?” Cobb asked me.

“She said we shouldn’t trust anyone from the Superiority. She said they would lie to us, that we would trade away our freedom to them if we tried to make peace with them.”

“We need a full report of everything she said to you,” Jeshua said. “We’ll send it down to the National Assembly, so they can decide what we should do.”

“We’ll make that report,” Cobb said. “And then I will decide what to share with the National Assembly.” Jeshua scowled at Cobb, but he kept talking. “FM, Jorgen, let’s head up to the command center for debriefing.”

He stalked out of the room and Jorgen and I trailed after him, leaving Jeshua behind.

Seven

When I left the command center, I headed toward the engineering bay to check on the taynix. I'd told Cobb everything I remembered from my conversation with Alanik, but Cobb had interviewed Jorgen separately, so I still didn't know what Alanik had said in his head. Jeshua hadn't been in on either of the meetings, which I was sure had angered her.

I didn't have a lot of sympathy for her. I was furious that Alanik was gone—and with her our only chance to communicate with Cuna and to train Jorgen in more advanced cytonics. Spensa's grandmother had helped some, but her knowledge was limited.

The National Assembly was so used to ordering people around and having everyone do what they said. I was glad Jorgen had taken me to talk to Alanik—but it highlighted a huge weakness in our government. We didn't have diplomats. We weren't used to cooperation. The Assembly wanted to treat this as a political situation, but they were scudding *bad* at it. We were supposed to be Defiant, but what good did that do us if all we did was defy other people to our own detriment?

I had no way to know what Alanik was going to tell her people—our former allies—about the humans of Detritus, but I guessed it wouldn't be good.

I stopped short at the end of the corridor that led to the engineering bay. Rig's metal slug box, based off M-Bot's supposed hyperdrive, was resting in the middle of the floor.

No one else was in sight, and I guessed that Rig hadn't left it there. I knelt down and opened it, and found the two yellow taynix inside, snuffling around like they were hungry.

If one of them had hyperjumped, it had brought the box and the other slug along with it. Rig must have missed its disappearance, or he would

have gone looking for the box and found it as soon as he opened the door to Engineering.

I didn't know how much it would help, but at this point any news felt like good news. I dropped one of Rig's location trackers on the floor, picked up the box of slugs, tucked it under my arm, and opened the doors to the engineering bay.

A couple of people from Rig's team were working on a hunk of metal and wires that looked like it might have come from one of the platforms. Rig was nowhere in sight.

"Have you seen Rodge?" I asked them.

One of them waved a hand at me. "He's at the platform controls in Charlie Sector."

My instinct was to feed the taynix in the box first. But if their hunger made them teleport more, I'd wait a little longer and see if we could catch them in the act.

I carried the box with me to Charlie Sector to find Rig. As I passed a series of exterior windows, I looked up at the platforms above ours. I wasn't exactly sure how they'd been built originally, but the technology of the people who lived here before us was far more advanced than ours.

Until they'd been destroyed by the delver, each and every one of them wiped out, leaving the planet barren and alone.

I didn't really understand why humans had chosen to live on Detritus to begin with. I'd been born in the caverns, but the stories we told of other planets spoke of green trees and vast oceans, fertile land to grow food instead of vats hidden away in caverns. The surface of Detritus was a craggy wasteland of debris both natural and mechanical. We'd managed to scrape together enough fertile soil to grow orchards near Alta Base, but I didn't imagine Detritus had ever been a paradise to live on. It seemed strange to me that people with such superior technology chose this place to call home.

If we did manage to use the taynix to escape Detritus, I wondered where we would go. How would we find a place to go, and if we did, how would we know if we'd be safe? Detritus was inhospitable, but it was also familiar.

The idea of living somewhere with an ocean like Old Earth seemed mildly terrifying. How did all that water not consume the land around it?

I looked up at the platforms above, imagining the stars beyond—white lights burning brightly against the black. Some of those would have planets around them, planets we could visit in the blink of an eye with FTL travel. But if the Superiority controlled all of them, would we really be able to escape? Would we be able to run far enough, or would we merely be looking for a better battle position?

Alanik seemed to agree with the basic philosophies of the DDF. She didn't trust peace, and was afraid that we would accept another set of chains for a false promise of safety, and the National Assembly seemed to be leaning in that direction.

I stood by what I said though. I knew my people. We didn't trust peace any more than Alanik did. In fact, I was afraid we'd never be willing to set down our weapons. A wasteland could feel more comfortable than a paradise, if that was what you were used to. Though I agreed with the Disputers who yearned for peace, I didn't know that I would be able to trust it.

I reached Charlie Sector and wove between the long rectangular blocks that held a lot of the machinery keeping the platform running. Power matrixes hummed with life, and a water pump churned, supplying our indoor plumbing. Most of the rest of the devices I couldn't identify. I found Rig standing at the side of one such block. He'd pulled the paneling off the side, revealing a set of wires and circuit boards beneath. The ground around him was littered with pieces of machinery.

Rig's boss in the Engineering Corps, a woman with long pale hair—whose name I thought was Ziming—stood to the side, looking over the rubble.

"I've got Thadwick picking up your work on the platforms," she said. "We're close to getting those gun emplacements working. Do you have anything more on the encryption?"

Rig shook his head. "I'm sorry. I've been working on the hyperdrives, so I haven't had time."

“We’ll keep at it,” Ziming said. “At least we’re into the shield system now. There are still too many questions to run a test yet, but we’re getting closer. Keep up the good work.”

Ziming strode past me, and I nodded to her. Rig was still looking into the tech behind the panel like it was a difficult problem.

“Rig?” I said.

Rig jumped, and then stared at me wide-eyed. “Hey,” he said. “Hey.”

That was not only a one-word utterance, but the same word twice. Not an auspicious beginning. “I found this in the hall.” I lifted the box for him to see. “So unless you left it there, I’m thinking the slugs teleported it.”

“Oh!” Rig said. “Oh, that’s good. Are they still in there?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s been most of a day since they’ve eaten, so they’re probably hungry, but I thought I’d leave them that way for a bit so we could see if they’d do it again.”

“That’s great!” Rig said. He rubbed his palms on the pants of his jumpsuit. “Thanks.”

He blinked at me like he wasn’t sure what I was still doing there, and I sighed. I hadn’t trekked all the way out here just to turn around and go back. “Did you hear about what happened with Alanik?”

“I heard she disappeared,” Rig said. He winced. “I guess maybe we should have been more delicate about interrogating a cytonic.”

“I tried to be delicate,” I said. “But I didn’t have the rank to insist others do the same. I got to talk to her a little bit, and I think her people are also being oppressed by the Superiority.” Though evidently the Superiority wasn’t shooting at them. That must be nice.

Rig looked away from me back to the wall he’d been tinkering with. There were a *lot* of wires in there, and several blocky widgets similar to the ones he’d already removed. Layers and layers of circuits and machinery, extending deep into the unit. I wondered if there was any way to get inside this one, or if it was just a massive block of technology.

I’d meant to catch him at a moment when I could ask him about his work, and this seemed like a good time.

“What was your boss saying?” I asked. “You guys are close to getting the gun platforms working?”

“Not close enough,” Rig said. “The encryption on the gun platforms is a lot heavier than on most of the other platform systems. Which makes sense. If someone is going to hijack your water system, that’s bad. If they hijack your gun emplacements, that can be much worse.”

“I guess so,” I said. “Though I’d rather have working water than working guns.”

“Depends on whether there’s something you need to shoot at in a hurry,” Rig said. “The water will keep you alive in the long term, but it won’t matter if you don’t live through the moment.”

“What did she mean about the shields?” I asked. “It’s something experimental?”

Rig sighed. “Experimental would suggest that we’ve experimented with it. Some of my colleagues managed to hack into the planetary shield system. We’re not entirely sure what a lot of it does, but some of it was clearly intended to turn parts of the debris field into a shield against orbital attacks. But we don’t have a projection of what the shield is supposed to do, let alone confirmation that it would work.”

I smiled. That was a lot of words all in a row. Coherent words, even. This was definitely progress. Maybe he’d never had an issue with me at all. Maybe he was just *that* socially awkward.

“What are you doing now?” I asked.

“Trying to find the communicator,” Rig said. “We received that communication, which means we must have some kind of hypercomm. If it can receive, it was probably once designed to send as well—so if we can find and examine it, we might be able to make it work.”

“Did you find it?” I asked. “How did you know where to look?”

“I followed the path of the alerts we received in the main system,” he said. He glanced at me self-consciously. “How is probably boring, but the trail led me here. I think the communicator is somewhere in this block, but I don’t know what a lot of this is.” He glanced at the mess around him. “I don’t want to break the thing in case Cuna sends us another transmission,

but if we could get it working, we could respond. And that might be the only way for us to get in touch, now that..."

"Now that Alanik was scared away," I said. "It really wasn't my fault."

Rig looked horrified. "I didn't say that it was! I mean, I didn't think it. I mean, I'm sure—" He blushed. "I'm sure you did a great job talking to her. Look, I'll probably be working on this for a while, so you can take the box back to the lab. Or leave it here and I'll watch it! Either way is fine."

He turned back to the machinery, unplugging some wires and then pulling out another block and setting it to the side, inspecting what was beneath it.

I set down the box with the slugs in it. I'd thought we were making progress, but now I was being dismissed. "Is there something I can do to help?"

"No!" Rig said. "I mean, you're supposed to be watching the slugs, right? I wouldn't want to keep you."

Yeah, definitely trying to get rid of me. I was getting really sick of wondering what was going on with him. "What's your problem with me?" I asked.

Rig looked at me, wide-eyed. "I don't have a problem with you."

"Really? Because you obviously don't want me to be here. You barely talk to me, even when we're supposed to be working together. You seem to like Jorgen just fine, but you won't even speak to me. What did I do to make you dislike me so much?"

Rig pushed a hand through his hair, closing his eyes. "I don't dislike you, FM."

"Then what?" I demanded. I probably should have been more reasonable, but the *last* person I'd tried to be reasonable with had disappeared into thin air, probably fleeing across the universe to get away. And while I knew she wasn't fleeing from me personally, it still didn't feel good.

At least Rig couldn't hyperjump away.

"No," Rig said quietly. "I...scud, Spensa didn't tell you?" He looked at me plaintively, like he was begging me to have any idea what he was

talking about. I was starting to have the creeping sensation that I was missing something enormous.

Rig sighed. “I guess she didn’t. I didn’t mean for you to think that I didn’t like you, when the truth is I—”

Oh scud.

Oh SCUD.

I was missing something, something so obvious I clearly should have seen it.

Rig wasn’t afraid of me. He—

“—kind of, um, like you,” he mumbled.

“That— *Oh*.” My face went hot. I was being as bad as Nedd right now. I did not see this coming. I’d known Nedd was interested in me, of course, and about Jorgen and Spensa, but none of them had acted like *this*. I normally thought I was pretty good at reading people, but—

“Why would Spensa have told me that?” I asked.

“I asked Spensa to ask you if you were interested,” Rig mumbled. “I thought probably she did, and you weren’t, and neither of you ever wanted to tell me, which was probably for the best. But I guess she never mentioned it at all? She must have been distracted by saving the world and everything. I get it.”

He didn’t sound like he got it. He sounded hurt. “No,” I said. “She never said anything. I had no idea. But...aren’t you interested in Spensa?”

Rig choked. “*Spensa*? Do I seem like I want to torture myself?”

I would have laughed if I weren’t in a state of shock. Rig and I stared at each other, the longest he’d ever made eye contact with me at one time.

Rig grimaced. “I’m sorry I made you feel like I disliked you. I was embarrassed, that’s all. We don’t ever have to talk about this again, and I’ll try to act less like I hate you and not die of embarrassment, okay?”

“Okay,” I said. My face was still flaming, and Rig was bright red, and I probably should have done us both the favor of preserving what was left of our dignity by walking away. I felt like a complete idiot for confronting him when he’d obviously been trying so hard to avoid it. Nedd had done the

same thing to me, and that had become all kinds of awkward the minute it was out in the open.

Except I didn't want to go. I'd *wanted* to get to know Rig, and I still did, even if it was awkward. Rig was worth wading through the awkwardness for. "Are you sure I can't stay and help?" I asked again.

Rig looked at me like I had lost my mind, and maybe I had. "You really want to help?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," I said. "I mean, I want to help you figure out how to answer that message."

"Of course." Rig somehow managed to look even more dejected. Obviously that wasn't the answer he wanted. I wasn't even sure it was the answer I'd meant to give him.

Between this and my experience with Alanik, I was clearly much worse at dealing with people than I thought I was. "And I'd like to talk to you some more," I said quickly. "Do you think we can manage to act like human beings while we do that?"

Rig looked a little horrified, but then he smiled tentatively. "Maybe? I mean, if this conversation is any indication, I'd say it's unlikely."

I laughed. "Yeah, okay. Do you think we could act like freaks, but not freaks who hate each other?"

"That sounds a little more achievable." He squinted at the next panel. "If the schematic I looked at is correct—not that I completely understood it, mind you—I think the hypercomm should be somewhere in this block. Want to help me lift this off?"

"Sure," I said. I stepped around some of the mechanical bits he'd already removed. "I have no idea what any of this is."

"And I have only vague ideas," Rig said. "To be honest, it will probably take a lifetime to sort through all the things that make this platform run. Don't get me wrong—it's fascinating work. I just wish we were doing it under better circumstances."

"Don't we all," I said. Rig unplugged a couple of cables, and then he lifted half of the panel and I hoisted the other half. Together we lowered it to the ground.

Rig brushed some grease off his hands onto his jumpsuit. “That was really unmanly of me, wasn’t it? Asking you to help me lift that thing. Nedd would have done it one-handed just to show off.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not interested in Nedd,” I said.

Rig looked at me, and there was something so sweet and vulnerable about him that it made me want to reach out and touch him.

I stood frozen to the spot. I’d tried not to think about guys since I’d joined the DDF. Something about all the fighting and dying made dating seem ridiculous, like it had about as much place in flight school as the fancy dresses people wore to parties back home.

But I was thinking about one now, and I didn’t really want to stop.

“Is there someone you *are* interested in?” Rig asked quietly.

He looked like he was bracing for bad news. I wanted to say yes, but I didn’t want to give him false hope. I liked him, yeah. But could it really go anywhere? What future did any of us have with things the way they were?

Not one we could bank on, that was for certain. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Yeah, okay,” Rig said. “No problem.”

He’d taken that as a rejection, but I wasn’t sure it was.

Rig cleared his throat and turned to look at the machinery behind the panel we’d just removed.

“Oh,” Rig said.

There, amid the wires and circuits and foreign devices, was a box identical to the one Rig had built based on M-Bot’s design.

“That’s how they did it,” Rig said, and I nodded.

We had an FTL communicator.

But it required a taynix to make it work.

Eight

“So you’re sure,” Jorgen said. “The FTL communicator is designed to house one of these slugs?” He was sitting on one of the metal chairs in the engineering bay with Fine, the purple taynix, stretched across his lap. Jorgen had fewer bandages on his face now, the remaining little white pieces of medical tape standing out in stark contrast to his dark skin.

Jorgen ran his fingers absently through Fine’s orange spines, and it shimmied slightly, like it was happy about it.

“Pretty sure,” Rig said. “FM discovered that the slugs do bring the box with them when they hyperjump. If the box in M-Bot’s ship was built to house a slug, the box in the FTL communicator probably has the same purpose.”

“But you wouldn’t want the slug jumping away with the communicator,” Jorgen pointed out.

“Our theory,” I said, “is that the different kinds of slugs have different cytonic abilities. The purple slugs and the red slugs don’t escape the way the yellow ones do, so the yellow slugs are the teleporters.”

“Right,” Rig said. “And the red one did that...exploding thing. It’s possible that the purple ones have a third power.”

“A communication power,” Jorgen said. “Like the way Spensa communicated with Gran-Gran from light-years away.”

Rig smiled. “Exactly.” He turned and looked at me—which he seemed able to do a lot more after our conversation. This time I had to resist looking away. I wasn’t entirely comfortable with the way I felt when he paid attention to me—like my heart was skipping beats. It made me nervous and worry about hurting him, which was stupid, because I already had, hadn’t I? He seemed to think I’d let him down easy, and maybe I had. Now I just needed to leave well enough alone.

But I still felt unsettled, and more than a little disappointed.

“But why would you build the same box in the ship and the communicator?” Jorgen asked. “If you’re not going to teleport the communicator around, and the purple slugs can’t escape, you don’t need the same sort of device in the communicator as you do in the ship. Not if the purpose of the box is to make sure the ship hyperjumps with the slug.”

“That’s true,” Rig said, “if the only purpose of the box is to send the ship with the slug.” He pointed to a piece he’d pulled out of the device before we found the box. “But I think the inside of the box might have a second function. This is a holographic projector. It’s not as advanced as the one on M-Bot, but it’s *more* advanced than the ones we use. I think it might have been used to project an image on the inside of the box.”

“Shouldn’t M-Bot’s box have one of those too, then?” Jorgen asked.

“M-Bot’s technology allows him to project holograms on almost any surface,” Rig said. “So he would have been able to project onto the inside of the box without a dedicated holoprojector.”

“And the purpose of the projector is to tell the slugs what to do,” I said.

Rig smiled at me. His cheeks dimpled, and my heart did that skippy thing again. I definitely needed to figure out how to get that under control. “That’s the idea,” he said.

Jorgen nodded. “And if we have the slugs, the box, and the projector—”

“Then we should be able to do the same thing.”

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “That’s good work. I don’t suppose getting the communicator to work is as easy as putting a purple slug in it?”

“I tried that,” Rig said. “The slug sits there, and maybe if we waited long enough it might send a communication somewhere...”

“But we need to be able to direct what it says,” Jorgen said. “How do we do that? Do we even know where to send the message?”

“I think so,” Rig said. “There’s some metadata that came with the communication from Minister Cuna. I think we might be able to use it to respond. The communicator has some hardware similar to Alanik’s translation pin, and I think that might send a specific message through the taynix even if the taynix doesn’t actually *understand* the message. What I

haven't figured out is how to get the slug to participate in the communication."

"It probably has something to do with cytonics," Jorgen said. "Boomslug exploded while I was trying to talk to it with my mind. So maybe I have to"—he gave me a side-eye—"ask it to send the message?"

"Or induce it to somehow?" Rig asked.

"What were you thinking about when Boomslug exploded?" I asked. "You said you were trying to talk to it. What were you saying?"

Jorgen rubbed the back of his neck. "Nothing much. You said I should befriend it, so I was trying to...empathize with it, I guess."

"Empathize with it," Rig said.

Jorgen groaned. "Yes, okay? FM said I should bond with it—"

"And you told me that was stupid—"

"Because I *thought* it was stupid. But nothing else was working, so I thought it would be worth a try. I told it I was sorry that I ripped it out of its home and was now invading its mind and talking to it through that creepy place with all the eyes. Okay?"

"Wait," I said. "The eyes?"

"Yeah..." He trailed off, and looked at the slug.

"The eyes," Rig said. "You said they're creepy, right? And you're afraid of them?"

"I'm not afraid of them," Jorgen said. "But yeah, the times I've seen them, they're...unnerving. It's uncomfortable, all of them staring at me. It makes me self-conscious."

"Self-conscious," I said. "Otherworldly, all-powerful beings that could snuff your life out in an instant—along with the rest of the lives on our planet—stare at you, and that makes you *self-conscious*."

"Yes, okay?" Jorgen said. "It's not like I *choose* how I feel about them. It's hard to explain if you've never experienced it."

"But the slugs have," Rig said. "And when you thought about those things, Boomslug was frightened."

"Maybe," Jorgen said. "So when I thought of the eyes, the slug used its cytonic abilities. I suppose we could try again, to confirm..." He felt at the

bandages on his face. “Maybe we should try one of the other varieties, like the teleporting ones. Perhaps I could...*scare* the slug into hyperjumping.”

“It seems like a good thing to try,” Rig said.

They both looked at me, like they wanted my opinion.

“Um,” I said. “I don’t love the idea of terrifying the slugs, but since it’s the only lead we have, it seems worth trying.”

“Right,” Jorgen said. He gingerly lifted Fine off his lap and put him in the crate. “Maybe we could use one of the slugs in the metal box. You said they already moved it once, right?”

“Right,” I said. I turned around to grab the box from where we’d left it next to the slug crate.

The box was gone.

“Well, we’ve proven they hyperjump with the box then, right?” Jorgen asked.

“Yes,” I said. “*Where* they took the box is another question.” I glanced out in the hall, but the thing wasn’t there.

“We can use a different slug,” Rig said, “and find the box later.”

I retrieved Gill from the crate.

Jorgen took Gill in his hands and looked him in the face. “Do you think I should try to...bond with it first?”

“I’m not sure how that will help you scare it,” Rig said. He looked at me like he expected me to argue.

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t think bonding it is necessary here.” I didn’t *want* the slugs to be miserable, but befriending them might actively make them more comfortable and less likely to move.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “I’m not going to hum this time.”

“That seems like it would be to everyone’s benefit,” Rig said.

“I don’t know,” I added. “If our goal is to terrify the slug, your humming might help.”

More dimples.

Scud, I was in so much trouble.

“Here goes,” Jorgen said. He closed his eyes, and nothing happened.

Rig and I looked at each other. The trouble with experimenting with cytonics was that the majority of the time we had no idea what was happening.

Then, without warning, Gill disappeared.

“Oh!” Jorgen said. “Hey! It worked.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Um...where did Gill go?”

We all looked around, but he wasn't in the immediate vicinity.

“It's occurring to me now,” I said, “that if you're successful at this, you create more work for me.”

“Hey,” Jorgen said. “You volunteered for this job.”

I did. I headed out into the hall, searching the surrounding rooms for Gill. I found the box with the other two yellow taynix in it in an adjoining room, and brought it back and set it inside the door. There was no sign of Gill in the surrounding halls though, or the corridors beyond that.

I was about to give up when one of the aides from Command came up the hallway holding a canvas bag that emitted a fluting sound. “Admiral Cobb sent this for you,” he said. “Apparently it materialized in the middle of his holoprojection.”

“Thanks,” I said, lifting Gill out of the bag. “You can keep the bag in case you see any more of them.”

“Okay,” the aide said, looking at the taynix warily.

Gill shuddered a little, trembling under my touch, and I reached into my pocket, pulling out a little tin of caviar and offering a bite to Gill. Even my parents would have to approve of this if they knew the slugs were the secret to saving the lives of everyone on Detritus.

“Okay,” Rig said when I returned. “We have an idea for another experiment. Is Gill ready?”

“Hasn't he been through enough?” I asked.

“We know he's frightened of the eyes,” Jorgen said. “And we want to see if we can get him to move the box.”

Rig had already removed the slugs who had been hanging out in the metal box. I went over to the crate and gave the slugs a couple of

mushrooms. If we weren't relying on starvation to motivate them to teleport, there was no need for the poor things to go hungry.

"Okay," Rig said, handing Jorgen the box with Gill loaded into it. "Hold on to the box, and we'll see if we can get it to take you *and* the box with it wherever it goes."

"Wherever it goes?" Jorgen said. "We have no idea where it's going to go, and we want it to take me with it?"

"That tactic could have its uses," I said, "like for getting fighters out of trouble when they're being tailed by Krell. But it's not useful for going to meet with Cuna." I was still nervous about trying that—what if Alanik was right, and Cuna was merely another tool of the Superiority looking to control us?

Without Alanik though, Cuna was our only option. If Alanik's people didn't want to be our allies, we were still going to need help if we expected to escape from the Superiority.

"I don't think it's going to take you far," Rig said. "None of the taynix have left the immediate vicinity. You're not going to get carried off the platform."

"So getting them to travel across the universe is its own problem," I said.

"Right," Rig said. "But one thing at a time."

"Fine," Jorgen said.

"Fine!" Fine piped up from over in the crate.

Jorgen drew a deep breath, holding the metal box in his hands.

Nothing happened.

After a really long silence, Jorgen opened his eyes. "It's not working."

"Maybe it's not scared anymore," Rig said. "You showed it the eyes and nothing happened. If someone showed me the same scary image over and over again, I would stop being frightened of it."

"Good point," Jorgen said. "Maybe we need to think of something else that scares them?"

"Or use another slug," I said. I reached into the crate and pulled out Happy. "Let's try this one."

With Happy secured inside the box, Jorgen closed his eyes again.

And then, without warning, he disappeared.

“Owwww,” Jorgen said, and Rig and I spun around to find him lodged inside one of the cubbyholes filled with rolled-up design schematics. The rolls of papers were all crushed to the sides, and Jorgen’s body was folded with his knees up to his chin. The box with the slug in it was jammed in front of him, and he pushed it out, shoving it onto the floor with a clang. Jorgen swore.

I giggled, and Rig snickered and then started to laugh.

“It’s not funny!” Jorgen shouted.

“I think the evidence is against you there, Flightleader,” I said, though he was right. Sure, him being crunched up in that cubbyhole was amusing, but what if the slug had hyperjumped somewhere more dangerous, or smaller? The slugs were used to finding spaces for their own body mass, and we didn’t even know if they were perfect at that.

I think Rig had the same thoughts at the same time, because he crossed the room and helped Jorgen extract himself. Jorgen rubbed one of the bandaged cuts on his elbow.

“I don’t think we should test it like that again,” I said.

“Agreed,” Jorgen said. “I wonder if the slugs have more awareness when they’re teleporting an entire ship. It seems like bad design to use a creature to teleport that wants to crunch you into a tiny space.”

Rig nodded. “I’m still impressed we managed to make it work at all.”

“We did,” I said. “But what’s the point?”

“The point?” Jorgen asked. “Of learning to use the slugs as hyperdrives?”

“Of having hyperdrives that only teleport cytonics,” I said. “If it requires a cytonic to use a hyperdrive, and cytonics themselves can teleport without hyperdrives—”

“Maybe it comes back to the projections,” Rig said. “They project something frightening onto the inside of the box, and then a cytonic isn’t necessary. My team can work with the projector to see if we can get it to project inside a box we can install in a ship.”

“Besides,” Jorgen said, “*I* am a cytonic and I don’t know how to hyperjump. If I can make the slugs do it, we’re still up from where we were, even if there are easier ways out there.”

That was true, but something about it still bothered me.

Rig considered for a moment. “You might be right that the slugs are more aware of their size when they’re taking a whole ship with them. M-Bot might also have had some way to deal with being placed in a small space, though I’m not sure what it would have been.”

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

“We don’t really have a choice,” Jorgen said. “Dangerous or not, we need to try this out in a ship.”

Nine

We all agreed it would be best if Jorgen didn't try to use the hyperdrive for the first time while piloting a ship. Cobb granted us the use of one of the two-seater Dulo-class fighters, which had pilot and copilot seats side by side. The cockpit of the Dulo was still narrow, with the fuselage only a little wider than a Largo class. Even so, as I climbed in, the cockpit felt smaller than normal, like the fuselage was squeezing in on me.

Rig had bolted his metal box under the dash between the instruments and the floor, so the slugs couldn't hyperjump without taking the rest of the ship with them. He was already working on some duplicate boxes, in case we got this to work.

At least this time we weren't flying out into the black. The Krell hadn't pierced the debris belt in months, so chances were good I wasn't going to have to watch any of my friends get shot out of the sky today.

Didn't make it any easier to be in the pilot's seat again.

"You're sure we're ready for this?" I said to Jorgen as we climbed into the ship.

"No," Jorgen said. "But I don't think we can afford to wait. The engineers are working on the defenses, but they say they have no way to know if they'll ever be functional."

Jorgen settled in the copilot seat, shoulder to shoulder with me. This was going to take some getting used to; I was accustomed to having a bit more space from my flightleader while I was flying.

Jorgen checked on the slugs in the box. We had Gill and Happy in there, plus a couple other yellow slugs. We all agreed we needed to bring more than one, in case something went wrong and we lost some of them in transport.

"All right," Jorgen said beside me. "Let's do this."

I put on my headset and turned on my radio, setting the channel for Command, which in this case connected me with Rig.

“We’re ready,” I told him.

“Copy,” Rig said. “Skyward Flight, you are cleared for departure.”

I engaged our acclivity ring, and several other ships lifted out of the landing bay alongside us. We hadn’t gathered the entire flight, but Sadie, Kimmalyn, Nedd, and Arturo were all accompanying us in case we got into trouble. Jorgen jumped on the channel we shared with them—he was still flightleader, even if he wasn’t technically flying.

“Skyward Flight,” he said. “Descend to 100,000 feet and meet at coordinates 334-1280. Quirk and Sentry, you two fly ahead to scout the area for unexpected debris fall. Amphi and Nedder, follow us in point formation.”

Our flightmates sounded off, and then I accelerated. We flew at half a Mag until we’d slipped down through a gap in the belt of platforms, soaring beneath the lights that illuminated the planet from the debris layer.

Jorgen fidgeted nervously with the bandage beneath his chin. “You worried this won’t work?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m also worried that it will.”

That made sense. We needed to be able to get off Detritus, but I didn’t envy Jorgen being the key to it all. We knew how to hide on this hole of a planet and fight for our lives. Everything else was a great unknown.

“What did Alanik say to you?” I asked. “When she spoke in your mind right before she left?”

Jorgen was quiet for a moment, and I expected him to say it was classified, but he didn’t. “She said I was powerful. That I shouldn’t let other people control me.”

Huh. “Is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Why did you lie about it?”

Jorgen sighed. “It didn’t seem like a great thing to say in front of my mother. But I told Cobb the truth when he debriefed me.”

“Why do you think she said that?” Alanik seemed to have issues with authority, which made her fit right in with the Defiant League. She didn’t trust *us* either, though. Not that I could blame her.

“I don’t know,” Jorgen said. “Maybe on her planet the cytonics are in charge? It might feel foreign to her that people who can teleport across the galaxy on a whim would listen to a chain of command.”

“You don’t agree with that though,” I said. Jorgen was the champion of the chain of command. He knew protocol forward and backward, better even than Cobb did.

Jorgen shook his head. “It’s one thing to have power, but if you don’t direct it you can end up making huge mistakes and hurting people. There’s a reason Command is in control.”

“And the National Assembly?” I asked. “Do you think they should take command power away from the DDF?”

Jorgen shrugged. “I think they have a point. Our military shouldn’t head up diplomacy for the Defiant League.”

I gave him a look.

Jorgen sighed. “Neither should my mother, okay? They sent her to be the liaison to the *military*. She isn’t a diplomat.”

“Do we have people like that on Detritus?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Jorgen said. “You did pretty well at it.”

I snorted. “I don’t have training as a diplomat.”

“No,” Jorgen said. “But no one here does. You’re a scudding better diplomat than my mother, that’s for sure.”

That wasn’t a comforting thought. We had a system for training pilots, for fighting the Krell. We’d spent generations perfecting it.

What would we do now that circumstances suddenly demanded different skills, skills we hadn’t valued as a people?

“We’re going to have to figure it out,” I said. “Quickly, if this works.”

Jorgen looked at the instrumentation. “We’re getting close to our heading. I’m going to focus on the slugs now.”

“All right,” I said. “Just...try not to hyperjump us anywhere dangerous, okay?”

Jorgen didn't respond. He still didn't know how to relay cytonic coordinates, which meant he'd have no control over where he sent us.

There was a lot more debris down here to crash into if the slugs decided to teleport us into a tight space the way they did with Jorgen in the engineering bay, but we didn't dare try this experiment outside the atmosphere where the remaining Superiority outposts might observe us.

Still, the slugs had only teleported meters away in the lab. None of them had left Platform Prime—I'd always been able to find them again. They weren't likely to choose this moment to take us light-years away. If they did, we'd still have a hyperdrive; we could figure out how to get back.

Except Spensa left with the same intentions, and now no one knew where she was—another reason Jorgen shouldn't try to hyperjump in a ship by himself.

I didn't think the *two* of us being lost in space was a huge step up.

As we reached the area we'd designated for experimentation, Kimmalyn and Sadie shot off ahead, canvassing the area in their sleek scout ships. I liked flying scout-class ships better than the heavier classes, and I was going to miss that maneuverability if we needed it.

"Call Rig," Jorgen said, his eyes closed behind his visor. "Tell him we're ready."

"Rig," I said over the general channel. "We're ready to begin."

"Everything's clear out here," Kimmalyn added. "No debris, no transport ships, nothing."

"Jerkface, you ready for this?" Arturo added.

"Tell them I'm ready," Jorgen said. But he was gripping the edge of his seat like he was terrified. I didn't think that was a personal affront to my flying.

"Jerkface is concentrating," I said. "He says he's ready."

"Try not to crash into us," Arturo said.

"She said Jerkface was concentrating," Kimmalyn said. "Like the Saint always said, 'A silent fool is a stealthy fool.'"

"Who are you calling a fool, Quirk?" Nedd asked.

"Not you," Sadie said. "You're never silent."

Nedd grunted. “Good thing I’m too dumb to know if that’s what she meant.”

“Tell them to cut the chatter,” Jorgen said.

“Guys, stay off the channel,” I said. “And track us on your proximity sensors. We may not move far, but we’ll need to prove if we *did* move.”

The channel went quiet, and I glanced at Jorgen.

“You look like you’re going to throw up,” I said. “Don’t do that in my cockpit.”

“I’ll try not to,” Jorgen said. “Do you think we’re doing this too soon?”

“No. I think we’re doing what needs to be done. But if you don’t relax, you might scare that slug enough to hyperjump us a lot farther than we want to go.”

“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “I don’t know if that’s how it works. I’m trying to relax.”

“You could hum again.”

Jorgen opened one eye and glared at me.

I was joking, but that gave me another idea. “Here,” I said, reaching for my transmitter. “Maybe this will help.”

I flipped on the transmitter and chose a slow, beautiful piece, played by only a few string instruments. We had banjos and fiddles on Detritus, but the sounds that came out of those were pale shadows of the long, melodious notes soaring from my transmitter.

Jorgen opened his eyes, and his shoulders did relax a little. “Where did you get that?”

“From my father,” I said. “Isn’t it beautiful? This is the one I listen to when I’m nervous.”

Jorgen took a deep breath. “It’s wonderful.”

It was so sad that while we had this music, we didn’t play it publicly. On Earth, music used to play over the radio all the time. Tune in to an FM channel and you could listen to anything you wanted. It was incredible to me that the air used to be filled with these waves. That was why I picked FM as my callsign: it thrilled me that the initials of my name—Freyja

Marten—were the same as the term for music that used to be so widely available.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

Jorgen nodded. He did seem a little more relaxed.

I flipped on the radio again, not bothering to turn off the transmitter. “Rig, are we cleared to hyperjump?”

“Cleared, FM,” Rig said. “When you’re ready.”

“Scud, here it goes,” Jorgen said.

For a moment the music ascended, but nothing else happened. I tightened my grip on my controls, looking out over the barren surface of the planet. We were too high up to see the craggy patterns of the surface, and too far from the debris belt to distinguish more than the largest platforms and pieces of debris. Suspended in the middle, flying at Mag-1 so I’d have more control if we needed to fall into evasive maneuvers. Beside me Jorgen breathed in deeply, and the music dropped into a series of quick, low notes that aligned with my heartbeat.

Maybe this wasn’t working. Maybe something was wrong. Maybe—

I blinked, and a chunk of metal debris appeared in front of my ship, bearing down on us.

No. We were bearing down on *it*.

I pulled up, narrowly missing the debris as I slipped into the crack between two large chunks of metal that spun freely in the debris belt—remnants of the systems up here that had long since started to disintegrate. Beside me, Jorgen snapped his eyes open and gasped in surprise as I slipped around the debris and shot downward—at least I thought it was downward; I’d lost all my bearings when we teleported.

“Look out!” Jorgen shouted, and too late I saw the chunk of rock our boosters had destabilized spinning toward us. We rammed straight into it, cracking our shield, and I rolled the ship to the side to avoid colliding into another piece of debris.

“FM!” Rig said over the radio. “You guys okay?”

Jorgen grabbed the radio. “Rig, where the scud are we?”

“I’ve located you in the debris belt. You’re deep in an unstable area. I’m trying to find the best heading for you to get out.”

“Scud!” I said, slowing our speed as I wove between large pieces of debris that looked like a platform broken apart at the seams. “Tell him to do it quickly.”

“Now, Rig,” Jorgen said. “We need that heading now!”

I swept between two pieces of the platform, but they moved toward me instead of away, folding in on each other as if on a hinge. I accelerated, but Jorgen put a hand on my shoulder.

And then suddenly we materialized just past the edge of the folding platforms. I watched on my monitors as the monstrous shapes clapped against each other behind us.

“What did you do?” I asked, swinging us around another chunk of debris.

“I focused on the space where I wanted us to go,” Jorgen said. “I think I can give the slugs an instruction for where to run, as long as I can see the space I want them to run to. I might be able to do it if I can visualize the place and it’s somewhere they recognize. We’ll have to experiment with that though.”

The section of the debris field in front of us was a little looser, and I continued to weave through the debris as the music swelled in long, slow swoops. *Calm*, I thought. *Focus*. I found a portion of the debris belt with wider, more open spaces and circled around and around while Rig worked on that heading.

“We could experiment now,” I suggested. “You could visualize the space over Platform Prime and see if the slug will take us there.”

Through his visor, Jorgen grimaced. He didn’t respond.

“Jerkface,” I said, “you okay?”

“Yeah,” Jorgen said. “But I think—I think that second time something heard me.”

“Heard you?” I asked. “Like, cytonically?”

“Yeah,” Jorgen said.

My heart dropped. “A delver?”

Jorgen shook his head. “I don’t think so. It was like—like it was surprised. It heard me reach out to the taynix, and it was shocked I was there. Like I opened a door and startled the person on the other side.”

“If it wasn’t a delver, and it wasn’t a taynix—” The only other cytonic on the planet that we knew about was Spensa’s grandmother, though she knew about Jorgen, so she shouldn’t be surprised. “Are there more of you? Because we could use—”

Jorgen shook his head. “I don’t think it was us,” he said. “I think it was *them*.”

Oh. The Superiority? We knew they had cytonics, and it made sense that there would be one or two assigned to the battleships parked near Detritus, especially if they used cytonics to run their hyperdrives. “If they heard you —”

“Then they know what we’re doing,” Jorgen said. “They might have sensed what we did just now. I don’t know that I want to try it again right away with them listening.”

That did seem unwise. If they knew we were developing hyperdrives, what would they do to us?

“Okay,” Rig said over the radio. “I’ve got coordinates for you. You’re going to need to move away from Platform Prime to a more stable part of the debris belt you can cut through to come back down.” Rig gave us some coordinates, and Jorgen put them into the nav system. I accelerated a bit more and swung around chunks of debris that were almost as big as Platform Prime, but twisted and battered.

Jorgen switched the radio to the general channel, and I lowered the volume on my transmitter, but didn’t turn it off.

“Amphi?” Jorgen said. “Nedder? You guys okay?”

“You’re alive,” Arturo said. “Scud, Jerkface, you just *disappeared*.”

“That’s what he was trying to do, wasn’t it?” Nedder said.

“Right, but I didn’t expect him to actually *do* it. Where are you guys?”

“Up in the debris belt,” Jorgen said. “I’ll send you the coordinates where we expect to emerge, and you can escort us to Platform Prime.”

“Did you really hyperjump?” Sadie asked. “What was it like?”

I flipped on my radio. “Like being in one place and then suddenly being in another.”

“Um, guys?” Rig said. “The command center is filling up. I think they’re going to take my channel soon.”

“Take your channel?” Jorgen asked. “Why?”

“Hang on. Let me find out.”

Jorgen and I looked at each other.

“We got those coordinates,” Arturo said. “Moving your direction.”

Through the chunks of metal below us, I caught sight of the surface of the planet.

“Skyward Flight,” a familiar voice said over the radio. Cobb, taking over from Rig. “I’m going to need you all to report back to Platform Prime immediately.”

“Why, sir?” Jorgen asked over the radio.

“We’ve got movement from the battleships,” Cobb said. “It looks like they’re pulling their largest ship into position, the one with the planetary weapons.”

Stars. “The *what?*” I asked.

“Sir,” Jorgen said. “Did you say *planetary* weapons?”

“Affirmative,” Cobb said. “We knew from the chatter on the datanets that they had missiles they could use to bombard the planet. They hadn’t shown any sign of using them, but they’re moving into position now.”

“Do you think that’s because of us?” I asked Jorgen.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But it seems like too much of a coincidence not to be.”

“Better tell Cobb then, yeah?” I asked.

Jorgen nodded. “Sir, we were successful in our mission, but when we were, I think the Superiority cytonics heard us.”

There was a pause, and in it I imagined Cobb swearing up a storm. “They may have decided it’s time to annihilate us. Can you use the taynix to get any of us off the planet?”

“Negative,” Jorgen said. “I think I can teleport to places I can see or maybe remember, but that’s it.”

“Copy, Flightleader. Get back here as fast as you can.”

I swallowed and resisted the urge to turn up the music again.

We weren't ready. We couldn't run, not without full control over the hyperdrives, and the Superiority wanted to destroy us before we got that far.

If they attacked at full capacity now, would any of us survive?

“We're on our way,” Jorgen said to Cobb as I broke through the edge of the debris belt. Arturo and Nedd both fell in behind us in flanking position, with Kimmalyn and Sadie leading the way to Platform Prime.

“There has to be some way we can use the hyperdrives to our advantage,” I said to Jorgen.

Jorgen nodded. “Admiral,” he said over the radio, “we can't use the hyperdrives to flee, but I think we could bring them to bear in the battle.”

Cobb was quiet. “You're too valuable a resource to risk,” he said finally.

“Maybe,” Jorgen said. “But if we don't make it through this, it won't matter what we hold back, will it?”

It was a good point, if a sobering one.

“All right,” Cobb said. “Tell me what you have in mind.”

Ten

When we arrived at Platform Prime, the landing bay was in chaos. Much like before the battle where the delver arrived, pilots raced for their ships as they received last-minute instructions, an air of nervousness permeating it all. I brought my ship down next to Skyward One, Jorgen's usual ship. Rig and two of his fellow engineers were standing around it with the canopy open, and Rig motioned to them furiously.

Jorgen opened the hatch and hopped out.

"Cobb said you were switching to your own ship," Rig said. "We took the interference module out of Alanik's ship and installed it in yours. If the information we took from her databanks is correct, it'll stop the enemy from projecting illusions into your head. You also have five yellow taynix in a box under your dash. It isn't pretty, but it's bolted in place, so the slugs won't teleport without you. Will you be okay with no one to help you with them?"

"I'll be all right," Jorgen said. "We need you to fly with FM in the Dulo."

Rig looked at Jorgen with terror. "I'm not a pilot, Jorgen. I barely started flight school."

"And you're not piloting today," Jorgen said. "We're going to try to use the hyperdrives to launch a surprise attack on the ship with the planetary assault cannon. The goal is to disable their cannons so they can't destroy Platform Prime or hit the surface of Detritus. The thing is, we don't know exactly how these weapons work. We don't know how to destroy them, or if we can. But if we send you in there, and you get a good look at the guns—"

"Then maybe I can help figure out how to disable them." Rig nodded.

"Command won't let me do it myself," Jorgen said, "but I can feel the slugs in my mind from a distance. I don't need to be right next to the slugs to communicate with them. So, we're going to send you in with FM. You won't be up there alone—they're willing to let me command Skyward

Flight to back you up because I'm going to have to see where I'm sending you. Also, I'll be able to use the hyperdrive to pull you out if things go wrong."

I wasn't thrilled about the plan myself—once I was in there, theoretically Jorgen should be able to teleport me out if something went wrong. But it was all *very* theoretical. This wasn't a suicide mission, but it was the closest thing I'd ever done.

I wasn't Spensa. I didn't enjoy running headlong into danger and figuring things out as I went along. But I also wasn't going to let my entire planet be destroyed because I wasn't willing to do what needed to be done. I was a pilot. I signed up for this. I was going to do the best I could to make sure that as many people came out of this alive as possible, even if I wasn't among them.

Taking Rig with me was another matter entirely.

"He can't order you to do it," I said to Rig. Rig knew that of course, because he wasn't in Jorgen's chain of command, but it seemed like a good moment for a reminder. "And Cobb hasn't ordered you to do it either." Cobb understood the reasons a pilot might have for not getting into a ship again. Cobb had done it when he felt he had to, but he wasn't going to make that decision for someone else. He hadn't ordered *me* to do this either—it was too experimental, too volatile.

Rig nodded. "I know. I'll do it."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

Jorgen gave me a sharp look. Rig had just agreed, which was obviously what we needed.

But I didn't feel good taking someone up into battle with me on a mission this dangerous unless they were sure they wanted to be there.

"Yes," Rig said. He motioned to a box next to him. "We have one more taynix, in case we need it." He hoisted the box into the Dulo, with Chubs looking contemplatively over the edge. Rig climbed into the copilot seat beside me. He squirmed a little, scrunching himself up on the side of the seat farthest from me, even though I wished he'd sit closer. He put on his helmet.

Scud, I hated this. He'd dropped out of flight school for a reason, and he hadn't ever wanted to come back, not like Kimmalyn or Nedd. If I got him killed, that was on me. In my mind I saw Lizard's ship exploding, the wreckage spiraling toward the planet.

Not Rig. I didn't want that to happen to him. I couldn't let it.

It didn't feel like a comfort to know that if he died in this fight, I was likely going with him. "You really don't have to do this," I said. I *hoped* he would back out, even though I needed his help.

This was exactly why having complicated feelings for someone in a situation like this was a bad idea.

"I know I don't have to," Rig said. "But Jorgen is right. You shouldn't be working a hyperdrive alone, especially since you don't actually have control over it."

"We'll be fine," I said with a confidence I didn't feel. "I have a perfect record of not dying in combat."

Rig laughed, but it sounded forced. He was avoiding my eyes again. At least this time he was clearly terrified of the combat and not of me.

"I'm going to do my best not to get you killed up there," I said. I would. I *had* to.

"I believe you," Rig said. "But it's not always under your control, is it?"

Of course it wasn't. I could never guarantee that I was going to return from any mission, much less that I could keep anyone else safe.

That was what worried me.

Next to us, I could see Jorgen checking his ship, getting ready to take off. Kimmalyn, Sadie, and the others were hovering in the air, waiting for rendezvous coordinates. T-Stall and Catnip had joined them.

"This new planetary weapon," I said. "Isn't it the kind of thing that shield you're working on is supposed to defend against?"

"It could be if the shield worked," Rig said. "But we haven't tested it. If we turn it on, maybe nothing will happen. Or parts of the system might come online, but others might be too damaged to function. The debris around Detritus is in bad shape. The system might fail. Worse, it might short out, making it harder to use in the future."

“And at worst?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Rig said. “We haven’t had time to map out all the ramifications. If there are shorts on important platforms, there could be considerable damage.”

“To Platform Prime?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Rig repeated. “That’s why it’s too volatile to try until we have time to work up the likely scenarios. But we’ve given a full report to Command about what we know and what we don’t. It’ll be up to Cobb to decide what to do with it.”

Jorgen had a point about the command structure. It did make sense for power to be organized so it could be used efficiently. But then everything depended on the decision-making of the person at the top. Cobb I trusted. Jeshua and the Assembly, less so.

Jorgen’s ship lifted off, and I engaged my acclivity ring, lifting up beside him.

“Skyward Flight,” Jorgen said over the radio, “our orders are to engage the fighters protecting the battleships. We cannot let them destroy Platform Prime or penetrate the debris field to hit the surface of the planet.”

“Skyward Five, ready.” I said over the radio.

When the rest of the flight had sounded off, we followed our navigation track through the maze of upper platforms.

“We’re going to be in the center of the battle today,” Jorgen said. “Our orders are to hang behind Victory and Valkyrie Flights as they punch up toward the battleship.” Jorgen wasn’t going to talk about the other part of our mission over the radio, where there was even the slightest chance the enemy might be able to intercept the message. “FM is in the Dulo today with Rig.”

“Wait, *Rig* is flying with us?” Kimmalyrn said. “Welcome back, Rig!”

“Tell them thanks,” Rig said.

I pointed at Rig’s radio controls. “Tell them yourself.”

He switched on his radio. “Thanks, Quirk,” Rig said. “I’m um...not totally against being here.”

“From Rig, that’s a resounding endorsement,” I said, and he gave me a weak smile. He relaxed in the seat a little, so our shoulders touched, and that at least was a comfort.

“I do intend to keep you alive,” I said to him.

“We’re flying toward a bunch of aliens who intend the exact opposite,” Rig said. “Especially once they realize we have a hyperdrive, even if it’s not a very effective one, and that we’re there to destroy their cannon.”

“Rig, FM, you have the device ready?” Jorgen asked over a private channel as we cleared the platforms and shot out into the black.

Beside me, Rig opened up the box and looked at the taynix.

“Do you know which one Jorgen already used?” he asked.

“I don’t,” I said. “Maybe swap them all out?”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.” He pulled out the four taynix already in the box and swapped them for the one he’d brought with him. Happy stretched out across his knee, trilling softly. I reached over and scritchd him behind his frill.

“Ready,” I told Jorgen over the radio.

“That’s an overstatement,” Rig muttered beside me. “But we’re as ready as we are right now.”

I laughed. That felt both profound and terrifying. I put a hand on my transmitter. “How do you feel about music?” I asked.

“I liked that song you were playing before in the lab. Do you have any others?”

“Yes,” I said, and I turned on my transmitter, flipping through the short list of pieces before selecting one.

This one was heavier than the one I played for Jorgen. I had no concept of what instruments could possibly make these sounds. There was a melody buried underneath a lot of shouting in a language I didn’t understand. But the beat was clear and the sounds were oddly engaging, even as loud and angry as they seemed.

Rig listened for a moment and then wrinkled his nose. “Is that music? Are you sure?”

“It is,” I said. “It just takes a refined taste to appreciate it.”

The flight accelerated together, moving toward the battleships in a standard V formation. My proximity sensors began to pick up ships—lots of them, though not yet as many as we'd faced when the delver arrived.

More alarming, the larger ships were now moving toward Detritus. Up to this time they'd stayed in place—a waypoint, not a danger themselves.

The music continued its relentless march as we continued to accelerate up to Mag-8. Outside the debris field, there was so much, well, *space*. The ships loomed in the distance, but even at high speeds it took us a long while to approach.

A while in which I was increasingly aware of Rig sitting next to me. Our arms were touching now, from shoulder to elbow, warming my whole body. Scud, this was not what I was supposed to be thinking about when I was heading into combat. It was like I told Sadie during the last fight: I had to *focus*. I wasn't used to having anyone in the cockpit with me during a fight, let alone a guy who liked me.

He did still like me, right?

"I'm not sure this music is getting any better," Rig said.

"Fine," I said. "I'll turn it off."

"No, you don't have to," Rig said quickly, but I'd already reached for the dial, searching for another song. I didn't share my music with many people, which was probably selfish. It wasn't that I wanted to keep it all to myself—more that I didn't want to share it with anyone who wouldn't appreciate it. It was the one thing that connected me to who we used to be, before our people crashed on Detritus and were reduced to nothing but survival.

I probably shouldn't have chosen one of the weirder pieces in my collection to share with Rig. So I decided to pick something a little easier to appreciate.

I chose a choral piece, also in a different language, one my father said had fallen out of use long before humans left Earth. Dozens, maybe hundreds of voices all blended together, singing with different tones and pitches, loud and yet somehow soft all at once.

"Oh," Rig said. "Stars, that one's beautiful. Are any of those instruments?"

“I don’t think so. Just voices.”

“Wow.” Rig petted Happy absently on his knee, and the slug began to trill along with the music, adding another high-pitched tone to the voices. Gill edged his way over, nuzzling my thigh.

“You have to like this one,” I said. “Even slugs appreciate it.”

Rig narrowed his eyes at me, and I laughed and smacked him on the hand.

I wished I had the guts to do more. I wished the battle wasn’t coming up so fast. Scud, another carrier ship had arrived, and more fighters poured out of it. It seemed incredible that they’d gotten here so fast, but the Superiority had working FTL communicators. They had hyperdrives that went where they told them to go, and the ability to call up their pilots and transport them across the vastness of space in moments.

We’d made progress, but we were still so scudding far behind it made me want to cry.

Not now. This wasn’t the moment to lose my composure. My flight was depending on me. Rig was depending on me. Detritus was depending on me.

The ships splayed across my proximity sensors as we rapidly approached the battlefield. This time we’d brought the fight to them.

I wished I thought that would give us enough of an edge for the victory to be decisive.

“We’re as ready as we are right now,” I said.

Rig nodded. “No more, no less.”

Several of the enemy ships broke away from the pack, heading toward us.

“Here we go,” I said, and we streaked toward them through the black.

Eleven

Our flight cut up through the center of the battlefield in the wake of Valkyrie and Victory Flights, who were both tasked with getting us close enough to the gunship for Jorgen to see a clear path to it. Jorgen needed a visual on the place he was going to send us to be sure we'd actually arrive.

The enemy ships fanned out, intercepting our fighters as they moved toward the gunship. There had to be a way to take that thing down, or the Superiority forces wouldn't be so determined to defend it. We didn't need to destroy it, only disable the orbital weapons before they had a chance to damage Detritus.

I soared with the lift of the music toward the incoming enemy ships and peppered them with destructor fire. I immediately picked up a couple of tails, and Sadie and Kimmalyn fell into position behind me, ready to fire after I took down the enemies' shields.

I reversed my boosters, slowing me down. In atmosphere, the drag of air resistance did this work for me, but up here I had to do it myself. The other ships quickly caught up and I did a barrel roll to avoid their destructor fire, though some of it crackled across my shield.

"Scud," Rig said, gripping the dash. "I forgot how disorienting this is." Still, he leaned over the proximity monitor, scanning it quickly. "Roll right," he said. "They've got a friend joining them. If you pass between the two you can get all three of them with your IMP."

"Done," I said, and I rolled to the side and then engaged my boosters to send my ship backward through the enemy fire. My shield cracked further, but it didn't matter. I hit my IMP, dropping my own shield as well as the shields of all three enemy ships. Sadie and Kimmalyn opened fire while I used a series of defensive maneuvers to avoid the enemy destructor fire.

Beside me, Rig squeezed his eyes shut. "Yep, don't miss this part," he said.

“It’s probably worse when you’re not in control,” I said.

“Oh, no,” Rig said. “I’d much rather you were in control than me.”

“Flight,” Jorgen said. “Converge on the gunship. Victory and Valkyrie have cut us a path.”

I reignited my shield, and we fell into an M formation as we worked our way up the battlefield. “Incoming,” Arturo said, and I glanced at my proximity monitors to see five ships coming in to break up our path. The enemy wasn’t stupid. They knew we were trying to get close to the battleship to destroy it.

Though if they sent all their reinforcements into the fray to fight us, they wouldn’t have any to defend the guns once we reached them. Skyward Flight broke formation, falling into evasive maneuvers.

“Amphi, Nedder,” Jorgen said, “lead those ships away from the rest of the flight. T-Stall, Catnip, back them up.”

“It’s working,” Rig said, scanning the monitors. “They’re not holding anything back to defend the gunship. Why would they do that if they know we have a hyperdrive?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe because they don’t use their hyperdrives this way. Can you imagine what would happen if they hyperjumped in a lifebuster and detonated it over Alta Base? And yet they never do.”

“Cobb says they’re careful with the technology,” Rig said. “They don’t trust it to individual fighters, for fear of losing control of the secret to FTL travel. Once people know how it works, the smaller planets will be able to use it, and the Superiority will lose control.”

If that was so, control came at a massive cost. There had to be a way we could use that against them.

But first we had to survive.

The battleship loomed larger in the distance, and Jorgen opened a private channel with me. “Okay, FM,” Jorgen said. “I can see the area in front of the battleship well enough now that I think I can direct the device. Are you ready?”

“Ready as we are right now,” I said.

“I don’t know what that means,” Jorgen replied.

“I’m ready, sir,” I said. The right answer, even if it wasn’t strictly true. There was no “ready” for this.

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “I’m focusing on the device on your ship.”

Happy vanished from Rig’s lap.

Scud.

Jorgen got the wrong slug.

“Sorry!” Jorgen shouted over the radio, just as one of the ships the others had distracted turned and fired its destructors toward us. The arc of fire closed in, and Rig squeezed his eyes closed.

And then suddenly a battleship loomed directly in front of me, so close I had to roll to the side to keep from sailing right into it.

The ship was boxy, and clearly not designed to be flown in an atmosphere. Two massive doors across the front rolled to the side, revealing a round, glassy cannon inside.

“I’m thinking that thing is the planetary weapon,” I said to Rig. “Any idea where I should start shooting?”

“Not at the cannon itself,” Rig said. “It’s built to take fire. Your destructors won’t be enough to destroy it. The cannon controls will be much more vulnerable, but they won’t have those mounted on the outside of the ship where they can be easily shot. Try flying around the front again so I can get a better look.”

“FM?” Jorgen said over the radio. “Status?”

“Jump succeeded, Jerkface,” I said. “Evaluating target now.” I swung around and headed toward the fore of the ship, avoiding the area directly in front of the cannon. I didn’t know how quickly the thing could shoot, and I didn’t want to find out by having my ship blown to bits by a projectile designed to destroy a planet.

“Uh, FM?” Nedd said over the radio. “Where did you go?”

“Busy, Nedder,” I said.

“FM, you have incoming,” Jorgen said. “A bunch of Krell turned around and are flying straight toward you. Victory and Valkyrie are nipping at their heels.”

“Permission to give chase, sir?” Kimmalyn asked.

“Permission granted. Keep as many of those ships away from FM as you can.”

“There,” Rig said, pointing to something on the monitor. “Below the gun, there’s a shield to deflect incoming fire. I don’t know if it’s the cannon controls—could be the ship’s acclivity ring, if they have one, or propulsion systems.”

“Let’s find out,” I said. I dove down below the front of the ship, skimming the underside where Rig had indicated he’d seen the shield. Predictably, there was no big red button labeled “To Destroy Cannon, Press Here.”

But there was a hatch about the width of my wingspan with the door closed tight, and I blasted it with destructor fire. The shield held for a moment, and then broke, and the door blew off, flying into the cavity beyond. I didn’t get a good look inside the wreckage before more destructor fire came sweeping in from my six, and I ducked my ship under the door and circled around again, bobbing to avoid being blown to bits by the incoming enemy.

“Well, they found us,” I said. “So much for our lead.”

“They’re still at a disadvantage,” Rig said, scanning his monitors. “They’re scrambling to protect the ship and you just blew a hole in it. Can you get a look inside?”

Destructor fire sprayed toward me as I wove around toward the front of the ship. An eerie blue energy was collecting around the cannon, so I gave that a wide berth as I flew beneath it again.

And encountered an immediate barrage of destructor fire. There *must* be something important down there, because three enemy ships were circling the damage, defending it as the cannon charged up to shoot toward the planet. Several fighters from Valkyrie and Victory Flights flew in and surrounded the enemy ships, forcing them to scatter or have their hulls torn to pieces.

“FM?” Jorgen said. “The enemy forces are turning around on you. We’re doing the best we can to keep them off you, but we’re outnumbered. Let me know when you need me to pull you out.”

“Not yet,” I said. I joined the other fighters in scattering the enemy ships while Rig reached down and unlocked the box, pulling out a quivering Chubs, clearly rattled from making the hyperjump. I took Chubs from him and set him on my shoulder. That was when I realized I had no idea where Happy had gone.

Stars, was the slug wandering around somewhere in the vacuum? Some things could survive without atmosphere, but I had no idea if taynix were one of them. The idea of poor Happy lost and alone in the black made me want to cry again.

Which I still did not have the luxury of doing right now.

The choral piece was a long one, the music still wafting out of my transmitter. I circled toward the broken hatch again, destructors firing, dodging around enemy ships. I could see some machinery in the wreckage of the blasted door, though I had no idea what it was for. “Rig?” I asked.

“No clue,” Rig said. “I say shoot it.”

I opened fire. The bottom of the ship lit up, some of the blasts glancing off the hull and ricocheting out into the battle while others tore through the tech behind the hatch door.

Destructor fire cracked my shield, and I pulled an inverse backpedal, trying to get away from my pursuers. Three enemy ships had me in their sights though, and they followed me as I darted away from the bottom of the ship.

It had only been a matter of time before their command identified the ship with the hyperdrive. Two more ships joined them, and I launched into a complicated series of moves that kept them from frying my shield entirely.

This was it though. “Jerkface,” I said over the radio. “I need to retreat.”

“Copy,” Jorgen said.

Another blast obliterated my shield. One more, and we were gone.

The glass of my windshield abruptly went black.

Rig swore. “Are we dead?”

Sparks, thousands of them, all stared at me. Not eyes, but beautiful white stars, worlds away. “Not dead,” I said. My breath caught, I reignited my shield and then scanned the proximity monitor. We might be too far for

Jorgen to bring us back, especially with our exhausted slugs. The DDF would come after us if our fuel ran out, but only if there was a DDF *left* after this latest attack.

And my flight. What would happen to them?

“There,” Rig said, pointing on the monitor. I fired my boosters to turn the ship around at his direction. *There*. We were close enough to see the battle, though we were now *behind* the battleships, farther out in space.

A flash of yellow, and a taynix appeared on the dash. Happy.

He’d returned, alive and unharmed.

“Hey buddy,” I said, reaching over and scratching him under his spines. “Glad you’re okay.”

Chatter resumed over the radio.

“I got him!”

“T-Stall, Catnip, help Sentry shake her tail.”

“On it.”

“Stars, there are more of them!”

“Has anyone heard from FM?”

That last from Jorgen. “We’re here,” I said. “Coming up on the rear flank of the battle in—”

“Two minutes,” Rig said.

“Two minutes.”

“That far?” Jorgen asked. “I directed the slug to send you toward the platforms, but I guess it didn’t work.”

“No,” I said. “It sent us in the opposite direction.” That was worrisome, though I guessed we should have expected it from creatures who were reacting in fear.

“Glad you’re okay,” Jorgen said. “We’ll head to you. You might encounter resistance on that flank. Flight, disengage and skirt the left side of the battlefield to wrap around and meet with FM. FM, give us a bearing.”

Rig read one off over the radio, and the rest of the flight affirmed they were coming in our direction.

“Sitrep?” I asked Jorgen.

“Not good,” Jorgen said. “The battle has split into two. One contingent of enemy ships is protecting the battleships and the other is cutting through our forces, heading toward Platform Prime. The other flights were unable to disable the cannon, and—”

He cut off as a beam of hot white energy erupted from the gunship and hit one of Detritus’s gun platforms. Debris scattered out from the rubble belt, destabilized by the impact.

“They’re firing on the planet,” Rig said. “Our existing defenses can’t stop that.”

“Scud,” Jorgen said. “Cobb’s calling the retreat. All forces are to abandon the fight and return to Platform Prime.”

Was there going to *be* a Platform Prime to return to?

“Um,” Rig said, studying the monitor. “Looks like there are five ships headed our way. They may know we hyperjumped to get here.”

“We’re coming for you,” Jorgen said. “FM, evasive maneuvers until we get there. We’re not going to leave you behind.”

“Understood,” I said. Then, to Rig, “How long until those ships reach us?”

“Not long,” Rig said. “They’re moving fast.”

I reversed my boosters, slowing down to dogfighting speed.

Five ships. I couldn’t outrun or outgun them, and there wasn’t a lot of terrain to work with this far out. Under normal circumstances, I could speed away and hope they wouldn’t consider me worth following, but if the enemy knew I’d hyperjumped, they would assume I was a cytonic and pursue me relentlessly.

“Incoming,” Rig said. “Scud, they’re piloted ships, every one.”

“Hold on,” I said. I performed a Barrett sequence, a complex set of dodging loops that made me nearly impossible to target. Rig groaned and grabbed the dash. I might have apologized if I wasn’t currently saving our lives. I thought for a second that he might throw up, and I apparently wasn’t the only one. Happy slid over onto Rig’s lap and cuddled up against him, trilling softly.

I broke out of the Barrett and immediately went into a twin-scissor as all five Krell ships bore down on me, the space in front of me alive with destructor fire. One blast hit my shield, weakening it.

“Jerkface, how long until you get here?” I asked.

“We see you on the monitors,” Jorgen said. “Hold on.”

I couldn’t engage my IMP, not with this much heat on my tail. Destructor fire rained over us from all directions. The enemy had figured out a formation to make it nearly impossible to dodge the fire. I could tell by the way they flew that they weren’t as good as I was. But there were more of them. A lot more. Another blast hit my shield, then another. I went into a barrel roll, but it wasn’t going to be enough.

We weren’t going to make it out of this.

Suddenly, ships came flying in from my left—Nedd and Arturo, who used their IMPs to take down the enemies’ shields. One of the enemy ships continued to tail me as the others broke off to deal with the new threat. Kimmalyyn picked off the ships with their shields down in two clean shots.

“Told you we were coming,” Nedd said over the radio. T-Stall and Catnip took out my last tail, then turned around and helped Jorgen chase down one of the last two ships. Jorgen moved in on it to get within IMP range—

And then Jorgen’s ship suddenly jerked to the side.

I tried to open a private line to him, but Jorgen didn’t pick up.

“Jerkface, you okay?” I asked over the general channel.

Nothing.

The enemy took advantage of Jorgen's apparent distraction, and turned and scored a direct hit. By the way his shields crackled, they were dangerously low. But at last he reacted, starting into an evasive pattern, and managed to lose his opponent.

“Skyward Flight, go defensive,” Jorgen said finally. “FM, cover me while I reignite my shield.”

“Sure,” I said, and followed on his wing as Jorgen slowed his ship and fell into a defensive position. The rest of the flight chased down the last two ships, then fell in with us while we waited for Jorgen’s shield to reignite. He

was still headed away from the planet, when our orders were to go the other way. Something had clearly gone wrong with him, and he still wasn't responding to my private hails.

"What's going on with him?" I asked Rig.

"No idea," Rig said.

Finally, Jorgen's shield reignited and his voice returned over the general channel. "Sorry," he said, though I wasn't sure what he was apologizing for. "Skyward Flight, reverse direction. Time to return to Platform Prime."

We all reversed direction, flying back with Jorgen at the center. "Cobb says the gunship has blasted holes through the debris field big enough to reach the surface," Jorgen said. "Another hit could destroy the apparatus and bury the caverns. All flights are to retreat below the platform belt—they're going to engage the planetary shield. I don't know what that means. Rig?"

"It might not work," Rig said. "But if it does, the platforms should move into position to protect the surface of the planet from bombardment."

I looked back toward the planet. There were two more large destabilized areas in the debris field now. While I'd been distracted, the battleships had continued firing.

"What about Platform Prime?" I asked. "Won't that still be vulnerable?"

"We don't know," Rig said. "But Platform Prime controls some vital planetary defense systems. Cobb said it wouldn't be good tactical strategy to install that on the outside of your shield."

"Regardless," Jorgen said, "they're relying on the gun platforms to defend Platform Prime while they get the shield up and running, and we are to head home at full speed."

I accelerated to Mag-9, and the rest of the flight kept pace with me. We were in this together.

And we watched together as suddenly, all throughout the debris field, the platforms began to move.

"Stars, is that happening?" Kimmalyn said.

"Looks like it," Arturo responded.

As far out as we were, we had the perfect view as the platforms began to rearrange themselves, edges extending toward each other. They spread out over the surface of the debris field like ships with wings stretched in all directions, and a crackling blue glow formed over them like a thin film.

“What the scud is that?” T-Stall asked.

“Energy field,” Rig said. “There aren’t enough platforms to cover the entire atmosphere. The energy field stretches between, filling in the gaps. It’s also covering the platforms to protect them from—*that*.”

As he spoke, the battleship lit up its gun again, and the white energy hit the newly forming shield.

It bounced off, scattering in all directions. No debris flew off this time.

“It held!” Rig said. “By the North Star, it *held*.”

“Uh, guys,” Nedd said. “How are we going to get *through* it?”

Scud. As we flew closer, I scanned the planet. There were areas where the platforms were clearly damaged, non-functional, or missing. That made sense, given the amount of debris that had fallen out of the atmosphere and landed on the surface over the years. But the energy shields stretched over those areas, covering the gaps. The next blast from the battleship focused on one of these areas, but it didn’t crack through the shield.

“It’s working,” I said.

“Trust me,” Rig said. “No one is more surprised than I am.”

“Rig, what happens if we make contact with the shield?” Jorgen asked.

“Um,” Rig said, “I would not recommend that. At best it would interfere with your instrumentation, maybe make your controls malfunction. At worst, the energy might fry you.”

“Okay,” Jorgen said. “So how do we get inside?”

“Um,” Rig said, “our exhausted hyperdrives maybe?”

“Guys?” Nedd said. “What are we going to do about the large force of enemy ships still hanging out right where we’re headed?”

I could see them on my proximity monitors, still trying to fire on the planet, chasing down the few ships that had been left outside the shield.

“I just heard from Cobb,” Jorgen said. “We’re going to run and hide.”

I supposed that was the only option we had left.

Twelve

Jorgen gave us a heading to a cluster of space rock that had been too far out for the gun platforms to blast from the sky, but which was large enough for us all to hide within.

“Cobb agrees that we’re going to have to use the hyperdrives to get on the other side of the shield,” Jorgen said. “He can’t afford to drop the shield as long as the gunships are parked there. The engineers are working on how to turn off individual sections of the shield, but that will take time.”

“It might take *months*,” Rig said. “We could starve to death waiting for that, if we don’t run out of fuel and freeze to death first.”

“Right,” Jorgen said. “And we want several fresh taynix before we try, so we don’t end up getting stranded or stuck somewhere the Superiority can get to us. So we’re going to have to wait for all the slugs to...cool down, I guess? Calm themselves? We have time, because Cobb is sending our coordinates to the other ships caught outside the shield. The slugs bring everything that’s touching their box with them, so we’ll all huddle together and touch wings and try to hyperjump beneath the shield without losing anyone.”

“It would be easier if we had some way to interlock,” Rig said to me. “Like the Defiant Fleet ships used to do before they crashed here. When this is over, my team should work on that.”

I picked Happy up off his lap and scooped him into my arms. “Jerkface,” I said over the radio. “You should probably try to comfort your slugs. Might make them ready to use again faster.”

“*Comfort* them?” Jorgen said. “How do you want me to do that? Tell them a bedtime story?”

“You could try to hum again,” I said, mostly because I knew it would bother him.

“Don’t,” Rig added. “You wouldn’t want them deciding they’d rather face the vacuum of space than stay in there with you.”

“Very helpful,” Jorgen said. “Remind me to thank you.”

“Pick them up,” I said. “Pet them. Make them feel comfortable.”

We clearly should have brought some mushrooms with us, but I did have some caviar with me, which I pulled out of my pocket and scooped onto my finger, offering it to Happy. Gill trilled excitedly down by my knee. He crawled up the seat to sit on my armrest, lifting the front part of his body into a begging position. I laughed and offered him a scoop as well.

“I feel I should tell you,” Jorgen said over the radio, “that I now have a slug on each shoulder and three on my lap, all seeming vaguely uncomfortable that I’m touching them. I blame you, FM.”

“Be more gentle,” I said. “Quit squeezing them.”

“I’m not squeezing them! Have *some* faith in me.”

“You could always try that bedtime story,” Sadie added. “I could use one of those about now.”

“I’ll tell you one,” Nedd offered.

“Don’t,” Arturo said. “Nedder’s stories always end with everyone getting eaten by space monsters.”

“Hey!” Nedd said. “All the best stories end in people getting eaten. Isn’t that right, Sentry?”

“Um, I’ll pass, thanks,” Sadie said.

“Anyone else?” Nedd offered. “Quirk? FM?”

“Thanks, I’m good,” I said.

“Bless your stars,” Kimmalyn added.

I leaned back in my seat. According to the proximity monitors, the Krell hadn’t located us here. They’d no doubt be looking for the cytonic ship that escaped, but since they knew we had hyperdrives, they’d probably expect us to have escaped beneath the shield by now.

“I think we’re actually going to survive this,” Rig said. He sounded surprised.

“So little faith in my flying,” I said, smiling at him.

Rig smiled shyly, and I found myself paying far too much attention to his lips.

He'd been an asset today, even without much pilot training. I should probably tell him so, but instead I opened a private channel to Jorgen. "Jerkface?" I said. "What happened? After your shield dropped in that last skirmish? It seemed like your ship malfunctioned."

Jorgen was quiet for a minute. "I saw Spensa."

Rig and I exchanged a look. "What?"

"I saw Spensa, in a reflection in my dash. But it wasn't a reflection. It was *her*. I could feel her, same way I feel the eyes. Same way I found the slugs under the surface."

"Seriously?" I asked. "Where is she?"

"In the nowhere," Jorgen said. "In the place we travel through when we hyperjump. She's stuck in there, and she says it's supposed to be impossible to get out."

Beside me, Rig closed his eyes.

"She'll escape," I said to Jorgen, for both their benefits.

"That's what I told her," Jorgen said. "And I believe she will. But I wish she were back already."

"So do I," I said, though I imagined it was for very different reasons. "But it's Spin. She'll survive."

"I sure hope so," Jorgen said, and he closed the line.

Rig and I sat there in silence for a moment. My arm felt warm where it touched his, and the heat radiated through my body. Finally Rig muttered, "I can't believe you thought I was into Spensa."

I laughed. "You guys are close, right? So I just assumed—"

"We grew up together. She's like my *sister*. Not that I ever had a sister, but if I had one who was, like, *terrifying*, that's how I think it would feel."

"Okay, fine," I said. "I shouldn't have made that assumption."

Rig blushed. "Can we listen to that song again?" he asked, probably to change the subject. "The one with all the voices?"

"Sure," I said, turning my transmitter back on. The chorus filled the cockpit again, and the slugs began to trill along in perfect harmony. I ran a

hand down the fringe on Gill's back, hoping this was helping him to relax.

So we could scare him again. That still made me feel like a monster. These creatures were saving our lives, maybe were going to save our whole civilization.

And what did we do in return? Terrorize them.

In the copilot seat, Rig had two slugs stretched across his lap, and another particularly long one draped over his shoulders.

"I think we should name that one Drape," I said.

"I like that," he said, running a hand down the stomach of the thicker one on his knee that had rolled over for a belly rub. "I think this one is Twist."

"Nice."

"Hey," Rig said. "You kept your perfect record of not getting killed. I appreciate you not making an exception this time."

I smiled. "Thanks for your help. We made a good team up there."

"Yeah." Rig smiled, though he looked a little wistful, and I thought I knew why. "I'm glad we're friends," he said quietly.

I'd never told him that I only wanted to be friends. He'd assumed, and I supposed that was fair.

It just wasn't true. "It's definitely better than you ignoring me," I said.

Rig winced. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"You don't have to apologize. I get it."

"Still. I shouldn't have made things weird. It's not a big deal if you're not interested in me."

"Interested in me!" Happy trilled helpfully.

"Thanks, Happy," Rig said.

Scud, should I say something? I obviously *was* interested in Rig. I liked how competent he was, how confident he got when talking about something he loved. He was kind and quick-thinking, and we did work well together as a team.

And that smile. Stars, I could stand to see that smile every day for a long, long time.

No, it wasn't a lack of interest that held me back. It was the situation, the knowledge that any day I could fly out on one of these missions and never

come back. It had almost happened today—it could happen anytime. I depended on my flight and on the other pilots. I didn't know yet who we'd lost today, but I was betting there had been casualties in this battle, people I knew and liked. People such as Lizard, who would suddenly be gone, blinked out of existence like dying stars.

I didn't know if I was ready to form any deeper attachments than the ones I already had. I wasn't sure how Jorgen handled it, knowing Spensa would always be charging off into danger. If Rig hadn't been sitting right here, I might have called Jorgen and asked him.

Rig leaned back, closing his eyes and listening to the music. He wasn't sulking. More...*sad*.

I didn't like causing him pain, especially when he had the wrong idea. But was I ready?

I'm as ready as I am right now, I thought.

Maybe in this dangerous existence, that was as close as I was ever going to get.

"I didn't say I wasn't interested," I said finally.

Rig's eyes snapped open. "Really?" he said. He sounded doubtful.

"Yeah," I said. "I said I didn't know."

"Yeah, okay," Rig said. He continued to stroke Twist on the belly, and the slug took the high soprano part while Drape trilled alto from Rig's shoulders. He was so gentle with them, so sweet.

I'd have to be an idiot not to give this a chance, whatever the circumstances.

"Maybe I have a better idea now," I said. And then I reached over and took Rig's hand.

Rig's sharp intake of breath nearly made me let go, but then he relaxed, smiling. His cheeks turned a bright pink, but he didn't let go either.

We sat there listening to the swell of the music, neither of us speaking. A quiet peace overwhelmed me, and I closed my eyes, savoring it.

Maybe it wasn't just the slugs who had needed comforting.

Finally Jorgen's voice returned over the radio. "Cobb says the shield is holding and the gunship has stopped firing for now. Four other ships are

going to catch a ride with us when the slugs are ready. They're currently hiding on the other side of the rock cluster and I've invited them to this channel."

The pilots all called in, two from Ivy Flight, and one each from Riptide and Ranger, a scout flight we'd worked with before.

Stallion, assistant flightleader from Ranger Flight, piped up. "What's the plan out here? Command said you were going to take us home. Are we finding a hole in the shield?"

"Negative," Jorgen said. "We're going to use a hyperdrive."

There was silence over the line. "Repeat, Skyward One?" Stallion said. "Did you say a *hyperdrive*?"

"Affirmative," Jorgen said. "We have a hyperdrive on board, which we will use to get inside the planetary shield."

He sounded more confident about that than he probably was, given our adventures with the hyperdrives so far. Still, with the shield blocking entry to the planet, it was this or wait for our ships to run out of power for our life support.

"What's the matter?" Nedd asked. "Never used a hyperdrive before?"

"Ummmm," Stallion said.

"Where have you been?" Catnip added. "I use hyperdrives all the time. Used one on my way to the cleansing pods this morning, didn't I, T?"

"Totally," T-Stall responded. "I thought everybody had hyperdrives these days."

"All right," Jorgen said. "That's enough."

There was silence on the line for a bit, and then Stallion said what the other pilots all must have been thinking. "But seriously? A *hyperdrive*?"

"He's being serious," I said.

"If you say so," Stallion said.

I smiled. "I do."

Jorgen reopened our private line. "FM, how are your slugs doing?"

Gill looked a bit affronted that I'd stopped petting him when I took Rig's hand, but other than that they seemed relaxed. "Good," I responded. "Maybe ready? You could try and see?"

“I think we should use one of yours. Mine all seem pretty disgruntled.”

“Stop squeezing them.”

“I’m not! I swear!”

I laughed, and Rig joined me.

If we were preparing to hyperjump soon, I was going to have to let go of his hand. I mean, my elbow was kind of aching from being at an awkward angle on the armrest and my palm was sweating. But I still weirdly didn’t want to.

That probably meant something, but I was more comfortable with the idea of attempting a hyperjump than I was with thinking about that.

I let go of Rig’s hand, stretching my fingers. “Let’s try to put them all in the box, so Jorgen doesn’t get the wrong one again.”

“I’m a little worried they’re going to start expecting the scare the moment they’re put in the box,” Rig said. “I wonder if we should be keeping them in similar boxes when they’re off duty to acclimatize them.”

Much as I didn’t want the poor slugs consigned to living in dark boxes for their entire lives, his logic made sense. And I did like that he referred to them as being off duty instead of out of use, like they were creatures rather than objects.

“Let’s hope they haven’t totally made that connection yet,” I said. “Because I don’t know that we have time to acclimatize them to it now.” Rig and I wrangled the five slugs into the box, shutting them in.

“Okay,” I told Jorgen. “We’re ready.”

“Skyward Flight,” Jorgen said, “And…guests. Come join us up by the… curvy formation at the top of this rock. We’re going to need to get our ships close enough to touch wings.”

I looked out through the canopy to see what Jorgen was talking about—a wicked hooklike protrusion on the top of this piece of space rock. I engaged my acclivity ring to lift us up toward it, and the other ships clustered around us. Jorgen’s ship pressed close on our right until our wings touched, and I could see slugs perched precariously on each of his shoulders.

“They do look uncomfortable,” Rig said.

Kimmalyyn used her boosters to scoot up next to us on the left, giving me a bright smile and a thumbs-up through the glass.

“All pilots, confirm you are in position for hyperjump,” Jorgen said.

Everyone confirmed, though the new pilots sounded significantly less confident that we were in fact about to hyperjump.

“Skyward Five, we are a go,” Jorgen said.

And then the stars disappeared.

Thirteen

Jorgen managed to get the slug to hyperjump us within a few kilometers of Platform Prime, which was several layers below the shield—a crackling, glowing net that stretched across the spaces between the platforms over our heads. We were greeted in the landing bay by Cobb and Jorgen’s mother, who looked happy for once. She ushered Jorgen off, telling him they needed to debrief.

“I can handle getting the slugs into their crates,” I told Rig. “I’m guessing you want to go talk to your friends in engineering about the shield.”

“You sure?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got it.” The rest of my flight headed to the mess hall to wind down from the battle, but I waved them off too.

Usually I liked companionship after a battle, but today I wanted to be alone.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I said to Gill, who rode on my shoulder while I toted the rest of the slugs toward Engineering in a box. “I should be happy.”

“Happy!” Happy said from the box.

“Yeah, exactly,” I said. No one in my flight had been hurt, despite several close calls. Rig and I were...something, though I didn’t know exactly what. I didn’t regret holding his hand—I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to regret that. We’d gotten the hyperdrives to work, sort of. Not enough to change the outcome of the battle, but enough to give us some hope.

But that was exactly it, I realized. I wasn’t sure what came next. We didn’t have a cytonic to teach Jorgen how to give coordinates to the slugs. We had a shield that was working for now, but there was no way it would hold up indefinitely. We had potential allies we still couldn’t reach, and a whole lot of enemies sitting on our doorstep.

We'd survived, but we were just as trapped on Detritus as we'd ever been—maybe more so. For a while we'd been able to reach into the expanse of space—and if our freedom had been measured in kilometers rather than light-years, it had been ours.

Now we'd lost all that, and the only way out was to rely on the whims of creatures who, while adorable, weren't easy to control. Jorgen could only do so much by himself. Even if engineering could replicate the holographic technology to outfit every ship with a functional box, there had to be a limit to how many hyperjumps he could track at once. The slugs had generally gone where he'd asked them to, but on that one jump he'd sent me in the opposite direction. That had worked out fine, but we couldn't guarantee that it always would.

And it would only be a matter of time before the Superiority figured out how to target and kill Jorgen. Without him we'd be lost.

We had to do better. *I* had to do better.

When I reached Engineering, I found Cobb in a meeting with Ziming and several of the other engineers. Rig waved to me, but one of Cobb's aides ushered me out, showing me to the room next door.

"We've decided to give the taynix their own space," she said. "We've been using this room to build boxes for the ships, but Rig said you wanted to start keeping the slugs in those full-time. You can start with the ones we have, and we'll build more as we go."

I stepped into the room, finding it filled with metal boxes the size of the one installed in the Dulo. The crates of slugs and mushrooms had been left in the middle of the floor, with the tools and materials for box building spread out around them. We were probably going to need to find a way to hold the boxes down so we weren't picking them up from all over the platform, but this would work for now.

"Thanks," I told the aide, and then I set the box of taynix on top of their crate and closed the door behind me.

"Thanks," Gill trilled on my shoulder.

"Thank *you*," I said, reaching into my pocket for my tin of caviar. It was almost gone, but I'd put in a requisition request to Cobb for more, and he'd

said he would speed that along. I wished I had enough to reward every taynix who helped us today, but I felt like I should conserve what I had left until the requisition order arrived.

What I could do, however, was feed them. I opened the crates and offered Happy, Twist, and the others some mushrooms. More of those were also supposed to arrive with the requisition order, though the mess hall had sent over a box of algae strips to try in the meantime.

I pulled one out of the package. “What do you think?” I asked Gill. He nudged the strip with his face, but didn’t open his mouth, instead nuzzling my finger for more caviar. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.” I offered Gill a mushroom and then sat down, watching the slugs happily eat, prolonging the time before I had to shove them each into a dark box to become comfortable in hard, cubic containers.

Trapped until they were useful to us, without even an apparatus to build spacecraft to fight back.

I sat down and leaned against the side of the crate, the tears I’d held back before burning at my eyes.

It was stupid to worry about the plight of the slugs. There were human beings who would continue to die—people I knew, people I loved. Unless we figured out a better way to use the hyperdrives, they would all be lost, the slugs taken away by the Superiority to be used in their ships.

The tears escaped from the corners of my eyes.

Maybe that was the problem. I wasn’t only worried about the slugs, or only about my people. I was worried about *all* of us.

“I’m sorry about your part in this,” I said to Gill.

“This!” he repeated enthusiastically.

The door opened, and I startled, wiping my face with the back of my hand. Rig saw though, and he came in and closed the door behind him.

“You okay?” he asked, sitting down on the edge of a table near the crate.

“Sure,” I said. “Fine. Great.”

“Fine!” one of the red slugs piped up with its deeper trill from the crate behind me.

“My team took Fine up to the communicator,” Rig said. “Cobb wants to try scaring the slugs into sending a message to Cuna, now that we know how it should work. They’re prepping Jorgen for it now.”

“Fantastic,” I said. It didn’t sound like I meant it, and I wasn’t sure I did.

Rig looked at me sympathetically, which I should have appreciated, but instead it made me want to hide. That was what I was doing in here originally, I realized. Hiding from my friends, from Command, from everyone.

“Want to talk about it?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know what there is to say.”

“I’ll start,” he said. “That was terrifying today. The hyperdrives worked, and the politicians are thrilled about that, but that’s because they weren’t in a ship being teleported right to the heart of the battle. That was scudding scary.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean for you to get caught up in that.”

“We’re *all* caught up in it,” Rig said. “And I’m not sorry I was there.” His cheeks went pink, so I didn’t think that was merely because he wanted to help with the war effort.

“It was scary,” I said softly. That wasn’t something I would usually admit after a battle. The flight liked to gather together and reenact our successes with dinner rolls and algae strips as stand-ins for ships. Except on missions when we lost someone, we all put on a brave face, mocked each other, and laughed about it until our nerves faded away.

That was probably what I should be doing now. So why didn’t I want to?

“Do you need me to keep going?” Rig asked. “I can list a lot of things I think are scary.”

“Is that supposed to help?” I asked. “Making a list?”

“Talking about it might help. If you’re not ready, I’ll continue. I’m terrified for Spensa. Being stuck in the nowhere seems like a really bad thing, and even though we all say Spensa will get out, can we guarantee that, really?”

“No,” I said.

“No,” he agreed. “And a few days ago there was a *delver* on our doorstep, and I’m still not sure why it didn’t kill us all or when it will be back.”

Rig had insisted it wouldn’t be back if Spensa could help it. I wasn’t surprised that was mostly bravado. “Did the delver look as freaky on the monitors down here as it did out there?” I asked. “Because I have never seen anything like that, and I hope that I never do again.”

“It was horrifying!” Rig said. “I nearly crapped my pants.”

I laughed.

“Okay, your turn,” Rig said. “What are you afraid of?”

“Not coming back,” I said. I hadn’t realized how deep that fear went until I said it out loud. I felt it in my bones. “Dying in battle. Ceasing to exist. Being the scar my friends won’t acknowledge or talk about.” I paused. “And the opposite of that, being the last one left.”

“Yeah, that’s enough to give you nightmares.”

I nodded. “No wonder it’s so hard to keep it together.”

“Seriously?” Rig asked. “You seem like you *always* have it together.”

“Is that what you like about me?” I asked. “Because I don’t have it together. I just don’t talk about it.”

“Clearly you should,” he said.

That wasn’t an answer to the question, and I found myself suddenly self-conscious. I crossed my arms, leaning back against the crate.

Why did I care what Rig liked about me? I didn’t usually give much thought to anyone’s impression. I showed up and did my job and tried to protect my friends; if people didn’t like me personally, so be it. Maybe it was better that way. The closer I got to people, the worse it felt when I lost them.

Had I always felt that way? No, not before flight school. Not even after. This was recent. A defense mechanism, I guessed.

It wasn’t one I particularly liked.

“Is that why I like you?” Rig said. “I don’t know. Maybe a little. I like how steady you are, how confident. I’m always so anxious about everything. I’ve wondered what it’s like to be, well, *not*.”

“Are you disappointed to realize I’m not really like that?”

“No,” Rig said. “More relieved.”

I stared at him.

“What?” he said. “You think I want you to be some emotionless robot? It’s *good* to have feelings, FM. It’s good to express them. And it’s kind of nice to know that I’m not the only one who’s terrified.”

“You’re not,” I said.

“I know. But we all show it in different ways. Spensa picks fights and threatens to murder you. Jorgen gets all tangled up in his rulebook. You pretend to be fine.”

“Fine!” Gill trilled.

“Yeah, okay,” I said. “What about you?”

“I stress,” Rig said. “And I work on hard problems and try to fix them. When Spensa disappeared the first time, I spent a full week trying to deconstruct a navigation system we found in the planetary defenses. I think it’s supposed to interface with the ship nav systems so everyone can coordinate better during flight.”

“But you didn’t figure it out?” I asked.

“No,” Rig said. “There are too many pieces we don’t understand yet. It kept me sane for a while, but then I just felt like a failure.”

“You’re clearly not a failure. You figured out how to improve our ships based on M-Bot’s design. You’re the main reason we were able to use the hyperdrives at all, even if they aren’t perfect yet.”

“We all worked on that,” Rig said.

“Still. Not a failure.”

“I know,” Rig said. “I just always feel like I should be doing more. If I could figure everything out faster, more lives would be saved. Every time someone dies in combat, there was more I could have done to prevent it.”

Huh. I felt that way, but I hadn’t thought about the people who stayed here on the ground feeling responsible for our deaths. “You’re doing the best you can though. No one can ask more than that.”

“Right. Does that make you feel better when your friends don’t come back?”

“No,” I said.

“Exactly.”

“Exactly,” Gill agreed.

“You’re certainly being chatty today,” I said, offering him another mushroom. I looked up at Rig. I wished he’d sit closer, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to suggest it.

He was right. It was good to talk. But the more I did, the more exposed I felt, like he could see right through me.

I didn’t like anyone seeing what a mess I really was, least of all him.

“Did you feel like a failure when you dropped out of flight school?” I asked.

“Not really,” he said. “It was Spensa’s dream, not mine. I felt more... directionless. Like I wasn’t sure what I wanted to be, but I knew it wasn’t a pilot.”

“Today probably reaffirmed that.”

“Yes and no,” he said. “It was more like a window into everything I gave up, you know? The engineering crew is a team, but it’s not the same. You guys...you depend on each other to survive. And everyone is still nice to me, though I’m not part of the flight. It was nice to experience that again, even if I know I did the right thing by dropping out.”

“We depend on you to survive,” I said. “It was engineering that saved us all today, not the pilots. But I know what you mean.”

The slugs were slowly wandering out of the crate, since I’d left it open. Twist perched on the edge and trilled until Rig reached out to pick her up.

“For what it’s worth,” I said, “I don’t think the rest of the flight sees you as a dropout. Most of *them* dropped out of flight school too. Jorgen and I were the only ones who graduated.”

“How did that feel?” Rig asked.

“Lonely,” I admitted. “Cobb told us on our first day that most of us wouldn’t make it. I felt guilty that I did and the others didn’t.”

“Didn’t stop the rest of them from flying though,” Rig said. “Just me.”

“Do you regret it?” I looked up at him, and was surprised to see him considering the question. He’d said he knew he’d done the right thing, and

it was clear to me that his calling was in engineering.

I also didn't hate that on a normal day he wouldn't be in nearly as much danger as the rest of us.

"No," he said. "Doesn't stop it from hurting sometimes." He looked down at me. "If you had it to do over, would you still become a pilot?"

"Yes," I said. I was surprised at how easily that answer came, even after all we'd been through. "If I wasn't, I wouldn't be able to protect my friends, you know? They'd still be up there flying, but I wouldn't be there."

Rig nodded. "Is that why you became a pilot? To protect people?"

"Ultimately, yeah," I said. "I didn't intend to stay in the DDF forever. I don't like the way the Defiant League acts like war is the most glorious thing ever, the way they make violence seem wonderful, when really it causes so much pain. But I thought if I was a pilot, I'd have the authority and respect to talk about that, you know? That I could stand up for people no one else would defend, and people would have to listen to me."

"People do listen to you," Rig said. "I've always respected that about you. When you talk, everyone listens. Not because you're a pilot. You command respect by being who you are."

My face got warm. "I don't feel like that," I said.

"Yeah," Rig said. "I guess none of us really believe the good things about ourselves, do we?"

"Spensa maybe," I said. But no, that wasn't true. Even Spensa was insecure sometimes. It just made her louder and more threatening.

"She wishes," Rig said. Gill butted up against my elbow until I rested my hand on his head, petting him gently.

"What I wish," I said, "is that I could guarantee these guys a life where the primary goal isn't for us to be able to scare them as many times as possible. I wish there was another way."

"It would be good if we could find something," Rig said. "Because if it takes longer and longer between scares, we're going to need more slugs, or be really limited in how often we can use the hyperdrives. The Superiority has a galaxy worth of planets they could have mined for slugs. They

probably have breeding programs. So far, we have the population of one cave.”

“If we figure out how to use them more efficiently, we might be able to get an edge on the Superiority.” I cringed. Now I was the one talking about the slugs like a resource. “It would improve quality of life for the taynix as well. If they could be *convinced* to hyperjump, even though it’s scary, then we wouldn’t have to rely on their primal impulses.”

“It’s a good goal,” Rig said. “We could design an experiment, see if we can find anything.”

I looked up into his eyes, which were a deep and clear blue, and had some primal impulses of my own. “Fine by me,” I said.

Rig stood off the table and offered me his hand to help me up. When I stood, I didn’t let go.

We were about the same height, so our faces were close without either of us having to lean. I clearly surprised Rig, because he stuttered a bit, but he didn’t move away.

I took that as a good sign. The slug on my shoulder, on the other hand, appeared incapable of reading the room. “Fine!” Gill said.

“Hush,” I told him. And then I leaned forward and brushed my lips against Rig’s.

“Fine!” Gill yelped, and then teleported away. Another escapee I was going to have to track down. *Later.*

I smiled against Rig’s mouth. “Better than fine,” I said.

Rig laughed. “So much better.”

Maybe the slug could read the mood after all.

Fourteen

When Rig ran an experiment, he did not mess around.

It took us most of the evening to design something up to his standards, even though the experiment itself was only comprised of a couple of boxes set up across the room from each other.

The next morning, we were ready to start gathering data. We'd sorted the slugs, isolating the red and black ones, since we weren't ready to deal with them yet. Our new idea was that in the absence of coordinates, we could teach the slugs to hyperjump to a familiar place on command. It wouldn't immediately help us to reach Cuna, since the slugs had never been to wherever Cuna was, but Rig said that big breakthroughs had to be broken down into smaller steps. Getting the slugs to do *anything* without scaring them would be one important piece. Then, if we could learn how to give them coordinates, we'd have another means to motivate them to go.

If the experiment worked, of course.

"Okay," Rig said. "I think we're ready for phase one."

I pulled Chubs out of the crate. We'd kept all the slugs in the closed box while we set up the experiment, so they couldn't watch us. I wasn't sure how much they would pay attention anyway, but Rig insisted that could invalidate the results.

I opened one of the boxes, showing Chubs a scoop of caviar sitting in a dish on the bottom. "Home," I told him.

"Home!" Chubs trilled.

I let him eat the caviar, then put another small scoop into the dish where he could see it before finally closing the door on the box. Then I took Chubs across the room and put him into another box facing away from the one with the caviar. This box was made out of wood and had a clear front so we could observe him inside and see when he left. Chubs wouldn't be able to reach the caviar unless he decided to hyperjump.

Chubs crawled around the box, his face crinkling at me through the clear plastic.

“He’s not doing anything,” I said.

Rig stood over me with a clipboard, writing notes. I didn’t know what he was writing, because nothing was happening.

“Still nothing,” I said.

“This is how science works,” Rig said. “Nothing, nothing, nothing. Maybe something! Oh, no, that was also nothing.”

“I don’t know how you stand it,” I said.

“Are you kidding? It’s fascinating.”

“Really? *Nothing* is *fascinating*?”

“Sometimes,” Rig said. “Depends on the nothing, I guess. Try giving him the keyword now.”

I pressed my finger to the plastic, getting Chubs’s attention. “Home,” I said to him.

He didn’t move.

“Home,” I said again. “Go home and get the caviar, would you? You’re making me look like an idiot.”

“Home,” Chubs trilled, his voice muted by the plastic. “Home, home.”

“Try looking away,” Rig suggested. “They don’t seem to like to hyperjump while we’re watching.”

“Okay, fine,” I said, turning around. “I’m not watching.”

A moment later, a slug nudged my ankle. There was Chubs, looking up at me expectantly from the floor.

“I think he sees you as the source of caviar, FM,” Rig said.

“FM!” Chubs said.

“Not me,” I said, carrying Chubs over and giving him a second look inside the home box. Then I brought him back to the observation box and shut him behind the transparent door.

“Home,” I said, and I turned around.

Rig studied his clipboard. When I glanced back at the observation box, Chubs was gone. I found him in the “home” location, chowing down on the caviar.

“Hey!” I said. “Good job! Home.”

“Home!” the slug trilled happily.

“Okay,” Rig said. “So he went to find the food because he knew where it was. Now see if you can get him to do it without seeing the food first.”

I waited for Chubs to finish his caviar, and then took him back to the observation box and put him inside. “Home,” I said to him.

“Home,” he replied.

And then he disappeared and reappeared in the “home” box, sniffing around for caviar.

“Hey, it worked,” I said. I pulled out my now almost empty tin of caviar and gave a scoop to Chubs.

“Okay,” Rig said. “Now try it with another slug.”

When I turned around, Drape had already climbed onto Rig’s shoulder, nuzzling his cheek.

“Looks like Drape volunteered to join the experiment.” I scooped Drape up off Rig’s shoulders. Standing this close to him made my skin tingle, and I wasn’t alone; when Rig blushed, even the back of his neck turned red.

Then the door opened abruptly, and we jumped apart.

Jorgen stood in the doorway, holding Gill and looking at us curiously. “Hey,” he said. “Everything okay in here?”

“Fine!” Rig said, too loudly.

“Fine!” Gill said from his perch in the crook of Jorgen’s arm.

“Don’t start that again,” I said to Gill, taking him from Jorgen. “I’m glad you’re here. You’re just in time to participate in our experiment.”

“I don’t think I have time for that,” Jorgen said.

I shrugged. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Jorgen looked at me like I’d lost my mind, but at least he didn’t comment on how close Rig and I had been standing when he’d walked in.

“I was actually coming to tell you two that they’re almost ready to try using the communicator to reach Cuna,” Jorgen said. “They’re going to use the holoprojector to power the communicator, but Cobb still wants all of us present, since we’ve been working with the slugs. Thadwick wants Rig to

consult with him on the communicator, and then FM and I are supposed to report after that.”

“Sure,” Rig said. “FM can show you what we’ve been working on.” He hurried out of the room more quickly than normal. I hoped he was looking to get away from Jorgen and not me.

Probably it wasn’t me.

Jorgen cocked an eyebrow at me. “Working? Is that what you were doing in here?”

“Yes, *actually*,” I said. “We designed an experiment.”

“Is that what they’re calling it now.”

“Shut your mouth,” I told him.

Jorgen smirked at me.

“Would you like me to mock you about Spensa now?” I asked. “Because if that’s fair game, let me just say—”

“Forget I said anything,” Jorgen said quickly. “Show me this experiment.”

“Thought you’d never ask.” I handed Jorgen Rig’s clipboard, though he didn’t look anywhere near as cute carrying it. “You take notes.”

Jorgen squinted at Rig’s notes while I used the last of my caviar running both Drape and Gill through the experiment. Drape didn’t teleport into the box no matter how many times I showed her the caviar, but Gill did so right away, trilling “home” happily at me.

“Huh,” Jorgen said. “Maybe some of them are more motivated by food than others?”

“Probably,” I said. “But even Chubs took a while to follow the command. I don’t know if this will be a reliable way to get them to hyperjump or not, though they do seem to be able to do it over and over again without having to wait for us to scare them.”

Jorgen consulted his watch. “We’re due up at Command,” he said. “I see what you’re doing here FM, but I don’t know that it’s any better than what we have.”

“Not yet,” I said. “Rig says science takes time to yield results.”

“That’s my point,” Jorgen said.

He didn't have to elaborate. We both knew time was one thing we didn't have.

—

The command center was crowded with members of the command staff, the engineers, and a few more people from Jeshua Weight's retinue sent by the National Assembly. Jorgen shouldered through to stand behind his mother, and I shadowed him, feeling out of place. I felt better when Rig joined us, coming over from a discussion with several of the other engineers.

"Fine is loaded in the communicator," Rig said. "And we've got the holoprojector hooked up. Cobb has recorded a message and we've set up the data in the communicator to align with the metadata from Cuna's first transmission. It's all very theoretical and I wish we'd had more time to test it, but it should probably work."

"Do you ever get used to it?" I asked. "Always having your projects thrown into service before you feel comfortable with the amount of testing you've done?"

Rig wiped his palms on his jumpsuit. "I definitely haven't gotten there yet."

"All right, quiet now," Cobb said from his place at the front of the room. "We're going to send the message." He nodded to Ziming, who pressed a button on a control panel, and then Cobb spoke into his headset. "This is Admiral Cobb, human from the planet Detritus. Minister Cuna, please confirm receipt."

Ziming pressed another button. "Did it work?" Cobb asked.

"I think so," Ziming said. "It sent, but I don't know if it was—"

"Admiral Cobb, human of Detritus," a voice said over the loudspeaker—the same eerie, even voice we'd heard in the first message. "I confirm receipt. Thank you for your response."

Cobb nodded, and Ziming resumed the transmission. "Minister Cuna. We would like to meet, but are unable to discern your location. Our cytonic is

untrained, and our hyperdrives primitive. Any assistance you can offer to help us reach you would be welcomed. Please advise.”

“I am afraid time is running short,” Cuna responded. “The Superiority has sent forces to bombard my location, and while our minimal artillery has kept them at bay, we expect them to send for reinforcements at any moment.”

“How many ships?” Cobb said over the communicator.

There was a pause. “Twenty fighters. We hear over the datanet that the Superiority forces are spread thin. I fear they will soon mobilize on your planet.”

“They already have,” Cobb said. “We’re holding them off for the moment.”

“Twenty ships,” Jorgen muttered. “We can handle that. If we can get there.”

“I am routing coordinates through my hypercomm,” Cuna said. “Please interface your cytonic with your communicator to receive coordinates.”

“Interface our cytonic?” Jeshua said. “What in the North Star’s light does that mean?”

Most of the room looked at Jorgen, who stuttered. If there was one thing Jorgen hated, it was not having an answer.

“Maybe he needs to interact with the taynix,” I said. “The one we used to send the message.”

“Fine,” Rig said. “He’s in the communicator in Charlie Sector.”

“You shouldn’t have to touch Fine, right?” I asked Jorgen. “You could scare the slugs at a distance, so you should be able to—”

“Hold on,” Jorgen said, closing his eyes. “I’m working on it.”

“You do that,” Cobb said, pulling the microphone closer. “This is Admiral Cobb,” he said. “We’re working on interfacing our cytonic now.”

“Well?” I asked Jorgen quietly.

“I’m trying,” Jorgen said. “Maybe if I—” Jorgen jerked back like he’d been slapped in the face. “I’ve got it. Admiral, I’ve got the coordinates. I know where they are. Stars, that’s painful.” He rubbed his temples. His mother watched him with concern.

“We have your position,” Cobb said. “We’re going to send a flight to defend you. Jorgen, take Skyward Flight and—”

“We should contact the National Assembly,” Jeshua said. “Let them make a decision before we send away one of our cytonics. We don’t know if they’ll be able to return.”

Cobb looked at Jorgen.

“That’s true, sir,” Jorgen said. “I’m not sure I can find Detritus again on my own. The slugs might be able to return instinctively from that far of a distance, but I can’t be sure. But these aliens, they understand the hyperdrives better than we do. They might be able to teach us how.”

Cobb turned to Jeshua. “You want to be able to communicate with our enemies. This is the only alien force that has ever offered to talk with us. We have to take this chance.”

“I agree with you,” Jeshua said. “But it’s up to the National Assembly to decide—”

“Sir,” Jorgen said. “The coordinates are fading. It’s slow, so we have a little bit of time, but it’s like it was with Spensa. I don’t know how to hang on to it.”

“Take your flight,” Cobb said to Jorgen. “Go now.”

Jeshua scowled at him.

Jorgen hesitated for a moment. Then he nodded. “Yes, sir,” he said, and I followed Jorgen out of the command center. Together we ran for the landing bay.

Fifteen

The rest of our flight met us at our ships. T-Stall was still munching on a handful of fried algae strips from the mess hall, and Catnip was zipping up his jumpsuit, but Kimmalyln and Sadie were already climbing into their cockpits.

“What’s happening?” Arturo asked, meeting us by Jorgen’s ship. “It’s just us this time?”

“We’re going to rescue a defecting Superiority minister,” Jorgen said. “Just our flight, but we need to hurry. Minister Cuna is already under attack. I have coordinates to hyperjump there, but we’re still figuring out how we’re going to get back.”

Arturo looked alarmed at that news. “Those are our orders?”

“Those are our orders,” Jorgen said. “Let’s get everyone in the air.”

Arturo nodded and headed for his ship, yelling at Nedd on the way to do the same.

Rig ran up with a box full of slugs, which he thrust into my arms. Gill was in there along with Happy, Chubs, Drape, and Twist. “Cobb wants us to keep the holoprojector attached to the communicator,” he said. “That way we’ll be able to communicate with you when you get there, because we’ll have one and Cuna has one.”

“You might not be able to scare Fine again,” I said. “You’ll have to try another purple slug. Though we received more than one communication from Cuna out of the same one, so maybe the connection lasts for a while after it’s established?”

“I’ll check on that as soon as you leave.” Rig bit his lip, looking like he wanted to say something but thought better of it.

“I’ll help you load the slugs into Jorgen’s ship,” I said, looking down at the slugs. There was another purple slug in there and I thought it had gotten mixed in, but when we reached Jorgen’s cockpit Rig put him in the metal

box beneath the dash with the others. “I think you should take a communication slug with you,” he said. “I don’t know for sure how many tainix Cuna will have. Technically, Jorgen can communicate cytonically without a slug at all, but I think you should have every resource we can spare with you in case—” His voice broke, and he took a deep breath.

I got it. I was going and he was staying, and he was scared. Probably for all of us, but I liked to think that he was sparing a little extra for me.

“I’ll come back,” I said. “Perfect record of not dying, remember?”

“Yeah,” Rig said. “I remember.”

I wanted to take his hand, but Jorgen was already climbing into his cockpit.

Time to go.

“We haven’t had time to set the ships up with interlocking pieces,” Rig said to Jorgen, “so you’re going to have to do it the way you did last time, all touching wings.”

“Got it,” Jorgen said. “We’ll make it work. FM, let’s go.”

Rig reached out and squeezed me on the arm, and then hurried away. I ran for my regular Poco and climbed in, immediately engaging my acclivity ring and boosting away. As my ship rose toward the ceiling of platforms between the sections of crackling blue energy holding the shield together at the seams, I looked back and saw Rig watching us go.

I’ll be back, I thought at him. Saying it wouldn’t make it more or less true though. It wasn’t a promise any of us could make.

Maybe I shouldn’t have started anything between us, put him in a position to hurt even more if the worst happened. Or maybe I was making too much of it. Maybe none of us mattered, not really. What did it change when any of us were gone? The DDF still churned out more cadets. If they ran out, they’d lower the age to take the pilot’s test and bring them in younger and younger. We’d keep sending groups on missions like this, never knowing if they’d come back, because our survival as a group mattered more than the individuals. I didn’t disagree with that; I saw the logic to it.

But I still wondered: if we didn't matter as individuals, then what were we saving the group *for*?

I joined the rest of the flight less than half a kilometer from the platform. Through a gap between platforms I could see the crackling net of the shield. As frightened as I'd been of the stars—feeling like I could fall off the face of the world—I missed them now that they were gone.

I supposed I'd be seeing them again soon enough.

"Skyward Flight," Jorgen said, "move in together. All ships need to be touching, or some of you will be left behind."

I maneuvered my ship between Sadie's and Kimmalyn's with a gentle touch. The metal of our wings rubbed against each other, and I could see Sadie looking over at me through her canopy. I tried to give her a reassuring smile. I remembered what Rig said: *You seem like you always have it together.*

I *wanted* to seem that way, I realized. Spensa lost her temper, Jorgen got frustrated, Rig could talk about fear like it was his best friend.

And me?

There was safety in being the one everyone else looked to. I felt everything, but I didn't want anyone to know it.

"All right," Jorgen said. "That looks good. Initiating hyperdrive."

I closed my eyes. We were about to hyperjump many, many times farther than we ever had. I wondered if it would take longer. I wondered if—

"Stars!" T-Stall said over the radio. "Are you guys seeing this?"

"Yes," Jorgen said. "I think—I think that's our destination."

I opened my eyes and stared out through the glass of my canopy at the expanse of black in front of me. The light of the nearest star was behind us, illuminating an object in the distance—a large rock that was dominated by dozens of white tentacles protruding from it like petals on some wildflower.

Or, well, it was impossible to tell by sight *how* large or distant it was. I'd never seen anything I could compare this thing to. I widened the scope of my proximity monitors, trying to get a sense of it.

"We're a hundred and fifty klicks out," Arturo said, beating me to it. "That *thing*. *That's* where we're going?"

“I’m getting a communication,” Jorgen said. “Hang on.”

We hung on. Our ships had drifted a little since we’d jumped, so we were no longer bumping into each other, but none of us had engaged our boosters to move far.

My radio made a little flickering noise, and I reached out to adjust the dial. This wasn’t the time for the thing to fritz out.

And then Cuna’s smooth, alien voice came over the radio. “Skyward Flight,” the alien said. “Thank you for coming to our aid. Your leader has given me permission to address you. As you can see, my crew and I are stranded on the old Superiority outpost of Sunreach—an abandoned research facility built here to study this rare species of mammoth starpod. You’ll want to avoid it. It’s nearing its molting cycle, which makes it especially hungry.”

“It’s *hungry*?” Catnip said. “Jerkface, what does she mean it’s *hungry*?”

“I understand you humans have not often encountered other species,” Cuna’s voice continued. “My species is referred to as *they*, because we do not conform to human genders. Diones are—”

“Jorgen?” Nedd said. “What is the alien talking about?”

“They’re saying don’t call them ‘she,’ ” I said. “But maybe we could deal with the formal introductions when we get there?”

“Right,” Jorgen said. “Um, thank you for the...etiquette lesson. My team will do our best to learn what language you prefer. For now, can you tell us how to reach you? Are you saying that giant star...flower...*thing* is going to eat us?”

“Yes, the mammoth starpod. It generally prefers minerals and other space matter, but the feeler tubes on its limbs can’t distinguish the metal in your ships from more nutritious varieties, so you might get past its mandibles before it realizes it has captured you in error. I recommend avoiding the limbs entirely by flying around the back side of the...Oh, *that’s* unfortunate.”

Beyond the mammoth starpod, several objects soared toward us. Ships, from the look of them on the proximity monitor, probably the ones waiting

for backup from the Superiority. Except they must have noticed us, because they weren't waiting anymore.

"Please," Cuna said. "*Hurry.*"

"Skyward Flight," Jorgen said. "We're going to fly around to the...side of this rock that doesn't want to eat us. Anyone *not* clear on which side that is?"

"The one without the pretty space monster," Kimmalyn said. "Got it."

"Right," Jorgen said. "Avoid the enemy ships, but if one shoots at you, shoot it back."

"Always solid advice," I said. "Formation?"

"Double V," Jorgen said. "Orient so the giant space monster is on top of the...giant space rock."

Without a planet nearby to orient which way was down, I supposed it made sense to agree on it in advance.

"Why on the top?" Nedd asked. "Couldn't the tentacled monster of death be on the bottom?"

"Because flowers grow *up*," Sadie said. "Even giant death flowers. Everyone knows that."

"She's got you there, Nedder," Arturo said.

"Less chatter," Jorgen said. "Let's keep an eye on what we're flying into."

We quieted down and fanned out, rotating so that the starpod bloomed upward into the dark sky, then accelerated toward Sunreach in wingmate pairs, Arturo and Nedd taking point on one side with Sadie and me on the other. With my proximity monitor still zoomed out, I could see ten enemy ships closing in on a location near the center of the underside of the rock. Another ten ships were closing in on us now. They outnumbered us, but we were used to it.

"FM and Sentry," Jorgen said, "draw off as many as you can. T-Stall and Catnip, back them up. The rest of us will try to punch through to the other group of ships. Divide and conquer."

Dividing the team into two groups also weakened us, but it seemed like a good choice, all things considered. If we spent too much time on the

intercepting force, the remaining ships had more time to kill or capture Cuna.

“Understood,” I said, and Sadie and I sped toward the incoming ships. When we drew closer, we pivoted our boosters to slow down to dogfighting speeds. Sadie would follow my lead, which meant the specific shape of this maneuver was up to me. The smarter thing for these ships to do would be to refuse the bait and keep a perimeter to prevent us from getting close to the base where Cuna and their team were sheltered. I had to make it look like I was trying to punch past the ships instead of trying to distract them from their mission, and hope they saw me as enough of a threat that it worked.

“Cover me,” I said to Sadie.

“I’ve got you,” Sadie replied.

I kicked into a complicated sequence of evasive maneuvers, the kind that would have made Rig turn green. I slipped past the enemy ships through a shower of destructor fire. Several pivoted, their lines of red fire following me. I took a hit, but it glanced off my shield. I sped toward Cuna’s location, gathering tails as I went.

“Nice going, FM,” Jorgen said.

“We’ve got you covered,” Catnip added.

Now it was time to fake panic. I let my evasive maneuvers grow wider and sloppier, not so much that I gave the enemy too wide of a target, but enough that they might interpret it as me losing control. Then I reversed my boosters, feeling the sharp drag as the g-forces overwhelmed the GravCaps. I switched direction, darting back toward the enemy ships in a way that was impossible to do in atmosphere but worked beautifully in a vacuum. I roped one with my light-lance and used my own momentum to execute a turn, then flew off to the side, letting the ship go once I was past.

It worked. Half of the ships followed me as I shot off toward the side. T-Stall and Catnip joined Sadie in firing on the ships from behind, adding to the adrenaline of the chase. The enemy ships raced after me, destructor fire surrounding me, weakening my shield. I sped up—I wouldn’t be able to outrun them, but they’d become less accurate at high speeds, and out here we had all the space in the world.

“Well done,” Jorgen said. “Moving in toward the base now. Amphi and Nedder, take point. Quirk and I will cover you.”

“They’re on to us,” T-Stall said. “Peeling away and coming your direction, Jerkface.”

It was true. Two of the ships were still hot on my tail, but the other three were making a wide loop and heading back to chase down the rest of the flight.

“Sentry and I can handle this if you want to follow,” I said to T-Stall and Catnip. They both readily agreed, circling around to go after the returning ships.

I continued my evasive maneuvers, trying to hold the interest of my two tails. I couldn’t keep it up forever though.

“Ready to take care of these guys?” I asked Sadie.

“Ready and willing,” Sadie replied.

“You take the one on my left wing,” I said. “I’ll take the one on the right.”

“You got it,” Sadie said, and I abruptly cut speed, slowing myself with a reverse of my boosters. The enemy ships shot past me and I engaged my IMP, dropping their shields.

Both Sadie and I opened fire, ripping the enemy ships apart against the dark sky.

“Good work,” I said to Sadie. “Let’s help the others.” We paused while I reignited my shield and then we reversed course, now far enough out that I couldn’t get a visual of the others against the dark expanse. I listened as the others exchanged orders over the radio, engaging with the enemy ships.

“Jerkface, they’re headed for you.”

“I’ve got them. Cover me.”

“Jerkface, I’ve got a clear shot. Can you bring down their shields?”

“On it.”

Sadie and I accelerated as I found the others on my monitor. It was scudding hard to take down a Krell fighter without bringing down their shields first, but these ships were too good—all enemy aces, not the less-skilled drone pilots we’d been fighting. Our team needed backup.

“Jerkface, you’ve got three ships on your tail,” Arturo said. “Don’t bring down your shields.”

“I see them,” Jorgen said. “I’ll jump out right after. Engaging IMP.”

Sadie and I soared closer, and I finally spotted Jorgen’s ship against the backdrop of space just as his shield went down.

Half a second later, he disappeared. I immediately zoomed out my proximity monitors, searching for his ship.

Jorgen reappeared on the other side of the rock, up near the mammoth starpod and its dangerous tentacles.

“Jerkface, what are you doing?” I said over the radio.

“I overshot,” Jorgen said. “I think the slug misunderstood me.”

“Get out of there!” I said.

“I’m on it,” he said. “I’m going to go evasive and try to fly out. If that fails, I’ll engage the hyperdrive again.”

On the monitor, the arms of the starpod moved slowly, like they were swaying in a breeze.

“Um, guys?” Nedd said. “What is the enemy doing?”

I watched on my monitors as several of the ships near Cuna’s base—and all of the ones we’d been dogfighting—sped out around the edge of the rock and upward toward the tentacles of the starpod.

They knew more about this creature than we did. If they thought they could survive flying through the tentacles, they probably could.

But Jorgen couldn’t take all those ships. Not by himself.

“Humans,” Cuna said over the radio. “Our analysis of the enemy flight patterns suggests that their primary focus is now to kill your cytonic.”

“You don’t say,” Nedd said.

“Jerkface,” Arturo said, “they’re coming for you. Get out of there.”

“Engaging hyperdrive,” Jorgen said.

“We’re on our way,” I said, accelerating to follow the other ships up and over the rock.

Scud, the starpod was *enormous*. This rock was far smaller than a planet, much closer to the size of one of the larger platforms around Detritus. But the arms of the starpod reached many times farther than the diameter of the

rock, each tentacle many wingspans wide and several kilometers long. They were whitish in color, with a smaller purplish stalk growing up the middle of each arm giving the illusion of a purple racing stripe. If the starpod was using those feelers to catch debris out of the space around it, it could almost certainly grab and hold a starship. As if attracted to my motion, one of the arms began to lean slowly in my direction, and I rolled my ship out of the way to avoid it.

Up ahead I could see Jorgen's ship near the center of the creature. The enemy ships raced toward him, opening fire, as the tentacles of the starpod slowly swayed in their direction.

"Engaging hyperdrive," Jorgen said. His ship blinked out—

And back again, this time *closer* to the body of the starpod.

"Scud, the slugs aren't listening to me," Jorgen said. "I think they're trying to get into a smaller space."

I steered my ship up to get a better view.

And stared into the scudding maw of the creature. Rows and rows of long ivory protrusions jutted from its center like teeth, but these were clearly flexible, waving about like the much-longer tentacles.

Tongues. This creature had a thousand tongues arranged in circles around its pink, cavernous mouth. And at this moment, all of them were reaching for Jorgen's ship. The enemy ships continued to move toward him and I followed, Sadie at my wing. Jorgen pulled up, clearing the tongues, then evaded a tentacle that undulated down, looping toward him. The enemy reached him, destructor fire raining everywhere.

"Get out of there!" I said to Jorgen.

"Engaging—" Jorgen said.

His shield cracked.

"Hyper—"

His ship jerked to the side, like he was trying to avoid the fire for one more moment to give himself enough time to frighten one of the slugs. One final movement, and then his shield broke.

"Scud—" Jorgen said over the radio.

And then his ship ripped apart, torn to bits by enemy fire, the pieces floating backward as the creature licked toward them eagerly with its tongues.

Sixteen

No.

I pulled my ship up, then ducked down again to avoid a tentacle that swung toward me and the enemy ships with a broad stroke. The enemy avoided it as well, but I wished a fiery death upon every one of them.

Jorgen had a ship full of hyperdrives. He should have been able to get out when his shield dropped. But if he did, the slugs would have teleported him somewhere out into space. If Jorgen wasn't dead yet of depressurization, he would soon asphyxiate.

No.

"FM? Sentry?" Arturo said over the radio. "What's going on up there?"

"Um," Sadie said. "Um, Jerkface—"

I wasn't going to make her explain this. "Jerkface is down," I said.

"FM?" Arturo said. "Say again?"

"Jerkface is down," I repeated. I didn't know how I could sound so dispassionate. My voice was foreign to my own ears. "His ship was destroyed. Salvage irretrievable."

Silence over the radio.

Finally, Kimmalyn was the one who spoke. "He got out, right? He had all those slugs. He must have gotten out."

"FM?" Arturo asked.

"I don't know," I said honestly. I didn't explain what the likely outcome was if he had. My friends already knew.

"All right," Arturo said. "Mourn later. We have a mission."

"Amphi—" Nedd started.

"Mourn *later*," Arturo said firmly. He was first assistant, now our flightleader. "Flight, regroup. We're going to make a run for the base, try to take out the remaining ships on the way."

"Humans?" Cuna said. "I have lost contact with your commander."

“This is Amphisbaena,” Arturo said. “I’m in command now.” His voice was tight, clipped. He was clearly struggling to follow his own orders, and I didn’t blame him. “We’re still coming to get you and your people out of there.”

“That would be appreciated,” Cuna said. “The ships are firing on our location, and our shield has been breached.”

Sadie wove among the tentacles of the starpod, headed for the edge of the creature where we could dive to the underside of the rock again. The enemy ships followed, and Sadie and I performed a double scissor, avoiding their fire. As one of the ships tried to chase us, a starpod arm slapped it from beneath. The ship stuck to the stalks and the tentacle carried it away down toward its mouth.

If ships weren’t nutritious, the creature clearly hadn’t figured that out yet. “Status, FM?” Arturo asked.

“We’re on our way, Amphi,” I said. “Don’t wait for us.”

“Copy. All pilots, move toward Cuna and destroy the enemy ships.”

I rolled away from another tentacle as it arced toward me, shooting over the edge of the creature and plummeting down the side of the rock. Sadie followed right behind me, finally out of the starpod’s reach. My flightmates coordinated with each other over the radio as they engaged the enemy. I knew we had to join them—we were still outnumbered, and the more of us got involved in the fight, the greater chances we’d get out alive.

Though I wasn’t sure what the point was. We’d lost Jorgen, our only cytonic. Without him, what were the rest of us going to do? We’d be as stranded here as Cuna, waiting for the Superiority to send reinforcements to finish us. Cuna probably had a slug and a projector for their communicator, but without a cytonic we couldn’t use those to get home.

We’d lost. We’d gambled and we’d lost.

And so—despite my absolute agreement with Arturo that the time to mourn would come later—I felt tears forming in my eyes. Hot streams of them ran along my cheeks, and I pushed my ship faster, almost welcoming the g-forces as they overcame the GravCaps.

We were approaching our flight now, and as we did a shape popped into existence on my dashboard, causing me to jump.

Gill sat there, nuzzling my arm.

Had he tried to save Jorgen? If his body was lost in space somewhere, we wouldn't be able to bring him home.

Gill slipped off the dashboard and onto my lap, quivering up against me like he wanted to comfort me. I didn't blame the slugs for what happened to Jorgen. I was glad Gill had gotten out, and hoped the others had as well. Maybe Jorgen had opened the box at the last moment, realizing he wasn't going to make it out, giving the slugs the chance to escape. The communications slug couldn't hyperjump, so it had likely been consumed by the starpod.

Without cytonic abilities or a holoprojector, I couldn't make Gill hyperjump, so his presence wasn't useful to me. We were still in far too desperate a situation for me to feel relieved.

I couldn't help but be glad that he was here though. I ran one hand up his back as I engaged my destructors with the other, distracting a ship that was tailing Kimmalyn. As if he could sense my distress, Gill cuddled closer, tightening around my waist like a leathery belt.

And then everything changed. My ship disappeared, my monitors, the whole of space. I was plunged into darkness.

And landed with a thud onto a cold concrete floor.

"Ouch!" I shouted, cradling my shoulder where I'd landed. Gill dropped off my waist, rolling over on the floor. I couldn't see anything, but I was definitely not in outer space anymore. Or in my ship, as I lay on a slab of cracked concrete. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could see a shadow up ahead, and I crawled toward it with one arm out.

My hand met wood. A doorframe, I realized, and there was the door, which moved on squeaky hinges. Gill had hyperjumped and taken me with him, though I didn't know where or why. Technically we could be anywhere in the universe now, but the taynix didn't tend to go far without specific instructions.

I stood, pushed the door the rest of the way open, and stepped into a shadowy corridor. What little light there was came from a thin band of tube lighting that ran along the ceiling, and I followed it, moving up this corridor and then down another. The air was warm, I realized. There was atmosphere for me to breathe and gravity to hold me down and heat to keep me from freezing to death. Wherever Gill had brought me, it appeared to be somewhere relatively safe.

And then I felt the explosion. It reverberated through the building, the stone trembling beneath my feet. This might be the source of the cracks, I realized. This building was under attack.

I had begun to suspect where I was, and so I was only slightly astounded when I reached the end of the corridor and stumbled into a room filled with creatures unlike any I'd ever seen.

A tall, slender humanoid with bright blue skin stood at a control panel of some sort, flanked by two similar creatures, though one of them had skin that was entirely red. They had ridges over their eyes that were similar to Alanik's, though without the crystalline growths, and cheekbones too prominent to be human.

Next to the slender blue alien was Jorgen, looking out the glass window at the stars.

"Jorgen!" I said, and launched myself across the room to throw my arms around him. I overshot a bit, running into him and knocking him off his feet and into the console. I ended up mostly hugging his shoulder as I tried to keep from falling over.

Not my most graceful move, but given that Jorgen was alive and not currently suffocating in the vacuum, I could accept it.

"FM," he said, "what are you—"

Sadie's voice cut him off, crackling over the radio. "—her ship was empty, Amphi. I got a good look before it crashed. She wasn't there."

"Where in the stars did she go then?" Arturo answered. "She can't have just *disappeared*."

"She's here," Jorgen said, pushing a button on the radio. "She's attached herself to my arm in a very awkward fashion, but FM is here and very much

alive.”

I let go, taking a step back.

“How did you get here?” Jorgen asked me.

“Gill,” I said. I left him in the corridor, I realized, and he was just now catching up, lying on the floor by the doorway. I ran over and scooped him up, giving him a hug for good measure. He’d teleported me out of my ship in the middle of a fight, and it had apparently crashed into the rock, but he’d clearly been trying to help.

“Glad to hear it,” Arturo said over the radio. “Sentry, help Quirk. She’s got three tails. Scud, they’re firing on you again—”

The radio cut off as another explosion rocked the bunker where we stood.

The blue alien closed their eyes, then turned to Jorgen. They were wearing one of those translator pins, like the one we used with Alanik. “Our defenses won’t last much longer,” they said. I recognized their voice from the transmission. This must be Cuna. “They are targeting our life support generators. When those fail, so will the artificial gravity, the air field, and the heat producers. If we don’t go now, we may be out of time.”

Jorgen glanced over at me.

And all at once, I realized what Cuna meant.

“You’re not thinking of *leaving* them here,” I said. “Our flight. Our *friends*. We can’t go without them.”

“Cuna has the coordinates from their communicator,” Jorgen said quietly. “We have the ability to get home with Cuna and their staff. Those were our orders, FM.”

He didn’t sound happy about it. *Of course* he wasn’t happy about it. Jorgen didn’t want to leave our flight here any more than I did. “Can we get out of here?” I asked. “Do we have a slug that hasn’t been scared?”

“We have Gill and Chubs,” Jorgen said, gesturing, and I found Chubs sitting in the corner in a strange disk-shaped chair. “I don’t think I used either of them when I hyperjumped. I definitely didn’t use both. We should be able to use them to jump to the Detritus coordinates. It’ll take us to the location of our communicator on Platform Prime.”

I knew the right answer. The needs of the group outweighed the needs of the individuals. We were pilots. We signed up to protect the lives of the citizens on Detritus. We were willing to make this sacrifice, every one of us.

I would have been willing to die to save the lives of my friends, no question. But could we really just leave, sacrificing their lives for ours?

Rescuing Cuna was the mission. That was exactly what we were expected to do.

“Nedder, help Sentry,” Arturo said. “She’s overwhelmed. Quirk, do you have a line on that ship on my tail?”

Cuna slipped their thin fingers up onto the dash and pushed a button. The radio went quiet.

They were turning off the voices, trying to make this decision easier. It could have been a kindness, but it felt like a slap in the face.

Another explosion rocked the base, and the lights flickered out.

“We can’t leave them here,” I said. Stars, this was why I never wanted to be in command. I didn’t have the stomach for it.

“We’ll come back,” Jorgen said. “I’ll jump Cuna and their people out and I’ll *come back*—”

“You think they’re going to let you?” I asked. “You think they’re going to let their *only useful cytonic* come jumping back to probably *die* here? Will you really *do* that?”

Jorgen looked at me, and I could see the weight of the decision in his eyes. This wasn’t his fault. None of it was. We were all of us in a terrible position.

But it was our team that was going to pay the price.

“Fine,” I said. “I know you’re only doing what has to be done.”

“Fine!” Gill said in my arms.

“Not now,” I said to him. He’d saved my life bringing me here. I should have been grateful. But what I wanted was to be out there in my ship, fighting alongside my friends.

Gill must have sensed my despair, because he disappeared.

Jorgen closed his eyes, and I could see the grief on his face.

“All right,” he said to Cuna. “Prepare your people to go.”

Cuna put out a call for the rest of their team to converge on the control room, then Jorgen took control of the radio. “Flight,” he said. “Abandon the mission.”

“Say again, Jerkface?” Arturo said. “Abandon—”

“We are taking Cuna to safety,” Jorgen said. “All units pull back in a full retreat, delta formation. Go on full burn on a heading Arturo chooses, and we’ll try to come back for you once the minister is safe.”

He glanced at me. “I’ll come back for them,” he said. “I’ll bring a ship. I’ll get the coordinates again, fly back here, and *bring them home*—”

He was pleading with me to tell him I believed this was possible. Maybe it was. Maybe he was right.

But I worried that the politicians would overrule Cobb, if he was inclined to allow it. No way were six pilots worth risking our only cytonic. I didn’t even blame them, really. I understood the math.

But I hated it all.

“Fine!” Gill’s voice said. I turned around to find Gill in the doorway with Fine, the communications slug that had been in the communicator at Detritus.

Right there on the floor.

“What in the stars—” Jorgen said.

“Fine!” Gill said, sliding toward me and trilling louder, like maybe I hadn’t heard him. “Fine!”

He’d gone to retrieve Fine, all the way from Detritus. He’d done it because he thought that’s what I wanted. No one had to scare him into it. He’d done it for the same reason he’d taken me out of my ship. Because I was upset, and Gill was trying to help.

Help.

I grabbed Jorgen by the arm. “Send him an image of Sadie,” I said.

“What?” Jorgen asked.

“With your *mind*,” I said. “Send Gill an image of Sadie, like you do with the eyes, and with the locations you want them to travel.”

“Why would I—”

“Now!” I said, squeezing his arm tight enough that he winced. Bullying the flightleader wasn’t my finest moment, but we didn’t have the time for me to explain.

“Fine,” Jorgen said.

“Fine!” Gill replied.

“No, Sadie,” I said. “Go get *Sadie*.”

Jorgen closed his eyes.

Gill disappeared.

“FM,” Jorgen said. “We can’t send the slugs off. We need them to—”

Another blow rocked the base, and I felt the atmospheric production system go offline. My ears popped as the room began to depressurize. Two more of the strange aliens appeared in the doorway, stepping over Fine and moving into the room.

“We’re all here,” Cuna said. “It’s time.”

I shook my head. “Wait. Give Gill a moment.”

“FM—” Jorgen started.

And then Sadie appeared. She materialized a few feet off the floor and landed with a thump, her knees bending, arms stretched out to keep from falling over. Belatedly, she screamed.

And I gave my second awkward hug, throwing my arms around her and nearly bowling her over. “Jorgen!” I said. “Tell Gill to get the others. Send the images to Chubs too. We can pull them out. They *want* to help.” I scooped Gill up off the floor. “I’m going to give you a whole *case* of caviar when we get back,” I said. “Go *get our friends*.”

Jorgen blinked at me, but he must have done as I said, because both slugs disappeared.

“Commander,” Cuna said. “With all due respect, we need to *go*—”

Another blast made the floor shake, and Sadie and I clung to each other to stay upright.

“What’s happening?” she asked me.

“I’ll explain later,” I said.

This most recent blast must have hit the system that created the false gravity, because suddenly my feet were no longer stuck to the floor. Arturo

appeared beside me, and then Kimmalyn. Chubs and Gill came with them, and then Twist appeared with T-Stall, and Drape with Catnip. Happy blinked in a moment later and Nedd appeared up by the ceiling, floating. The rest of our flight looked at each other in confusion.

“That’s everyone,” Jorgen said. “Huddle together!”

Another blast from the ships cracked the window, which fractured in a spiral pattern. T-Stall reached up and grabbed Nedd by the wrist, pulling him down with the rest of us, and we held on to each other. Cuna and their staff crowded in as well, linking hands. I let Sadie hold onto my waist and grabbed Gill in one hand and Chubs in the other and tossed them to Kimmalyn, who caught them while I gathered the rest of the slugs in my arms.

“Don’t scare them,” I said to Jorgen.

“FM,” he said, clearly exasperated. “What in the—”

“Home!” I shouted. “Home! Take us *home*.”

“Home!” Chubs and Gill trilled together.

Glass rained down over us as the ships above opened fire.

And then the entire world disappeared.

Epilogue

We appeared in the room where the slugs were housed on Platform Prime, all bunched together in a group and about four feet off the ground. We landed in a tangle of limbs both alien and human, with a chorus of groans and ouches and Nedd yelling, “Get the scud off my neck!” My knees were bruised and my neck tweaked, adrenaline still pumping so hard you’d think I’d faced a firing squad.

But I laughed. I laughed because we were somehow, all of us, *alive*.

As my flightmates on the edges extracted themselves and began helping the aliens to their feet, I sat in the center of the floor laughing my head off, until Gill came and tucked himself up under my arm. “Home?” he said uncertainly.

“Home,” I said. “Home, home, *home*.” And I hugged the slug tight to my chest.

“Um, FM?” Jorgen said. “I don’t think you’re supposed to squeeze them like that.”

“Shut up, Jorgen,” I said. And then, right in the middle of laughing, I also burst into tears.

That was what I looked like when the door to the room flew open and Rig stood there, gaping at all of us, Cobb right behind him looking like he’d seen a ghost.

Rig watched me sitting there, laughing and crying, and came over to kneel next to me. He looked up at Jorgen. “You broke FM?” he asked.

“Apparently,” Jorgen said.

Cobb shook his head. “I thought Spensa was the only one who pulled scudding stupid stunts like that. You realize you left your scudding *starfighters* behind, don’t you? I can’t turn my back on any of you for a moment.”

I wiped away my tears and stood. The ships were a loss, no question, but I could tell from the way he looked at us that this wasn't Cobb's primary concern. He'd been as worried for our team as I was. "Apparently not, sir," I said.

Cobb looked up at the aliens then, cleared his throat, and held out his hand.

"Minister Cuna, I presume?" he said. "I'm Admiral Cobb. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Cuna stood to their full height, which was taller than Cobb, and bared their teeth at him. Cobb looked worried for a moment.

"It is a pleasure," Cuna said. "Thank you for sending your team to our aid. We look forward to repaying your trouble."

Out in the hallway, Jorgen's mother cleared her throat. Cobb's face darkened briefly, and then he stepped to the side. "Minister Cuna," he said. "May I introduce Jeshua Weight, our emissary from the National Assembly. She's eager to speak with you."

I exchanged a look with Jorgen. His mother had barged in and scared away our last diplomatic opportunity. I didn't know where Alanik had gone, but I doubted very much that she was ever coming back.

"Of course," Cuna said, gliding elegantly out of the room, their teeth still bared, their retinue following after them.

Scud, was that supposed to be a *smile*?

"The rest of you," Cobb said, "come up to the command center for debriefing."

"Sir," I said. "I'd like to get the slugs settled, if you don't mind."

"Fine," Cobb said.

"Fine!" several of the slugs replied.

"Stars, those things are annoying," Cobb said, and he led the rest of the team up the hallway.

Only Rig stayed behind.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," I said back. "Were you listening over the hypercomm to all of that?"

“Some,” Rig said. “It sounded pretty dire.”

“It was,” I said. “I thought Jorgen had been eaten by a giant space monster, but the slugs jumped him out.”

Rig gaped at me, and I felt a bit of hysterical laughter welling up again. “A *space monster*?”

“Mammoth starpod, specifically. You should have seen it. It was bigger than Platform Prime. And then Gill took me to find Jorgen, and for a while we thought we were going to have to leave the rest of the team there to die.”

“Gill took you,” Rig said. “Of his own accord.”

“Kind of,” I said. “He thought I wanted him to. These things are a lot smarter than we assumed.” I found Gill wrapped around the leg of the table and scooped him up, running my fingers through the fringe on his back. “We need to figure out how to *communicate* with them. Once they know us and care about us, they want to help us out. We don’t have to scare them. We can...*ask* them.”

“Like a partnership,” Rig said.

“Like a partnership.” I set Gill down on the table and looked up at him.

Rig stood awkwardly with his arms crossed like he didn’t know what to do with them.

Scud, that boy was cute. “I’m sorry to have worried you,” I said.

“Yeah, well,” he said, scuffing his toe on the floor. “I should have known you wouldn’t break your perfect record.”

“Not if I can help it,” I said.

I didn’t know if I’d always be able to help it, not really. There was always the chance that I’d go out on a mission and never return, like Lizard, like Hurl and Bim before her. Like so many others we’d lost. We weren’t done. The hyperdrives gave us hope for the future, but things were only going to get more dangerous from here, not less.

Maybe it would have been safer to protect myself. Maybe it would have been kinder to Rig not to let either of us get attached.

But I reached out a hand, and Rig took it. His fingers laced through mine.

It wasn’t enough to survive for survival’s sake. I wanted to *live*. I leaned in and kissed him, slowly and tenderly, like we had all the time in the

world. And by the stars, I hoped we did.

“Help it!” Gill said, and I turned around to see all of the slugs we’d returned with gathered around a stack of goods that must have been brought in from requisitions in our absence. Several boxes of algae strips, some vacuum-packed mushrooms.

And an entire tower of jars of caviar.

“All right,” I said. “You guys have earned it.”

I cracked several jars open and let them eat their fill.

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Peter

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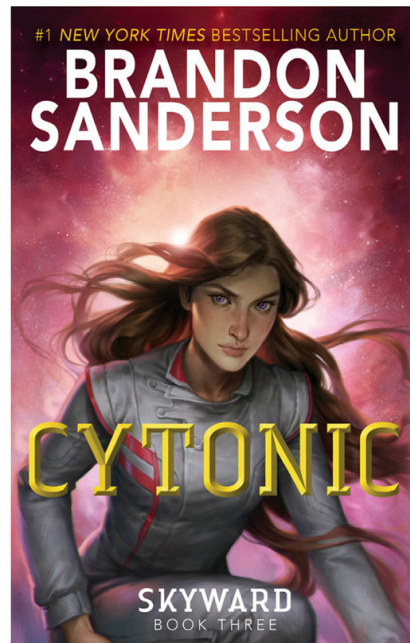
Janci Patterson writes in a variety of genres, so whatever you're looking for, she's probably got something you'll like. Her first book, *Chasing the Skip*, was published by Henry Holt in 2012. After publishing several contemporary YA novels and the YA paranormal *A Thousand Faces* trilogy, Janci discovered a love of collaboration and has written books with Megan Walker, Lauren Janes, James Goldberg, and Brandon Sanderson.

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