

It's time to cut the ties that bind.

SARA REINKE

TETHERS

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By Sara Reinke

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## **Dedication**

To Kirk, for all the countless times you've been my hero.

4.9.2056

Commercial Stellar Transport: Daedalus

Crew Members:

Captain Alexander Horne (retired) (277-231-9)—First Officer

Kathryn Emmente (352-210-0)—Second Officer

Lieutenant Eric Nagel (retired) (424-111-7)—Pilot

Xian Tren, P.E. (268-199-0)—Seismic and Mechanical Engineering Specialist

Leia Nicholsan, P.E. (325-989-1)—Payload Specialist

Franklin Brown, M.D. (517-532-5)—Medical Officer

Additional On-board:

Jerica Emmente

Mission:

Complete construction of terra-farming colony facility on Jupiter satellite, X-1226

## Prologue

*Funny*, Kat thought, studying the stellar display, watching the computer trace lines across the monitor, plotting and arranging course adjustments so minute by the readings she'd almost question their necessity. *Funny, it doesn't feel like Easter.*

But there it was, undeniable on the monitor displays. At least seven months in cryostasis away on Earth, it was Easter Sunday. Back there, in Illinois, she imagined her family would just now be settling in for the traditional Easter feast. Her mother would be bringing out a turkey, steaming and probably too dry, and the table would be laden with mashed potatoes, gravy, homemade cornbread dressing, rolls and her sister Allison's green-bean casserole.

*The dressing will be too runny, Kat told herself. The gravy too lumpy, and Jerica would just wrinkle her nose at it all anyway. And then we'd have to sit through an hour or so of Allison bitching about her job and how her ex doesn't pay his child support, and snapping at her kids for picking at each other. Some fun.*

Some fun, but she found herself missing it anyway. Easter had always been a difficult time for her, full of unpleasant memories she didn't feel much like thinking about, and she had somehow found a comfort and strange sort of solace from being with her family. No matter how weird they could seem.

She pressed a couple of buttons on the terminal in front of her, locking in the new coordinates the ship had plotted out. They were running late; a small system glitch just prior to their coming out of cryostasis had left them a little over a day behind schedule.

"Good thing it happened then and not earlier," Alex had remarked. "Or Christ only knows where we might have ended up. Uranus or something."

She'd laughed. They all had, but none of them had really found it funny. And they'd all been keeping a watchful, wary eye

on the bridge since then, making sure the system didn't decide to make another odd decision and send them off-course again and out into space.

"It's not like out here, you get lost, you stop in at the nearest Denny's and ask for directions," Alex had told her.

Kat agreed with him. The trip was already going to cost her five years, and she knew she'd have to get used to the lonely, empty feeling deep down in the pit of her belly that came with spending a holiday away from the familiar bustle of her family, because there were a lot more ahead of her. She didn't feel like getting lost in deep space and never finding her way back home.

Ordinarily, her crew would have rendezvoused with the one previously stationed at the X-1226 terra-farming colony post, but because they were running behind, the other crew had already launched from the moon's surface, heading toward them and the stellar platform Kat's crew had departed from four days earlier.

Already, the on-board computer, STELA, was picking up the other crew's transport vehicle, moving in a nearly parallel path, coming toward the *Daedalus*. The two ships had been sending each other routine hailing messages from the moment they approached within range of one another, and now a small red light flashed, distracting Kat. Someone on the other ship, the *Icarus*, wanted to say howdy.

Kat had a pretty good idea who it may be, and smiled to herself.

She pulled her terminal closer to her and typed: *COMM OPEN.352-210-0*.

STELA thought about this for a millisecond and said: *ENTER COMMAND ACCESS FOR COMM OPEN*.

Kat typed: *SIMONSAYS KAT*.

"Open sesame, STELA," she murmured, watching the monitor in front of her tile into a small frame. A woman's face materialized in the window, like some kind of Las Vegas show magic trick. Kat recognized the black woman in the image and her smile widened. "Hey, Trina."

"Hey, yourself," Trina said. "Happy Easter."

“Yeah.” Kat rolled her eyes, spinning her index finger in a small circle. “Big hurrah.”

“Didn’t the Easter Bunny bring you anything special?”

“I managed to sneak a couple of chocolate eggs for Jerica,” Kat said. “She’s not buying the whole bit about the Easter Bunny finding her way up here, but she was glad to have them.”

“I bet,” Trina said. “Is she up?”

Kat shook her head. “She’s not sleepy, but I try to at least get her in her room around bedtime. I’m afraid to get her too out of whack with her Earth routine just yet. Even a couple hours’ sleep and I’m glad.”

“You writing anything yet?”

Kat laughed. “Not yet, no.”

Trina arched her brow. “You said you were going to use this trip to start on that novel you’ve been wanting to—”

“We’re less than two weeks out of cryostasis, Trina,” Kat said. “And four days past the stellar platform. I’ve barely had time to stretch my legs, much less think about writing.” Trina looked disapproving, which only made Kat laugh again. “I’ve got five years to write the novel. I think I’ll eventually find some free time for it.”

Trina sighed, looking weary. “I’m half-tempted to turn this barge around and meet you back down at the colony, to tell you the truth. I don’t know if I want to go back to Earth.”

“How come?”

“Don’t you check out the news transmissions? That group Legion’s been bombing government buildings again.”

Kat knew the name. There weren’t many people who didn’t. Over the last ten years, Legion had grown from a small, grass-roots campaign for government reform in the United States into a full-fledged militia, complete with armed troops and military-grade weaponry. They had tried to get the government to turn the entire state of Texas over to them several years earlier, as an independent country, a “true democracy,” as Kat had read in the newspapers. *Whatever the hell that means.*

Legion had lost that battle, but the war hadn't been over for them, apparently. What they hadn't been able to accomplish through legislation, they continued to try and achieve by force. *They're all fucking nuts*, Kat thought. "When'd this happen?"

"Couple of weeks ago. They blew up federal depositories in six states. Killed several hundred people. Really gruesome. I think it's safer up here, personally. Where freaks like that can't get to you."

Kat was nearly inclined to agree. "Well, maybe you can switch professions, get into terra-farming. Get yourself stationed up here for at least the next three decades."

Trina laughed. "Don't think I like it out here that much."

Kat smiled and touched the monitor with her fingertip. "It's good to hear your voice, Trina. Damn it all. I was really looking forward to seeing you, too, so we could at least have one evening to spend over a pot of coffee, having some girl talk."

"Everything okay there, Kat?"

Kat nodded. "Yeah, I just...it's all fine, I just..."

"Things still going on with you and Alex?"

"Yeah," Kat said quietly, almost ashamedly.

Trina frowned. "I don't get you sometimes, girl."

Kat laughed. "And why is that?"

"Because you keep messing around with that married man."

Kat laughed again, covering her mouth. "Alex isn't *happily* married."

"So he tells you."

"Yeah, well, if he was happily married, why would he want to sign up for a five-year assignment?"

Trina shrugged. "Yeah, well, I still say you don't need him to be your 'white knight'."

Kat chuckled. "Then who should be?"

"You, Kat." Trina reached out and touched the screen. "You need to be your own hero." Her eyes cut momentarily away from the screen. "Uh-oh. Got to run. Got a priority message coming in from the platform."

“Okay.” Kat glanced at her watch. “My shift’s about over with anyway. I’ll give you a transmittal tomorrow sometime.”

“Sure enough, Kat,” Trina said. “Chat with you then.”

Kat heard the bridge doors slide open behind her, hissing softly, and she turned.

“No fair.” Kat pouted insincerely. “My time’s not up yet.”

Eric Nagel, the ship’s pilot, paused in the doorway. “I can come back,” he offered hopefully and she laughed.

“Forget it,” she said, and he sighed. “It’s all yours, Lieutenant.”

“*Muchas gracias* there, pal.” He walked toward her, mockingly dejected.

She seldom thought about, much less noticed his leg anymore. It was a little bit harder sometimes for her not to think about or notice how handsome he was. How much more so than Alex.

She stood, relinquishing her seat and the helm to him. “I’ve done all the dirty work for you,” she said, and he raised a brow at her, inquisitively. “I went ahead and programmed the course corrections.”

“I could’ve done that,” he told her. “That’s what they pay me the big bucks for.”

She laughed. “Yeah, well. Did you get Jerica to bed?”

He nodded. “Tucked her in myself. Threatened to tickle her until she pissed her pants if she didn’t at least try to sleep.”

“Thanks. She’s probably already up and sneaking around, but at least you tried. Have you had any luck sleeping?”

He shook his head. “Nope. I mean, I feel tired, but not sleepy. I tried a couple times, lying down, but...”

That was the bitch of cryostasis, in Kat’s opinion. Once under, a person slept in a deep, persistent, nearly vegetative state. Upon rousing, however, it could take days, if not weeks, before the body’s Circadian rhythm readjusted, and normal sleep patterns returned.

“How long now?” Eric asked.

“Without sleep?” Kat thought for a moment. “Going on thirty-seven hours. How about you?”

“Thirty-nine.” He arched his brow, interested. “Why? Are we having a contest or something? You think you can outlast me?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. What’s the prize?”

“For going the longest without sleep? I’d say oral sex. Definitely.”

She laughed. “I’d say definitely not.”

“Perfectly platonic oral sex,” he said, his dark brown eyes round and earnest. “Scout’s honor. Won’t even expect you to swallow.”

Kat laughed again. “Please. You couldn’t handle it. You’d fall in love.”

“Too late for that.” The corners of his mouth lifted into a wry smile that was at once fetching and infuriating. “You’re going down, Kat. Literally.”

“Screw you, Nagel.” Kat smiled and shook her head, walking toward the door.

“Hey, that’ll work, too.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that,” she replied, heading out of the bridge. He chuckled gently behind her.

## Chapter One

There was a terrible, searing pain in Kat's face.

It radiated out from somewhere just above her left eye. She tried to blink, to open her eyes and look around, but they burned, agonizing. She heard a woman screaming.

*Leia. That sounds like Leia...*

And then she blacked out again.

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Kat dreamed of before, of Alex in his crisp, starched uniform, leaning back in the captain's chair and folding his hands neatly behind his head. His breath came in a long and tired sigh.

"I'm getting too old for this shit, Kat," he said and she remembered hoping futilely that this would segue into something more—a promise that this would be his last mission, that he would leave his wife and build a new life on Earth with Kat.

He moved out of the chair, close to her, pushing his body up against hers. He kissed her. His hands were busy with her breasts, fumbling with the fastens on her flight suit.

"Alex, no," she protested, but she didn't mind. "Jerica could walk in any minute."

He looked at her, leaning forward so the tip of his nose rested against hers. His eyes were bright, mischievous. "Shhh." He pressed his fingertip over her lips. She giggled.

He kissed her throat, and she put her hand against the growing swell of his crotch, gripping him, stroking, making him groan softly, hungrily against her.

And then there was a sound—*bammmmpb*—like an enormous plastic bag filled with air being sat on from somewhere deep in the dark, empty belly of the ship.

“What was that?” Startled, Kat pulled away from Alex.

“What the hell—?” he said, his voice overlapping hers.

The cruiser moved gently under their feet, as if it had been nudged by the edge of a breaking wave. They stumbled, arms pinwheeling out for balance.

The claxon began to shriek, a high, nasal voice.

*WHHOOONNNKK!*

*WHHOOOOONNNKKK!*

The red security alert lights flashed suddenly.

*WHHOONNNNNKKK!*

They ran into the corridor outside, hurrying toward the bridge. They met Leia as she rushed out of the rec room.

“What’s going on?” Leia screamed over the din of the alarm. Her hands were pressed over her ears.

“I don’t know!” Alex yelled.

“Where’s Jerica?” Kat cried, and then she saw the little girl standing behind Leia in the doorway. Her blue eyes were large and frightened, seeming to swallow her whole face.

“Mommy!” Jerica ran and Kat scooped her up. Her little arms wrapped vise-like around Kat’s throat.

The ship moved again underneath them, more violently this time, sending them sprawling. Kat tried to shield Jerica as they smacked into the wall.

“You okay?” she asked, and Jerica nodded, her headful of yellow curls bouncing.

“What’s happening, Mommy?” she wailed.

Kat pressed her lips against Jerica’s brow. “I don’t know, pup.”

Leia sat up, dazed. Blood streaked down her cheek from a wound below her eye.

Alex helped Leia get to her feet. “Kat, take Jerica and Leia and go round up Franklin and Doc. I’m going to go up to the bridge and find Eric. Meet me at the escape shuttle.”

“The shuttle?” Leia cried. “Are we going to crash?”

“Just go with Kat!” Alex snapped at her.

“Be careful!” Kat shouted after him. She meant to say, *I love you.*

He disappeared down the corridor, away from them.

She remembered that there were things exploding, wires, cables and conduits along the ceilings of the passageway. There was some kind of power surge, an overload or something. It had turned the hallways of the ship into a murky, smoke-filled hell.

“Shit!” Leia shrieked.

Sparks landed on them, burning their faces and hands. Kat tried to protect Jerica, tried to put her own body between the flames and her daughter. Jerica wasn’t crying, but she was making frightened, mewling sounds. She shoved her small face against Kat’s throat, gasping for breath, frightened and panicked.

Leia smacked fervently at her arms and belly. “ShitshitshitshitSHIT, Kat, holy shit!”

Eric was suddenly in front of them, yelling. He grabbed Leia by the arm, jerked her around smartly and started beating her in the back of the head. Her hair was burning, on fire, but the smell was indiscernible from the hot, rich stink of the electrical fire and melting circuitry.

The entire cargo ship heaved, and a long, fat section of piping came crashing down out of the ceiling. Leia screamed, her voice ripping above the din of the alarm claxon. Eric put his arms around her, pushing her head down, shielding her body from the shower of sparks. “Kat!” he cried. He held his hand out to her. “Kat, come on!”

*“You know who he is, don’t you?” Leia had asked her once.*

*“What do you mean? No. Who?”*

*“Oh, Kat, that’s Eric Nagel. You know, the Sovereign pilot. He was in all the news...such a shame, what happened to his leg.”*

“Mommy!” Jerica cried, and she cringed, struggling. The hole in the ceiling where the pipe fell was on fire. *“Mommy!”*

“Come on!” Eric flapped a desperate hand at her. “Here! Help her, come on!”

Someone grabbed Jerica away from her, pulling with strong arms—Franklin.

“No!” she screamed. “Jerica!”

“It’s burning!” Franklin caught her by her wrist, his hand clamping down, hurting her. “Go! Now! I’ve got Jerica!”

“No!” Kat tried to pull away from him. “Where’s Alex?”

Eric closed his hand against her sleeve and jerked her toward him. Frank was right behind them, inching around the collapsed pipe. He held Jerica in his arms, trying to shield her. Sparks shot out of the ceiling, peppering them with white hot embers. Jerica wailed in terror.

“Jerica!” Kat cried, struggling against Eric. She watched the sparks pelt her, but didn’t feel them. She heard Frank yelp in pain.

“Watch it,” Eric said in her ear. He pushed her head down with his hand.

They got around the piping and the ship lurched again. Kat staggered and fell to her knees.

“Go!” Frank hollered at Eric. He passed Jerica to him. “I’ll help Kathryn, go, go!”

“Come on!” Leia pleaded shrilly.

Frank got his arm around Kat, hurrying her to her feet.

“Goddammit!” she screamed, angry, fighting. “Where’s Alex?”

They reached the shuttle and Kat was thrown into a chair. Her head smacked against the back of the seat.

“Mommy!” Jerica yelled, and she ran away from Eric. She jumped into Kat’s lap and crushed against her in a fierce embrace. “Mommy, I’m scared!”

“It’s okay, Jerica,” Kat whispered, leaning over and kissing her hair. “Sit over here, next to me. Come on, pup, just like in the drill.”

Jerica clambered into the adjacent seat. Kat lowered the safety harness over her daughter's small shoulders. "Watch your arms...here, okay," she said, securing the straps.

"Are we going to crash?" Jerica asked.

Kat struggled to smile. "No, pup." She exchanged a quick, anxious glance with Eric from across the shuttle. "It...it's going to be fine."

Frank helped Kat, fastening the safety harness over her. She saw Eric strapping Leia into the seat directly across from her. Leia whimpered quietly, her eyes huge and round and glassy with fright.

Frank fell into the seat next to Jerica and began struggling into his own harness, his movements quick, jerking, frantic.

Something was wrong. Kat knew it. Alex was taking too long on the bridge, and there was still no sign of Doc. "Where are Alex and Doc?" she yelled to Eric. "They should have been here by now!"

"I don't know." Eric checked Jerica's harness, pulling the straps taut. He cupped her face in his hands. "Having fun yet?"

She shook her head and he struggled to smile as he pushed golden curls back out of her eyes. "Me either, kiddo."

"We have to go and look for them," Kat said, drawing his gaze. "Get this thing off of me. We're not leaving yet."

Franklin blinked at her. "Are you crazy? We have to get out of here." He turned to Eric, his eyes wide and alarmed. "Launch the shuttle, Eric!"

"Like hell!" Kat snapped, balling her hands into fists. "I'm second officer—it's my goddamn call! Eric, unhook this thing and let me out of here." She began to struggle, pushing her shoulders against the bars, trying to get the harness off. "Eric, I said let me out of here! I've got to find Alex and Doc!"

"Eric, we have to—" Franklin began.

"I'm in charge here, Franklin—not you!" Kat shouted. She glared at Eric. "We're waiting—we're going to go look for them."

"This thing is going to go and you know it!" Frank screamed and his voice cracked along a ragged, panicked edge.

“Something must have happened to them. They’d be here by now if they could! They’re not coming!”

“We’re waiting!” Kat screamed back at him, thrashing now against the restraints of the safety harness.

Eric stared at her, his eyes stricken and uncertain. Kat could hear the ship groaning around them. Smoke rolled into the little shuttle, bitter smelling, acrid. It curled around Eric’s legs and he shied away, coughing, stumbling.

There was a cracking sound from somewhere deep in the ship’s bowels, and the recoil pummeled the little shuttle. Kat’s head snapped sideways, the side of her face smacking against the hard, unyielding pipes of the safety harness.

Eric fell, catching himself clumsily on the seat next to Leia, his knees banging hard against the floor. His face twisted in pain.

“Eric!” Jerica began to mewl again, quietly.

“We have to go!” Leia screamed. She struggled against her restraints, terrified, drumming her boots against the floor. “Please, please!”

“Close the goddamn door!” Franklin shouted.

Eric looked at Kat desperately.

*Because I’m senior officer here, Kat thought. Because he’s waiting for me. It’s my call.*

She saw the glow of the fire, orange and yellow against the smooth oiled steel of the corridor walls. She heard the flames licking their way eagerly toward the shuttle doorway, heard the ceiling caving in, spilling down, feeding the blaze.

“Kat, Eric, please, for God’s sake!” Franklin cried.

She looked at Jerica, whose cheeks were flushed with fear. Her eyes were wide and shining and alert, like a small deer pinned by a car’s headlights.

*Alex, oh, Christ, Kat thought, her eyes flooding with tears. I can’t kill us all. I can’t kill my daughter! Do it, Eric.*

She must have spoken aloud. Eric staggered over and sealed the hatch closed. He moved to the front of the little craft and fell into the pilot’s seat. She watched as he pulled his life-support mask over his mouth and nose.

He looked back over his shoulder and met her eyes.

*Such a shame what happened to his leg...*

“Do it.” This time she knew she spoke; she heard the flat, dead sound of her voice, and somehow there was a strength in it, a courage, an authority, a conviction she did not feel.

There was bright, brilliant, white light. She could hear people screaming; Leia’s frightened, panicked peals, Jerica’s high-pitched, bird-like cries, Franklin’s bellowing, her own terrified shrieking.

There was no air. She hitched in a breath to scream, but there was no air to take in.

And then there was blackness.

And the pain and burning in her eyes.

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Once upon a time, five years ago, in the dawn of terra-farming borrowed moons, they had been in Illinois, at the loading platform. Somewhere high above them, slowly circling in the upper atmosphere, was the *Daedalus*, their cargo craft, hers and Alex’s command.

Kat remembered Leia on a heavy payload lift. Leia worked the enormous, bulky metal arms with a deftness and ease that Kat found remarkable given the other woman’s small, slight stature.

She looked across the tarmac and saw a young man walking with some of the ground crew techs. She also recognized the gentle, arrogant swagger of one of the men in the group, and a soft smile found the corners of her mouth.

*Alex.*

The men seemed to be engaged in heavy, deep conversation. Shop talk of some sort. It occurred to her that the young man with Alex was incredibly handsome; the kind of guy you caught a glimpse of somewhere, like in a movie, and fell for head over heels.

She had never seen him before.

“Who is that, Leia?” She raised her voice over the whine of the lift’s engine.

Leia stalled the motor out, and the lift grumbled to a halt, its arms poised purposefully out in the air in front of it.

“Who?” Leia asked, wiping sweat off her forehead with the side of her slender wrist. Her auburn hair was caught back in a rakish ponytail, but strands had worked their way free and blew across her cheeks in the breeze.

“That guy over there, walking with Alex and the techs. See?”

“Oh, Kat.” Leia smiled. “That’s Eric Nagel. You know, the Sovereign pilot. He was in all of the news.”

Alex raised his hand to Kat in a wave. She saw his handsome grin below his dark, mirrored sunglasses. The other man, Eric Nagel, followed his gaze.

“Such a shame,” Leia said, and then the payload lift was rumbling back to life underneath her. “What happened to his leg.”

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Kat stirred lightly aboard the shuttle as something cold and wet hit her in the face. *Plop!*

*What is that?* she wondered, her pain-dazed mind slipping back toward unconsciousness. *Rain? It...can't be raining...not in space...*

*Plop!*

\*\*\*

She dreamed of that day in Illinois again, of Alex catching up to her on the tarmac. It was an Indian summer, and unseasonably warm and humid. Autumn had not had time yet to rob his skin of its summer bronze tone, or his dark blond hair of its sun-gold highlights.

He had two teenaged daughters and a son in college, though one wouldn’t know it just to look at him. His son was

the spitting image of Alex, while the girls favored their mother—dark eyes, dark hair and the sort of exotic, olive complexions Kat had always longed to have.

His wife's name was Cassandra. Cassie for short. Kat had met her more times than she could count at company picnics, holiday parties, New Year's get-togethers. She had a hell of a recipe for broccoli salad and once, at a pot-luck supper, she'd copied it for Kat.

"You can use all Miracle Whip," Cassie had told her. "But it's better if you do it half and half with mayonnaise."

She'd had no idea that less than an hour earlier, at that very same gathering, Kat and Alex had ducked into a bathroom together for a quick but fiery lovemaking session.

"You look beautiful." Alex had to speak to Kat on the tarmac in a low voice, with only a hint of a smile playing on the corners of his lips and a simmering, lusty glow in his eyes. She watched his gaze crawl down her body, lingering like a caress along her breasts.

Kat blushed and lowered her head. "Stop it. Who is that, Alex?"

Alex glanced over his shoulder and his brow furrowed. "That," he said, in a somewhat irritable voice, "is the one-time Lieutenant Eric Nagel, Sovereign pilot extraordinaire. You've got to have read about this guy, Kat. He had some kind of wreck. Lost his leg, the left one. Its all biomechanical, clear up to his hip. You can't even tell. I mean, I'm walking beside him and I'll be damned if I could see a limp."

"What's he doing here?"

Alex shook his head. "That's our new pilot. Dylan officially left our crew as of yesterday morning."

"What? Why?" Kat said, dismayed. She had liked Dylan Wayman; he had been a member of their crew for as long as she could remember. She had trusted him. Wayman had been almost like a father to everyone on board.

Alex shrugged. "Well, you know, he was getting up in years, and all of that extended hyperstasis was starting to wear and—"

"Oh, bullshit, Alex." Kat frowned. "In other words, Nagel's injury got him discharged, so the suits in their million-dollar

high rises decided to bump Dylan and give this guy his job to make for good public relations.”

Because she could not have known what would happen five years later, on a routine mission to X-1226, a stupid, desolate moon and future terra-farming colony, Kat arbitrarily decided she didn't much like this Eric Nagel.

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*Plop!*

Whatever was hitting her began to fall faster—*PLOP!*—and soon she was soaked. It trailed down her nose, down her throat. Kat tried to sit up, coughing, choking, sputtering. The safety harness caught firmly across her shoulders and snapped her backwards into the seat.

She spat. Bloody phlegm smacked against her pant leg. She squinted. Her eye still vaguely burned.

*I'll be damned*, she thought, dazed. *It is raining.*

The shuttle had landed on the terra-farming moon—or crashed was more like it. A slight downpour pattered in through an enormous hole that had been wrenched into the ceiling of the craft. It had washed most of the blood away from her eyes, and she was able to see again.

Kathryn shivered. She tried to free herself from the harness mechanisms, but her hands were shaking badly.

*What in the hell happened? Where am I?*

*Jerica...!*

She looked around, her eyes wide with bright panic, and found the little girl in the seat next to her. Her face was turned down, her chin rested against her chest. Her hands were curled in small fists in her hair. She seemed very peaceful, like she was taking a nap.

Kat began to fight frantically with the seat harness. It flew up off her shoulders unexpectedly, and she slipped out of the seat and onto her ass.

She crawled over to Jerica. “Jerica?” she gasped, trying to get the harness off the girl. “Jerica? Hey, pup, hey, it's me...”

Jerica moaned. Her long eyelashes fluttered, her eyes opened sleepily. “Mommy?” she whispered, bewildered.

Kat pushed the harness off Jerica’s shoulders and pulled her close. “Oh, God,” Kat said, on the verge of tears. “Oh...”

A soft grey bruise was forming at the right corner of Jerica’s mouth and a single, dark drop of blood dried at her lip.

“Are you okay?” Kat smoothed her daughter’s hair back, clutching at the child’s shirt. “Jerica, are you hurt anywhere?”

Jerica blinked at her, staring blankly, silently. She was in shock.

“Sit down, Jerica, just sit here a minute,” Kat said, easing Jerica down in her seat again. “It’s okay now, pup.”

Franklin was next to her. He was limp in his seat, but Kat could see his chest rising and falling steadily. He was alive.

She looked toward the pilot’s chair. Eric was slumped to one side, and she couldn’t see his face. His hand dangled limply over the armrest, and she remembered that he had been hitting Leia, beating her in the head because her hair had been on fire.

*Leia*, Kat thought, remembering the screams that had seeped into her unconscious mind after they’d crashed.

Something had punched through the pod where Leia had been sitting. A large, leafy tree limb draped across the crimped metal. Leaves and branches were scattered across the floor.

Leia had been knocked clean out of her safety harness and lay in a sprawled heap at the back of the module. Her back was arched at a crazy angle, and her head was turned all of the way around on its axis, so it looked eerily like she was a sideshow contortionist.

*Come See the Amazing Rubber Band Girl!* a voice screeched in Kat’s mind, resounding in shrill, strained cheer. *Only a Nickel!*

“Oh, God.” Kat gulped, feeling bile rise in her throat.

Leia’s eyes were open. There was blood smeared around her mouth and nose, drying, crusting. The left side of her face had a strange, sunken look where her skull had splintered.

Kat whirled clumsily, throwing up until there was nothing left to come up but thin, foamy fluid, and her stomach was wrenched into tight, agonizing knots. She glanced over her

shoulder and realized to her horror that Jerica was looking at Leia's body. The little girl's face was blank and shell-shocked, her eyes vacuous.

"Don't look, Jerica." Kat scrambled for her, turning her face away. "Don't look."

She crawled over to Eric on her hands and knees. "Eric?" she whispered, taking his hand. She reached up and touched his face. The instrument panel had collapsed in places. Part of it was crimped down around his legs, trapping them at mid-thigh.

"Eric," she said again, her voice ragged. She pulled the face mask over his head. She felt the immediate push of his breath against her face. He drew in a deep, gasping mouthful of air. His brows knitted slightly in pain.

"It's okay. I'll get you out." Kat grabbed the fallen console. She gave the twisted metal an experimental shove, but it was impossibly heavy.

She pushed her damp hair back from her face and struggled to her feet. She limped over to Frank. "Franklin?" Kat shook his shoulder tentatively. "Frank?"

Having Frank join their crew had been easier to take than when Eric had first come along. The only constant in the *Daedalus'* medical officer position was that no one seemed to keep the job for more than one flight mission. They had just picked up Frank—Franklin Mackenzie Brown, M.D.—four days earlier, when they'd docked at the stellar platform.

*Some welcome-aboard this has been, huh?* Kat thought as she shook him again. "Frank? Can you hear me?"

Franklin groaned. His head rolled from side to side for a moment, and then his eyelids fluttered open. He stared dazedly at her.

"Are you okay?" Kathryn asked.

"Wuuhh...what...?" Franklin touched the back of his head and grimaced, sucking in a quick hiss. Blood dotted his fingertips when he pulled them away.

She began to help him as he fumbled with his safety harness. The straps were wet and clumsy to handle. She loosened them and pushed the frame up over his shoulders. "What happened?" His voice was stronger now, less cracked

and hoarse, but she could tell from his eyes he was hurting and dazed. “Where are we?”

“We crashed. I don’t...I don’t know exactly what happened, but we’re on the moon. Leia...she...oh, Christ...”

Frank looked over and saw Leia. “Jesus!” He turned to Kat, wide-eyed and alarmed. “Jerica—?”

“She’s okay... I think...I think she’s just in shock.”

“And Eric...?”

“He’s alive, but he’s over here. His legs...it fell on him. I think he’s hurt. I can’t get it off him.”

“Get what off him?” Frank said. She stood and helped him stumble to his feet alongside her. She noticed blood matted thickly in his hair at the base of his skull.

He blinked stupidly, owlishly at the hole in the ceiling, and at the trees filling the view. “So this is X-1226,” he observed.

He reached across Eric’s hips and released his safety straps. He cupped the side of Eric’s face with deliberate care, his thumb resting against the side of his throat.

“His pulse is strong,” he said. “But he’s got to be in pain. We have to get him out of here and to the compound.” He gripped the console with both hands. His knees were flexed, his feet planted. “I’m going to try and lift this thing up. If it moves, you pull him out. Don’t quit until he’s clear, okay? I’ll hold it as long as I can.”

She nodded.

“You ready?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Go on.”

He began to tug. His face flushed with the exertion, and the tendons on his neck stood out like taut straps of rubber under his skin.

After a long, futile moment, Frank let go and staggered back a step. He was breathing hard and his hands were shaking. “Goddammit! It’s slippery from the rain and it’s too heavy. I can’t get it.”

Kat looked around the ruined shuttle, searching for anything they could use for tools. She caught sight of a pipe poking out of the tear in the ceiling. She reached up and wiggled

it experimentally. There was a good amount of give, and so she caught it in both hands and put some weight behind it as she yanked. The pipe popped free with a lack of resistance that caught her by surprise. She danced back a step to avoid getting clobbered over the head as it fell to the floor with a loud metallic clank.

“Maybe this...?” she offered it to Frank.

He smiled at her. “Give me a lever and I can move the world, huh?”

He eased the end of the pipe under the lip of the console and snuggled it in good and secure. He rubbed his hands together, grabbed hold of the opposite end and glanced up at Kat.

“You want me to help?” she asked.

“No, no, I got this,” he said. “You pull him loose.”

He began to push down on the pipe. The console creaked as it shifted.

“Keep going.” Kat slipped her arms around Eric. “That’s it, you’ve almost got it, Frank, keep going.”

“Shit,” he seethed, pushing with all of his might, his forearms shaking from the strain. “It’s too much!”

The panel rose centimeters more, enough to just clear Eric’s thighs.

“No, no, I got him, that’s it!” Kat cried, pulling Eric free. He was heavy, and she sprawled him out on the floor. She kept one hand under his head, supporting and protecting. “Eric, can you hear me?”

Eric moaned lightly. He opened his eyes. He blinked, confused and bewildered up at Kat. “Hey...” he murmured.

“Hey, yourself,” she said. She smiled at him, brushing his hair back off his brow. She leaned over him, using her back and shoulders to shield him from the rain.

He groaned. “How long was I out?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I just came to a little while ago.”

He cracked a smile, a wry lift to the corner of his mouth. “You woke up first. Guess that means you won our bet.”

She couldn't help herself but to laugh. It was either that or burst into hysterical sobs. *Or go crazy*, she thought. She kissed Eric's forehead, blinking against tears. "I'll collect from you later."

"Can you walk?" Frank asked Eric. "I'm not sure how far it is, but the colony compound has to be around here somewhere."

"I can make it," Eric said with a nod.

Kat gathered Jerica up in her arms. It was like lifting a very heavy doll. Jerica didn't make a sound, didn't even seem to blink.

"Want me to get her?" Eric reached for her, but Kat shook her head.

"No, no, it's okay. I've got her."

"What should we do with...?" Frank cut his eyes toward the back of the shuttle, toward Leia. Eric followed his gaze and uttered a sharp, startled gasp.

"We'll have to come back later," Kathryn said. She caught Eric's hand and forced him in tow without turning her head. She didn't want to look at the corpse again. "Let's just go."

## Chapter Two

“Ow!” Kat yelped miserably.

“Sorry,” Frank said, smiling sheepishly at her. “I know it stings a little.”

“A little, hell.” She winced as he began to dab at the laceration on her head again with some kind of sweet-smelling antiseptic salve. “What is that? Hydrochloric acid?”

They had made the infirmary the first stop in their perfunctory grand tour of the compound. Jerica had curled up on one of the cots and immediately dozed off. She slept with one hand buried in her mess of dirty yellow hair, and the other up, almost over her face. Frank had cleaned the little scrape on her lip, and covered her with a blanket. He assured Kat her torpor was nothing more than shock from the crash.

“I know this hurts, but it’s really not too bad,” he remarked. “Not very deep at all. Scalp wounds will scare the shit out of you, but there’s usually more blood than damage. You’ll probably have a scar, though.”

“That’s all right,” Kat said as he handed her a white cotton gauze pad. “It will match the others.”

“Hold that up there a sec. Good.” Frank pressed a strip of medical tape across the gauze. “Thanks. You’re all done now.” He handed her a small foil packet from a nearby cabinet. “Ibuprofen,” he responded to her questioning glance. “Take two and call me in the morning.”

Kat groaned and he laughed. “You’ve been banged up pretty good, Kat, and those will help. You’re going to be sore.”

“Too late. I already am.” Kat smiled, hopping down from the cold metal examination table. She walked over to another, where Eric had situated himself.

He’d shucked out of his flight suit and was sitting in his underwear. Despite her soreness and their circumstances, Kat took in a quick but admiring look at his long torso, the well-defined muscles cleaving his chest and abdomen. The dim, sudden heat this observation stoked in her snapped her mind immediately, cruelly to Alex, and the awful realizations she’d been trying her damndest not to think about.

*I left Alex to die.*

“Any luck?” she asked Eric.

His legs were stretched out in front of him, and all sorts of little tools were spread around him. He looked up at her. “No. All of these tools are too big. There’s nothing here small enough for the cybermechanics.”

“Do you think it’s damaged?”

“I don’t know. I hope not. I mean, it seems to be working okay.” He wiggled his toes experimentally. “How about you and Jerica?”

She nodded. *I’m fine*, she thought. *Just peachy. Never better. The man I love, the man I’ve been sleeping with for the past five years is now blown to microscopic bits in outer space, floating around Jupiter’s asteroid belt. The man whose hands were touching me not twelve hours ago, who was undressing me, kissing me—whose goddamn erection I felt pushing against me through his pants and wanted to feel inside of me—is dead now, gone. I didn’t even get to tell him goodbye. Much less that I loved him.*

“I’m fine. We’re fine. Everything is fine.” She pushed her hair out of her face. It felt grimy to her. She winced, and went to rub her hand on her flight suit. It was covered with blood and muck. “God, I hope there’s a change of clothes around here somewhere.”

“I’ll find you one,” Eric told her, his voice oddly gentle.

*He can tell my brain is scrambled right now. He knew about me and Alex.*

But she didn’t want to think about Alex anymore.

She began to unfasten the front of her flight suit, and remembered what it had felt like to have Alex’s fingers there,

working the clasps free. *I remember how he tasted. The flavor of his mouth, his toothpaste. We were just about to make love, goddamn it.*

“Kat...” Eric began.

“It’s all dirty,” she said, not looking at him. She managed a sharp, barking laugh. “It’s disgusting.”

She couldn’t get the fastens undone fast enough. Suddenly all she wanted to do was get that damn thing off her, away from her skin. She could feel it pressed against her; wet, cold, sticky fabric.

“Get it off me.” She jerked ferociously at it, ripping the front wide open, staggering back, twisting and struggling. Her hip knocked against a tray of Eric’s tools and it crashed to the floor.

She managed to pull her arm free of the sleeve. “Get it off me!” she cried, desperately.

Eric was off the table and holding her, pinning her arms down at her sides. Jerica was awake, sitting up on her cot, watching them with wide eyes.

“Eric, help, get it off me!” Kat cried, and then she burst into tears.

“Kat, shhh...” Eric stroked her hair. He turned his face down toward hers, holding her gently. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not! It’s not okay! I left Alex to die. I tried to do the right thing, and now he’s dead!” She brought her hands up to her face, ashamed of her tears, unable to stop them. “I loved him, Eric! I never got to...to say it...I just...”

“I know, Kat,” Eric whispered. His hand pressed against the back of her head; warm, comforting pressure.

Frank gave her a sedative. She hadn’t even felt it as he slid the long silver needle into her the soft curve of her elbow. She supposed she’d needed it. It was the proverbial slap in the face to get her out of her hysterical fit.

## Chapter Three

On her tombstone: *For a brief moment, an angel rested here.*

And sometimes Frank would be sifting through the day's pile of assorted bills and junk mail, stacking department store circulars in a neat pile here and anything not immediately destined for the garbage there, and it would hit him out of nowhere, like a splash of glacial water.

*I don't remember how she sounded.*

There would be times when he would almost hear her, when his wife Lauren would laugh despite herself on the phone with her sister. He would think on it, think hard, and try to cement the melody of his daughter Elaina's voice in his mind.

*I can't forget you, I can't.*

He remembered Elaina playing with her Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls one afternoon. She was sitting in a warm, fat, yellow beam of sunshine that cut a diagonal across her playroom floor.

He, Lauren and Elaina had lived in a beautiful split-level Cape Cod that was what his grandfather would've called "spitting distance" from where the cold Atlantic Ocean pressed itself against the edge of New England.

He and Elaina would go digging for clams. They would wake before dawn and tiptoe through the house, careful not to disturb Lauren.

He remembered how he would pack their lunches, and how she would raise up on her tiptoes so she could see over the edge of the counters and make sure he didn't get too much mustard on her hard-salami sandwich.

"More?" he would ask her, poised with a butter knife. He would hold the slice of Roman Meal out for her inspection, and

she would either nod her approval or wrinkle her tiny, delicate nose.

“Too much, Daddy,” she’d say in a hush, her blue eyes dark like polished steel in the dim light from the bulb over the range. “Take some of it off, yucko.”

They would dig for clams all morning long, furrowing with their feet through the wet, cold sand at the tide’s lip until their toes would be numb. They would collect the clams in a big plastic pail, sometimes until it was filled to the brim with mussels. Then they would hike out to the overlook, sit on the rocks while waves smacked around them, and eat sandwiches, Frito’s corn chips and share a thermos full of raspberry lemonade.

“Do you believe in monsters, Daddy?” Elaina had asked him once upon a time, out on the damp rocks.

He had leaned over and tugged the hood of her red cotton sweatshirt more securely around her ears. Autumn was encroaching, and the breeze blowing in off of the pewter grey ocean was chilly.

He remembered like it was yesterday; the small, rhythmic movements of her lips as she chewed her bite of sandwich, and the way the tip of her small pink tongue darted out to catch a smidgen of bread on her lip.

He had packed yogurt that day, too. Strawberry-banana, her favorite. She had taken a mouthful of some, and licked the spoon clean.

*And he remembered her that day in her playroom as well, with the rag dolls, and how she had taken off all of their little clothes, and how she was pushing their small, stuffed bodies against each other with savage fervency, and the words that were coming out of her mouth.*

“Sea monsters?” Frank had asked, smiling at her. He had not been able to coax her into doing much more than wading out into the ocean. She shared her mother’s irrational fear of water.

“Just monster-monsters,” Elaina had said, looking up at him. A loose strand of her dark hair had blown across her cheek, and he had pushed it away, trying to tuck it back under her hood.

*“Remember, this is our secret stuff, it’s a secret thing, remember,” she was whispering, her voice hoarse and nearly panting. “Stop crying, be quiet, it doesn’t hurt you, it doesn’t hurt...”*

“Nope,” he’d told her, and he flicked a corner of bread crust up into the air with his forefinger and thumb. A particularly deft seagull had caught it and swooped away. Elaina had giggled, delighted.

*“This is our secret stuff, remember, a secret thing. It doesn’t hurt, STOP CRYING.”*

“Besides, even if there were monsters—which there aren’t,” he’d said, dropping her a conspiring wink. “They couldn’t get to you.”

“How come?” She had licked her yogurt spoon again.

*“El, what are you playing at?”*

*“Nothing—nothing, Daddy.”*

“I wouldn’t let them,” Frank had said, and he’d put his arm around her and pulled her close and loved her more than his own soul.

“I love you, Daddy.”

The feel of her cold, wind-chafed lips pressing against his cheek, and the smell of her, like Johnson’s Baby Shampoo and detergent and something beautiful and vaguely clean that was distinctively Elaina.

*“Who plays with you like that, El?”*

*“Nobody, Daddy. Like how? I dunno, I just...I...nobody, Daddy.”*

“I love you, too, El.”

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It had been a man who lived up the road from them, the closest neighbor in five miles.

When they had bought the split-level Cape Cod, Frank and Lauren had found that charming, one of the selling points of the place.

His name had been Campbell Greene and in the summertime, he’d brought them grocery bags full of freshly

grown corn, sweet peas, beans and bright yellow summer squash from his half-acre wide vegetable garden.

He had been a charming and delightful bachelor. Sometimes he and Frank would sit out on the wraparound porch of the Cape Cod and swap stories while sipping Budweiser out of brown glass bottles.

Lauren had talked about fixing him up with one of her friends from the city. “Or maybe one of the nurses at the hospital, like that one, Jenny. You said you post-op a lot with her, and she’s single and pretty...”

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Frank had blown Campbell’s brains out all across the bed where the man had raped his beautiful six-year-old daughter.

He had made Campbell deep-throat the barrel of the gun, almost to the point where he gagged. “You son of a bitch,” Frank had said, and he had been shaking, thinking about Elaina shoving the Raggedy Andy doll against the Ann doll.

“Vvvtthnnoo,” Campbell had pleaded around the black metal stock of the 48-caliber handgun Frank had picked out at a pawn shop. He’d driven more than five hours to New York City to buy the pistol. Pawn shop owners in New York didn’t ask questions when someone was murdered, but in small towns, they buzzed like late-season cicadas. Frank had watched enough true-crime television shows to know that. And he hadn’t wanted anyone to ever trace the weapon back to him.

“Eeeez, vvtthhnnnooo...” Campbell had pissed his pants. Of course, that was before Frank had kicked him furiously in the balls and smashed them into a meaty, useless pulp.

“Stop crying,” Frank had told him, and then he had blown Campbell’s brains out across a navy blue bedspread.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Frank had whispered. He’d left Campbell’s house, driven to the city again and dumped the gun in the Hudson River. Double shifts, that’s what he’d told Lauren. He’d had to pull double shifts at the hospital in East Windsor and that’s where he had been. She’d never questioned him on it, and neither had the police. Frank had returned from

New York, locked himself in the bathroom, turned on the sink faucets and sat on the toilet, sobbing for Elaina under the cover of the water's rush.

In the end, Elaina had died anyway.

He hadn't been able to protect her from another monster, this one almost more dark and foul and insidious than the molesting neighbor.

Leukemia. The goddamn leukemia.

There had been no time after the diagnosis. And throughout that brief time, Lauren had watched him bitterly, her dark eyes quick and bright. He knew what she was thinking. He shared the same sentiments.

*I'm the doctor. Why didn't I see it all sooner?*

Lauren had left him shortly after the funeral. The cancer had taken everything from him.

Frank sat alone in the dark quarters he had adopted as his room in the compound on X-1226, trying to remember his daughter's voice. It was somewhere in his brain, trapped like forbidden music, but it would eventually come. It always did.

From somewhere down the hallway outside, he heard Eric's voice, soft and distant, followed by Jerica Emmette's, louder, shrill with something that delighted her.

He could hear her laughter, and for a moment her voice reverberated in his skull, and he smiled, remembering Elaina.

## Chapter Four

Kat had a weird dream about Chris Emmente, her first and only and not-sorely-missed ex-husband.

She dreamed about being back on board the *Daedalus*, and they were headed for the escape shuttle because the ship was burning, and piping and conduits were crashing down out of the ceiling.

For Kat, it was like being at the movies. She didn't feel panic or fear. She felt distant, disconnected, like she was sitting in the back row of an empty theater, watching a show. In the dream, Frank was behind her, holding Jerica. Kat could hear her daughter crying, frightened. She watched the pipe come crashing down in front of them, and heard Jerica shriek in terror. She saw Eric in front of them, holding Leia, trying to shield her body with his own from the showering sparks. Leia was screaming.

Kat watched with a strange, detached fascination as Leia clutched desperately at Eric's flight suit, her fingers splayed wide.

"Kat!" Eric cried, holding his hand out toward her, reaching around the collapsed portion of the ceiling. "Kat, give me your hand!"

"Go on, what are you waiting for?" someone said behind her, and when she turned around, she saw it wasn't Frank and Jerica behind her at all.

It was Chris.

He stood there, sparks spilling around him but not seeming to touch him. His arms were crossed at his chest in that old

familiar way. He was wearing the red-and-blue plaid shirt he'd had on the day she had finally left him for good.

His face was different, though. It was much younger and thinner than the day she'd left him. He looked like the young man she had fallen in love with; a man who had once treated her kindly, and whose hugs were so fierce and warm she remembered hoping he would never let her go.

*My God*, she thought. *Were you ever really this beautiful, Chris?*

"Take his hand." Chris nodded toward Eric. He unfolded his arms and began to squeeze his hands into fists. She listened to the terrible, familiar sound of his knuckles as they went *snap! crackle!* and *pop!*

And she knew what that sound meant. *Oh, yeah. Real damn well.*

"Go on." Chris' face seemed to change right before her eyes. His skin moved like warm taffy, pulling down toward his chin, draping in plump tucks of fat at each corner of his mouth, and in a roll just under the edge of his jaw line.

Kat shied away, bringing her hands up to her face instinctively. There was the face she remembered. The man who never seemed to smile. The man whose face could twist and contort and become evil.

"Take his fucking hand. Maybe he'll suck on your tits, huh? Would you like that?"

Kat cringed. "Chris, don't...please, no..."

"I know. Maybe he'll fuck you, Kat, and you'd like that, wouldn't you? A nice, pretty young fella like him, huh?"

She saw his fist come up, and she remembered the Easter Sunday when she had first started showing with Jerica. She'd lost two teeth to those hard, uncaring, cruel hands that day.

And his face. She'd thought he looked like the devil.

"No," she pleaded, shrinking back, hunching her shoulders in toward her chest, feeling small and young again, wanting to disappear. "Oh, no, Chris...no, please..."

In the dream, his fist swung around in a sharp, precise arc, hooking expertly for the side of her face. She supposed it had connected, but she didn't remember feeling it.

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When she came to, she was in a small, dimly lit room, in a soft, comfortable bed, with cool, crisp, clean-smelling sheets draped about her shoulders.

She looked around, momentarily bewildered and disoriented. She half-expected to find herself back in Illinois, in her old house, with Chris there, his terrible hands poised.

The dream was still fresh enough in her mind to bother her, because she'd been immobilized with terror, frightened and helpless. It had been a long time since she'd felt that way. She'd worked very hard not to be that woman anymore, the victim, the one who had endured Chris's beatings and abuse for so long. And yet, in that moment, in the dream, it had all been stripped from her. She'd been *that woman* again, the one she still hated. The one she'd vowed she'd never again be.

Eric dozed next to her in a chair, with his head tilted back, resting against the wall behind him. His eyes were closed.

*You'd like that, wouldn't you, Kat? A nice, pretty young fella like him?*

She studied the angle of Eric's jaw line, the slope of his nose, and the arch of his cheek outlined in the dim light. She thought—and not for the first time in the five years or so that they'd been working together—what an extraordinarily handsome man he was. At twenty-seven, he was nearly eight full years her junior.

*I was learning to drive a car when you were in grade school, she thought fondly and somewhat forlornly, smiling as she watched Eric sleep. Jerica snoozed in his lap, her hand draped daintily against his chest, her lovely little features serene. She looked like she'd been made out of porcelain.*

Kat peeked beneath the covers and realized she was in her bra and panties. They weren't nearly as soiled as her flight suit had been, but they still looked pretty bad. The idea that Eric must have undressed her, that his hands had caressed her body, drawing back the damp, dirty jumpsuit left her feeling warm inside, and somewhat embarrassed.

*God, what he must think*, she thought, with an unhappy glance at her soft belly, breasts and hips, all rounded and full, presenting more folds at the moment than she would have preferred.

Kat leaned over and gently poked Eric's thigh. "Hey, sleepy heads."

He gave a start and woke up, blinking sleepily at her. "Kat, hey."

"Mommy!" Jerica cried. She hopped off of Eric's lap and bounced onto the bed.

"Hey, pup," Kat said, as Jerica straddled her hips.

"Are you going to be okay now?" Jerica bounced on Kat's belly.

"I think so." Kat caught her daughter's shoulders with a grimace, holding her still. "At least, if you stop jumping on my stomach, I will."

"How are you feeling?" Eric asked.

"Kind of loopy." She smiled goofily. "Must be from that stuff Frank gave me. Where's he at?"

"Checking out the commissary." Eric reached out and gave her nose a playful pinch. "While you were sleeping, some of us were hard at work. We've activated the emergency beacon in the command center. Not much else there seems online yet, except the basic primary functions, like maintaining the perimeter field."

"Yeah, Doc was supposed to do all..." Kat began. Her voice trailed off; her smile faltered. Xian Tren, or "Doc" as he was affectionately dubbed, had been their engineering specialist. While the basic electronic and computer functions of the colony compound had been set up earlier, by her friend Trina's crew, it had been Doc's responsibility to see everything else up and running. *But now Doc is gone*, she remembered, and the horrible, leaden weight of her culpability came settling down on her once more.

"Hey, there's a shower in there," Eric said brightly. She could tell from his expression that he worried about her, that he'd sensed her distress. He indicated a small, narrow door

she'd mistaken at first glance for a closet. "And plenty of hot water, too."

"That sounds too good to be true." Kat stretched her legs out and wiggled her feet.

Eric stood. She noticed that he seemed to favor his right leg over his cyborg left one. She also noticed the nearly imperceptible way his brows furrowed, as if it hurt him.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. Come on, Jerica. Let's go give Frank a hand."

Jerica leaned down, gave Kat a loud, smacking kiss and then climbed off the bed.

"That little console by the door is a com system, so give a shout if you need something," Eric said to Kat. "When you're done in the shower, come down. Just to the left and around the corner. We'll all have canned meat and rehydrated milk."

Jerica wrinkled her nose at Kat and poked her tongue out.

"Can't wait." Kat reached out, took his hand and squeezed his fingers. "Thanks, Eric."

"No problem, Kat." Eric looked down at Jerica. "You want a piggyback ride?"

"I'm too big for piggyback rides," Jerica said, rolling her eyes.

"I didn't want to give you one anyway." Eric dropped a wink at Kat.

"Yes, you did, too."

Kat watched Eric walk out of the room, the dark metal door sliding closed behind him with a hydraulic hiss. She hadn't been able to detect a limp. *I must be imagining things*, she thought, crawling out of bed. *That's all.*

\*\*\*

The shower felt good, impossibly good.

Kat pressed her forehead against the smooth wall of the shower stall and let the steaming water pound against the back of her neck and shoulders.

It had never felt so good, so important to be clean. Kat had scrubbed every inch of her body as hard as she could, scouring until her skin was violently red. She cupped her breasts in her hands, feeling their warm softness, their reassuring weight. She closed her eyes and remembered.

*It's always you on my mind, Kat, and one day we can be like this, together, I mean, for good, for always.*

Alex's voice, echoing in her mind. Alex's hands caressing her breasts, his fingers gentle and kneading, squeezing her nipples, exciting her.

*It's not always going to be like this, Kat. I'm going to leave Cassie. But I can't right now, not any time soon. These things take time, and there's a lot to figure out in the meantime. But you know this is what I want. You're what I want.*

"Oh, Alex," she whispered. "Alex, I'm sorry."

She stayed in the shower for what seemed like hours, until she was certain her body had shriveled up into a raisin. Eric had left some towels out for her and she wrapped one around her body. She walked back into the bedroom, leaving small puddles in her wake.

She leaned over the sink and looked at her face in the mirror. She'd been careful to keep the gauze pad over the wound dry, but it had gotten rather soggy none the less. She carefully pulled it off. Her eyes smarted as the tape peeled back from her skin.

She studied the rough, jagged line that furrowed down from her hair line to just above her cheekbone. Frank had used fifteen stitches to close it. It still stung, and the skin around it was irritated and sore. She squinted experimentally, and it felt tight and stiff.

Her entire body ached. Her neck and shoulders hurt the most, but Frank had said there was no back injury or whiplash. The safety harness of the shuttle had protected her from any serious injuries.

In the light from above the sink, she could make out the lines in her face that betrayed her age, although she still felt she was a fair cry from being "old". However, she didn't like the creases around her eyes. "Laugh lines," her mother had always

called them. Kat didn't think they were too funny, especially since she'd watched the same sort of lines cut deeper and deeper trenches across her mother's face throughout the years.

Sometimes she would look at Jerica, admiring the pretty, cornflower-blue eyes, the beautiful, glossy golden ringlets, and the delicate, refined features and wonder if her mother had ever looked at her that way, cherishing the small, innocent features that were so similar to her own, so untouched by time.

"Jerica's going to be a little heartbreaker," Alex had told her once upon a time.

*Alex.*

She pushed all of her wet hair back from her face and twisted it into a rudimentary knot on top of her head.

There were two grey jumpsuits folded neatly on her bed. Kat picked one up and smiled. "Thanks, Eric."

As she wriggled into the jumpsuit, she pretended not to notice the way her hips were not as slim as they once had been. Jerica had found Kat's wedding picture once, maybe a year ago. She had studied it for a long time, her face pinched and serious.

"Is this you?" she'd asked, pointing to the slim, pretty twenty-four-year-old girl in the photo.

Jerica had glanced at the picture, and at Kat, and at the picture again.

"What happened, Mommy? You were a lot skinnier here."

*Thanks, pup.* Again, she tried not to consider Eric undressing her, seeing her little more than naked. She'd seen him in a nearly identical state in the compound's infirmary, and had admired the view. *I doubt he could say the same. God, what he must think.*

Kat pressed her hands against her hips, smoothing the fabric back, watching the way it pulled across her belly and her upper thighs.

The girl in the wedding picture seemed like someone from another time in more ways than just the physical; a person she'd once known, long-lost and nearly forgotten. That had been the girl Chris had beaten, the one too stupid and naïve to escape him.

*I don't know her anymore.* Kat shook her head, ridding herself of any residual dread left over from her dream, and trying to forget she'd never be able to wriggle into a pair of size seven slacks again. *She's gone forever, out of my life. Good fucking riddance.*

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She could hear Jerica's high voice coming from up ahead as she tried to find the kitchen. She poked her head into a doorway, and saw Eric and her daughter nosing through some sort of supply room.

"...is this what it was like before?" Jerica asked him. They both had their backs to the door and didn't see Kat. "The first time you crashed?"

"No," he replied.

She sat on the floor and tried to pry open the lid of a metal box. "What was it like, then?"

"I don't really remember. I'd lost power in my ship, and all I know is it was very dark and very cold."

"Did it hurt?" Jerica looked up at him. "What happened to your leg?"

"I don't remember it hurting then," he said. "I was in shock. You know what that means?"

Jerica sighed, rolling her eyes, awarding him one of her patent-pending "I'm-not-stupid-you-know" looks. Eric laughed. "Right. What was I thinking?"

Kat smiled softly, shying back in the doorway so they wouldn't notice her. Eric seldom talked about the accident that had cost him his leg. She found herself touched that he would confide so freely and earnestly with her daughter.

"It hurt later, though," Jerica said. It was a statement, not a question and Eric nodded.

"Yeah."

"Bad?" Her voice grew small, uncharacteristically timid.

"Pretty bad, yeah." He knelt next to Jerica and took the box gently out of her hands. "I got this." He glanced toward the

doorway and saw Kat. He blinked in momentary start and then smiled. “Well, hi.”

Jerica looked over her shoulder and grinned. “Hey, Mommy!”

“What’s going on?” Kat asked.

“We’re looking for tools,” Jerica replied. “Eric needs small-point cybermechanical tools to work on his leg.”

“I thought you said it was okay.” Kat frowned at him, thinking of how he’d looked pained as he’d risen to his feet in her room.

“It *is* okay,” Eric told her and as he stood now, he did so with a straight face, not even a hint of a limp or wince. “I mean, I think one of the lift hinges in the knee might be a little crunched, but that’s no big thing.”

She could have pressed him on it, but didn’t. *He wouldn’t lie to me*, she told herself. *If there was something wrong, he’d say so. Maybe not to Frank or Jerica, but he would to me.* And even if he was lying, Kat didn’t think she wanted to know. *I’ve had to deal with too much already today. I can’t take anything else. Not now. Not after Alex.*

She forced a smile, dismissing any lingering concerns. “You guys help Frank in the commissary?”

“I wanted to help Eric instead.” Jerica bristled.

Kat smiled knowingly. Jerica was polite to Frank, but he was still new to her, a stranger, and she always seemed to regard him with a child’s dark mistrust of unfamiliar adults. Plus, she had always been particularly fond of Eric. Kat secretly suspected that Jerica had developed a crush on him.

She would watch how Jerica carried herself around Eric, her spine straight, her gestures graceful and purposeful, like she was a small woman instead of a little nine-year-old girl. She was often amazed to hear this playful, coquettish woman’s laugh coming from the kid when she would talk to Eric.

“Are you hungry, pup?” Kat asked her.

“I’m not a pup,” Jerica said in that odd, womanly voice, snooping through the tool box. “Please don’t call me that.”

“I’m kind of hungry.” Eric tousled her hair to draw her attention. “What do you say we see what Frank has found for supper? This can all wait.”

“All right.” Jerica got to her feet and took Kat’s hand. “Come on, Mommy. The commissary is this way. I’ll show you.”

She was just a little girl again. But Kat had a feeling she would see more and more of the busy little woman inside of Jerica in the next few years.

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“We need to check the compound’s electric HUM-V.” Kat sat on the floor, resting her spine against the side of a couch, her arms crossed over her knees.

“Already done,” Frank said. “It’s been charging since the *Icarus* crew left, apparently. I tried starting it up and it turned right over. All the fluid levels looked good.”

Kat was surprised that he would have thought to do this, much less know how. *He’s a doctor, for God’s sake*, she thought, scolding herself. *He’s not a moron. Of course he figured it out.*

“I think we should take it tomorrow and try to find the *Daedalus*’ black box,” she said. “Maybe then we can try to figure out what happened.”

There was a long moment of silence.

“Look, I know this is hard to talk about, but I think we need to.” Kat looked between Eric and Frank, her expression solemn. They had all been avoiding the topic of conversation since they’d reached the compound, but she knew they had to address it. Since no one else seemed inclined to broach the subject, and she was the senior officer in charge, she figured it was her responsibility. “Do you remember anything about what happened? Did you hear something like an explosion?”

Frank shook his head. “Not that I can recall. But I had a CD in. I was working in the med lab and I like to listen to Vivaldi when I’m doing sample analysis.”

“I didn’t hear anything either,” Eric said. “Just all at once, STELA went nuts, the alarm claxons screeching, the monitors saying there were fires all over the ship, and hull breaches on the cargo hold and three subdecks below it.”

*Hull breaches.* That sure as hell sounded like the result of an explosion to Kat. *But from the cargo hold? What did we have back there that was explosive?*

Leia had been the crew’s payload specialist, charged with keeping track of the *Daedalus*’ cargo. Kat had only perfunctorily surveyed the ship’s inventory sheets. She didn’t remember seeing anything volatile or explosive listed. *And Leia would have told us if there had been. She would have made everyone aware of the danger.*

Eric ran his fingers through his hair. “I tried to reestablish orbit, initiate a posigrade burn and pull us out further, but the navigational systems wouldn’t respond. The electrical systems were all shorting out, sparking. I keep replaying it over and over again in my head, but I don’t remember anything being wrong before that—none of the readings, nothing.”

“Did Alex ever make it to the bridge?” Kat’s voice was small. Here was what she had really been dodging, not the discussion of the explosion, but of Alex. Just saying his name sent a spear of pain through her heart. She began to pick at her cuticles, pushing against them with her thumbnail until she saw a thin line of blood swell along the edge. “He...that’s where he was going when he...”

“I never saw him.” Eric shook his head. “He must have come in behind me.”

“Behind you?” Frank frowned. “That doesn’t make sense. If he was going that way, you should have run into him.”

Eric met his gaze, a slight crimp forming between his brows. “I didn’t see him.”

“How could you have missed him?” Frank said. “That corridor was the only way to and from the bridge. I—”

“What the hell are you saying, Frank?” Eric snapped. “I didn’t see him, okay? Leave it alone!”

“Both of you shut up.” Kat frowned. “We got enough to deal with without the two of you jumping each other’s shit. So just cool it already.”

“Goddamn it, I’m not jumping his shit,” Frank said, his voice sharp and angry. “All I’m saying is—”

“Enough, Frank!” Kat locked gazes with him, and for a moment, the furious intensity in his eyes frightened her. It took her back to another place, another time—a lifetime ago. It was the way Chris would look before he hit her.

“Enough,” she said again, as much to herself as Frank. *I’m different now, damn it. I’m in charge here.*

Frank turned away and shrugged, the rage in his face softening into subdued submission so abruptly, Kat wondered if she had imagined it.

*It’s the dream, she told herself. That dream about Chris. It’s still on my mind, still messing with me.*

She cut her gaze first to Eric, then to her daughter. “And you watch your mouth.”

Eric looked abashed by her rebuke, his shoulder hunching. “Sorry.”

Jerica sat next to Eric on the couch, her legs tucked under her Indian-style, watching them with a great deal of interest.

“I think it’s about time to go on to bed,” Kat said to her. “I want to get an early start tomorrow, if we can, and you’ll need to go with us.”

“Okay, Mommy.” Jerica slid off the couch.

“Do you need something to help you sleep?” Frank asked. He looked sheepish, and she realized he was trying to make amends.

She didn’t want to sleep again, or face any more disturbing dreams, but the idea of remaining awake, of spending the night through in the creepy, unfamiliar compound with only her thoughts, her memories of Alex and her bitter heartbreak for company didn’t appeal to her, either. “Yes, please, Frank.”

“How about you, Eric?” Frank turned to the younger man. “A little something to—?”

“No,” Eric said, quickly, almost sharply. “No, thanks, Frank. I don’t like needles. I’ve had enough sticking into me in my life. I’ll sleep okay.”

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“I didn’t mean anything by that,” Frank said, walking down the hall. “I’m sorry, Kat. I didn’t mean to get you upset.”

“It’s okay,” she replied. “I kind of fired off both barrels at you, and I shouldn’t have.”

“Well, I sort of fired first, so I had it coming.” He offered his hand to her, bridging the distance between them. “Truce?”

Kat smiled, slipping her palm against his and accepting his shake. “Truce.”

In the infirmary, Kat watched, transfixed, as he administered the sedative. The needle slid effortlessly into a small, fat, bluish-grey knot of blood vessels at the inner delta of her elbow. It burned when Frank pulled it out and he pressed a cotton ball against the small polka dot of blood that was forming.

“There.” He winked at her. “One nightcap, shaken not stirred. A peaceful night’s sleep, guaranteed.”

She smiled. “Thanks. You ready for bed, pup?”

Jerica waited across the room, snooping through cabinets and drawers. She was frightened by needles. “Yuh-hunh.” She glanced at Kat and nodded. “Can I stay with you?” Jerica twisted a lock of hair around her finger. “Just for tonight, I mean. Not for always.”

“Sure, pup.” Kat looked at Frank. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “As long as I don’t stop to think about anything.”

“Tell me about it.” She hugged him. She’d been so busy worrying about her own grief and pain, she’d failed to notice how exhausted he looked, how haggard and strained, haunted in his own right.

*Tethers*

“Thanks, Frank.” She wished she could offer more to comfort him. *But hell, I don't even have that for myself.*

He smiled and it touched his eyes. “I'll see you in the morning, Kat.”

## Chapter Five

Frank lay on his back, naked in bed, staring up into the darkness at the ceiling and thinking about what it had been like to slice open the gook's throat.

Xian "Doc" Tren had put up a pretty good fight, but Frank supposed that should've been expected.

*All those goddamn gooks know that karate shit.*

Frank knew that karate shit, too. He had learned it, among other things, shortly after he had stood on frost-crusting ground and watched as his daughter's small, glossy white casket had lowered into its black pit in the earth.

Leukemia. The goddamn leukemia.

There had been no more early morning clam digs for him and Elaina. They were replaced by early morning pills. It was always his responsibility, because Elaina wouldn't take the medicine from Lauren. Every morning at four o'clock sharp, Frank would kiss Elaina's forehead lightly, rousing her from her fitful sleep.

"Mornin', punkin."

"Oohh, Daddy, please, no, it makes me sick, I don't want it..."

"Please, punkin. Take it for Daddy. It's going to make you all better real soon."

"Do you promise?"

"Cross my heart."

"And hope to die," Frank whispered hoarsely up at the ceiling.

On her tombstone: *For a moment, an angel rested here.*

He made sure all of her favorite stuffed toys were in the casket with her. He remembered a world history class from his undergraduate years in college, where he had studied how Egyptian pharaohs were buried with all of their favorite worldly possessions, including servants and pets. Frank had doubted that trying to slip Kit-Kat, El's fat grey tabby cat into the coffin would go over particularly smooth, and so he'd settled on her powder blue Puffalump hippopotamus, the Paddington Bear she'd had since she was three days old, and her Crystal Princess Barbie doll.

After the funeral and wake, when he and Lauren were left alone in the split-level Cape Cod on the beach with three honey-baked hams and God alone knew how many consolatory casseroles, he had sat in his bathroom on the toilet, wishing he hadn't thrown his pistol into the Hudson River. He would have wrapped his lips around the barrel and pulled the trigger.

Three weeks later, he had met "Colonel" David McDonald at a cocktail party in East Windsor. It had been some kind of fundraiser for one of Lauren's stuffy politician friends. An unsuccessful candidate in two presidential elections himself, McDonald was in attendance, offering his personal backing and that of his independent militant party, Legion.

And, of course, his financial backing. David McDonald was one of the richest men in the world, a self-made billionaire who had grown disgruntled with the mechanisms of American politics and wanted to see the country reshaped into what he called a "true democracy".

Frank had spent more than four hours that night discussing this concept with the good Colonel. Within a month, he was a card-carrying member of the New England Militia branch of Legion. He'd been so desperate for an escape from his grief, longing for something that felt like family to him. Christ knew that he hadn't enjoyed that with Lauren in ages, long before Elaina's illness.

He had abandoned his job, his house, even his wife, and moved to Legion's compound in rural New Hampshire. Where, of course, he'd met Reba Crowe.

Reba had taught Frank his karate shit. And his computer shit. And his explosives and weapons shit.

He guessed that if anyone in the world besides his daughter could have been his soul mate and friend, it was Reba Crowe. And man, could she fuck. Christ knew that he hadn't enjoyed *that* with Lauren in ages, either.

Frank had been too noisy coming into the tech lab aboard the *Daedalus*. Reba would have been pissed at him, told him he had to be more careful.

Doc had heard him, glanced over his shoulder and seen the butterfly knife in Frank's hand. "Franklin...?" he'd asked, puzzled.

Frank had gone after Doc first because he knew too much. If he'd survived, he would have been able to get all of the electrical and computer systems up and running at the lunar compound—which Frank didn't need—and he wouldn't have let anyone else access the systems in the meantime—which Frank *did* need.

That, and Doc knew the karate shit, which made him dangerous. He was a first-degree black-belt in hapkido, as a matter of fact. Too bad Frank was third-degree.

Doc had reached forward and hit the bridge alarm, and Frank had sprang forward in swift, sudden action. He'd brought the knife around and down, severing Doc's index finger neatly.

Doc shrieked and danced back clumsily, clutching his hand to his chest and watching in nearly comedic horror as blood spurted from the stump of his knuckle. Frank had brushed Doc's finger aside and shut off the alarm.

"Whu...what are you doing, Franklin?" Doc had wheezed at him, backing away, trying to get to the door. "Eric's on the bridge... He will have seen the alarm. He'll be here...any minute."

"Good," Frank had replied. "It'll be a pleasure to slice his fucking throat open, too."

He'd delivered a quick, hard roundhouse kick to the side of Doc's face. Doc had swung his arm up, blocking the blow, sending blood from his severed finger spraying across Frank's cheek. Frank had danced back, ducking around the countering punch Doc launched at him, and the fracas had been on.

Doc had been one tough little gook. Even with his wounded hand, he'd landed some solid blows, his fists swinging, his feet kicking out as he struggled to defend himself. Frank had been breathing hard; it had felt like his heart had been going to jackhammer its way right through his solar plexus. He was exhilarated, flying on a rush of adrenaline. Again and again he swung the knife, ripping into Doc's flesh, carving him open, sending blood splattering around the lab.

Doc had rushed unexpectedly at Frank. He'd slammed Frank backwards into a table, nearly knocking both the wind and the kidneys out of him. Frank had felt Doc's bloody hand clawing for his wrist, the knife, and he'd brought his fist up, punching Doc's nose. He'd heard the moist, distinctive crunch as the bone had broken. Doc staggered away, bringing his good hand up to his face, yowling in pain.

Frank had caught him easily, forcing the other man into a tight, choking headlock. Doc had struggled ferociously against him, even as Frank forced the open blade of the butterfly knife under his chin and jerked it swiftly, deftly, opening his carotid artery.

Doc's blood had splashed across Frank's forearm in powerful, pulsating spurts. It had been incredibly hot against his skin. Frank had shoved Doc and watched him man flounder away. He'd heard Doc's breath wheezing through his punctured windpipe.

Doc's knees had folded clumsily, and he'd pitched face-down on the floor. A large pool of deep crimson had spread rapidly around his head.

Frank had wiped the knife blade clean on the front of his blood-stained shirt. He'd folded the knife closed with a quick toss of his wrist. He'd tucked it in his pants pocket and unbuttoned his shirt.

He'd waited patiently for Eric Nagel, Everybody's-Fucking-All-American, but after about ten minutes he realized the pilot wasn't going to answer the alarm. He'd been both disappointed and relieved at this; disappointed because he'd be lying if he said he hadn't wanted to carve open the arrogant pretty boy since the moment of their introduction, and relieved because at that time, he'd needed Eric to fly the escape shuttle. Alex Horne was

a bigger problem in the overall scheme of things than Eric, and thus, he was number two on Frank's list of things to do before the *Daedalus* blew up. But if he killed Alex *and* Eric, that would have left Frank alone with Kat, Leia and Jerica. Neither woman could fly the shuttle. He knew how to, but they didn't realize this—and it would have raised a world of suspicions had he revealed it to them.

When Frank had finished killing Doc, he'd pulled his shirt off and dropped it unceremoniously across the gook's body. He'd glanced at his watch. He had only seven minutes left before the first round of detonations, but it had been plenty of time to throw on a fresh shirt from his quarters.

He'd locked the tech lab behind him and headed for his room. His gait had been light and quick.

He'd run into Leia as he'd left his room after changing. She had been stomping toward the rec room, her pretty red ringlets streaming along behind her, her bright hazel eyes flashing.

"Hey, Leia," Frank had said, and he was still pretty rueful that he'd never had the chance to fuck her. She'd survived the crash, even though her safety harness had broken loose of its moorings during the impact, and she'd been hurtled across the shuttle. Her body had been battered and broken, but she'd been alive, hiccupping for breath, squirming feebly on the floor. "Everything okay?"

"Just beautiful," she'd replied, not even slowing her pace down for a moment. "Be even better if Eric Nagel would drop off the fucking face of the earth."

Frank had come to before anyone else aboard the shuttle and found Leia on the floor, sprawled and bleeding. He'd limped over to her and looked down for a long moment, watching with detached, aloof interest as she'd struggled to breathe, gulping at him, opening and closing her mouth like a fish caught out of water.

"You and Eric have a lovers' spat, huh?" he'd asked her aboard the *Daedalus*, amused.

He'd broken her neck aboard the escape shuttle, genuflecting beside her broken body and cupping her face

between his hands. She'd blinked up at him, uttering quiet, whimpering, pleading sounds and he'd smiled at her.

"Hush now." He'd wrenched her head, twisting her neck until the bones anchoring her skull to her spine snapped and her soft, snuffling mewls had faded abruptly to silence. "Hush."

Aboard the *Daedalus*, when he'd teased her good-naturedly about Eric, she'd shot him a blazing look, her nostrils flaring out and her eyes sharp and mean, and then she'd disappeared into the rec room without offering him another word. Her tits had been bouncing provocatively under her blouse, and he'd watched the way the fabric of her khaki slacks hugged the gently undulating curves of her ass.

She'd given him a hard-on with that baleful look.

Just thinking about her now, in his bunk at the complex on X-1226, turned him on. He reached down, his hand sliding between his legs, and folded his fingers around his hardening shaft. He began to stroke himself, remembering Leia's tits and ass, the soft, crunching sound as her neck had broken.

He imagined that he might have been able to fuck her eventually, if he'd been able to stay with the *Daedalus* crew for awhile. But at that time, Leia was obviously head over perky little ass for Eric.

Just like Kat, although Frank figured Kathryn Emmente was too full of self-righteous indignation and petty personal insecurities to ever admit that she wanted Nagel.

*Uptight bitch*, he thought. His hand moved faster, his rhythm growing more fervent. *Her cunt's probably so tight, she'd turn your dick to diamonds fucking her.*

He smiled, considering this, imagining burying his cock between Kat's prudish thighs and finding out for himself if the ice queen indeed ran cold to the core. He closed his eyes as he came, the hot, wet rush of his release spattering suddenly against his belly.

## Chapter Six

“Mommy?” Jerica whispered.

The room was dark, and they were snuggled under the covers, side by side. Jerica had wriggled up close to Kat’s back, her face near her mother’s shoulder.

“Yeah, pup?” Kat felt warm and sleepy from the sedative. She’d almost been asleep.

“I’m sorry Alex is dead. I know you loved him a lot.”

“Yes,” Kat said quietly. “Yes, I did.”

Jerica’s small fingers crept along her side, tickling. Kat reached down and squeezed them affectionately.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“Thanks, pup,” Kat murmured. *You’re wrong but thanks anyway for the sentiment.*

The drug lulled her to sleep, with Jerica snuggled up beside her. She’d hoped the drugs would keep her from dreaming, but the damn things came around anyway.

She dreamed they were back on the shuttle, at the crash site in the forest. She could hear the rain dripping delicately down through the leaves and branches overhead. She could hear the soft, lulling creaks and groans of the battered shuttle. She could hear her own rasping, whistling breathing.

In the dream, Leia wasn’t dead yet. Her body was still torqued crazily, horribly broken, but she was somehow still alive. Kat could hear her small, whimpering sobs.

“Please...” the dream Leia pleaded. “Please...!”

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Kat jerked awake, twisting so sharply that the muscles in her right calf cramped into a knot.

“Shit!” she hissed, pulling her leg up to her chest and trying to massage the muscles loose.

The cramp subsided and she relaxed. She rolled over onto her belly and took her watch off the nightstand. She brought it up to her face, but couldn’t make out the time. The crystal had cracked during the crash, and rain water had gotten inside the face. Now there was a thick film of moisture bubbles obscuring the glass.

She put it down and sighed.

“Mommy...?” Jerica whispered from beside her. She was half-asleep, bewildered and scared.

“It’s okay, pup.” Kat rolled over and stroked Jerica’s satiny curls until the little girl slept again.

Kat closed her eyes and imagined Leia, laying sprawled and twisted at the back end of the shuttle, the rain running into her open eyes, filling and overflowing like tears. *Just a dream*, she thought, even though Leia’s voice replayed in her mind again, a hitching, hiccupping plea that dissolved, ripping upward into a terrified scream.

She opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling. *Just a dream*, she told herself. *Leia wasn’t alive after the shuttle hit. She couldn’t have been. Who would she have been pleading with? Who would have made her scream?*

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Kat dreamed again, this time about Alex.

In the dream, they weren’t doing anything exciting or extravagant. They were sitting together on the sofa in his quarters aboard the *Daedalus*.

He was holding her hand. His palm was warm against her knuckles, and his fingers were wrapped around hers, comfortable, familiar.

She could smell his cologne faintly. He never bought expensive cologne. It was just some anonymous kind he'd buy for himself, a fragrance that she associated with no one else but him.

He looked so handsome.

They were watching TV, hand in hand. One of Alex's favorites: Jimmy Stewart, *It's A Wonderful Life*.

Kat looked at Alex instead of the movie. She watched the way the warm lights from the TV screen lit across his face and shined in his soft grey eyes.

People often thought he was Jerica's father. His hair was a darker shade of gold, and his eyes were not quite as blue, but there was still a remarkable resemblance.

In the dream, Alex glanced at her. He cocked one eyebrow, smiling at her. She watched the dimple in his left cheek crimp.

"What?" he said, his fingers tightening slightly against hers.

"Nothing," she said, savoring the deep, resonant tenor of his voice. "I just...I had this really awful nightmare where the *Daedalus* crashed and you were dead."

Alex laughed. "That was sweet of you."

She leaned over and rested the side of her face against his arm. She felt the hard curve of his biceps through the material. "It was the worst dream I've ever had."

Alex slipped his arm around her, hugging her. "Do I look dead to you?"

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"No," Kat said, and when she spoke the word aloud, she woke herself up.

The room was still dark. Kat blinked up at the ceiling.

*A dream. It was just another goddamn dream.*

She began to weep silently, with almost no tears.

## Chapter Seven

Jerica was already awake and gone by the time Kat woke the next morning. Sunlight was streaming in through a small window cut into the cinder block wall. It was warm and gloriously bright.

Kat stretched her arms and legs out until her feet hung over the end of the bed. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and sat up.

She found Jerica in the kitchen. She was, much to Kat's surprise, fixing breakfast with Frank.

"Good morning," Frank said to her.

"Good morning." Kat tucked her unruly hair back behind her ears. "Any word yet from the platform?"

Frank shook his head, his bright expression faltering slightly.

They had issued their distress signal, but as of bedtime the night before, there had been no response from the stellar platform. Though this seemed odd and worrisome to all of them, none had yet been willing to admit that something might be wrong.

"There must be something off with the receiver here," he said. "They have to have heard us by now. I'll check it this morning. Maybe it's not set up right." He nodded, as if to convince himself that this was the most likely scenario, and then quickly changed the subject, lest he persuade himself otherwise. "How'd you sleep?"

"Fine." Coffee was brewing, and it smelled positively wonderful. Kat looked around stupidly for a mug.

“Second cabinet on your left.” Frank pointed helpfully. “No, the other left.”

Kat laughed, and found a cup. “I am desperate for caffeine. I feel like I just crawled out of cryostasis or something.” She took a sip of coffee and burned her lip. “Is Eric up yet?”

“He’s been up for awhile...if he got any sleep at all,” Frank said. “I think there’s something wrong, maybe with his leg. Something he’s not telling us.”

“He can’t do anything about it if there is,” Jerica said. “There aren’t any small-point cybermechanical tools here. He can’t even get inside it.”

Kat tried to imagine Eric somehow unscrewing part of his seemingly normal-looking leg, and removing it like you might a hat or pair of gloves. She tried to imagine what it would look like inside: complex circuitry and stainless steel mechanisms moving in graceful tandem with long muscles and synthesized ligaments, tendons and joint hinges. She thought about all of that mixed in with blood and greasy mechanical lubricants and it made her feel a little green.

Eric walked in. His motions were slow and stiff, and he looked tired, older than his rightful years. There were heavy shadows under his eyes.

“Eric!” Jerica hopped down from the cabinet and ran toward him.

“You got breakfast done yet?” He placed his hand on top of her head, tousling her hair.

“Almost,” she replied, shrugging out from under him and then slipping her hand through his.

“How are you feeling?” Kat asked.

“I hurt in places I didn’t even know I had.” He laughed. “Have we heard back from the platform?”

“Not yet.” Kat shook her head. “Frank’s going to check the receiver this morning to make sure it’s running okay. Did you get much sleep?”

“Enough.” Eric reached down and gently squeezed the tip of Jerica’s nose between his forefinger and thumb, making her squeal with laughter as she ducked away from him. “Frank, you got any more of that aspirin in the infirmary?”

“Yeah,” Frank said. “If you’re real sore, there’s some narcotics. They’ll work a lot more—”

“Thanks, but I don’t need anything like that,” Eric interrupted. “Just some aspirin, please.”

“I can show you where it is.” Jerica’s hair was resting over her shoulder in a golden sheaf, and she flipped it back with a quick toss of her head. It was a frightfully coy gesture; Kat could imagine a sixteen-year-old Jerica doing the same thing, batting her long eyelashes flirtatiously, and having anything she ever wanted handed to her.

Eric was a good sport and let Jerica drag him out of the commissary and down the hall. Kat heard a soft, unfamiliar hissing sound when Eric walked away. She realized it was the sound of the hydraulic lifts in his knee and heel. She didn’t recall ever having heard it before.

“Did I just say something wrong?” Frank asked, his brow arched slightly.

“No.” Kat considered leaving it at this, but Frank continued looking at her, obviously expecting something more. “It’s just...well, you couldn’t have known. Eric used to...use morphine. After his accident. He was in so much pain, and there wasn’t a lot...”

“Jesus, here goes my foot in my mouth,” Frank said.

“He’s been clean for awhile now. It’s been so hard for him...I can’t imagine. First his leg, and then he loses his career with the Corps, and then the drugs...”

“Even with the cyborg leg, they wouldn’t let him pilot Sovereigns again,” Frank remarked. “I remember reading about it when it happened. Maneuvers training out around Saturn. Wasn’t there something wrong with his navigational system?”

“Something.” Kat shrugged. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard him talk too much about it.”

*Except to Jerica.*

“Do you think he should stay behind today? Keep tabs on Jerica?”

Kat shook her head. “No, Eric says he’s okay. He wouldn’t lie to me. And we’ll need his help. Jerica’s, too. She’ll have to

stay in the HUM-V and use the com links and scanners to tell us how to get to the box.”

“She can do that?” Frank looked surprised. It was a common enough reaction. Jerica tested on the genius level as far as I.Q. While most kids her age struggled through simple multiplication and division tables, Jerica solved quantum physics equations for fun.

Kat smiled. “Sure. She can do all sorts of stuff. She’s a smart kid. Gets it from her mom.”

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“Do you think this place will ever be like Earth?” Jerica asked as they bounced along in the HUM-V. “Full of people and cities and stuff?”

“Eventually,” Eric said. “You’ll probably be around to see it.”

As a future terra-farming colony, X-1226 had an artificial atmosphere designed to make its surface optimal for harboring life. The little moon, once a desolate chunk of rock hovering between the outermost edge of an asteroid belt in Jupiter’s massive gravitational field, was now a sub-tropical paradise, replete with weather patterns, precipitation and lush, dense vegetation. This was the result of more than ten years of deliberate, concentrated cultivation. Like a cake baking in a temperamental oven, X-1226 had been monitored day in and day out, by numerous computers both at the nearby stellar platform and on earth, and scientists had insured that the right amount of elements and gases were maintained. There was more science to it than Kat had ever understood. *Playing God* is what Alex had always called it.

The HUM-V grazed a tree and jostled over a fallen log. The equipment in the back hatch slid precariously.

“What have you got up on screen, Jerica?” Kat asked.

“We’ve come a little more than ten miles,” Jerica said. “We won’t be able to keep going much further. It gets really rough up ahead.”

Eric shifted the HUM-V into a lower gear, and it growled as it clambered over more fallen trees and large, rocky knolls.

“The box should be just up ahead.” Jerica frowned. “There’s something there. Something big, but not part of the terrain.”

“It’s got to be part of the ship,” Kat said. “Something that didn’t burn in the atmosphere.”

“Stop, Eric!” Jerica leaned forward excitedly. “Stop here.”

The little HUM-V rumbled to a halt. Kat swung her door open and hopped out. The grass was tall, almost to her knees. She could hear insects buzzing and chirping, transplanted from Earth. “Where, Jerica?”

“Over there, past the trees.”

Eric and Frank climbed out of the vehicle, too.

“Wait for me!” Jerica opened her door and swung her legs around.

“No, pup, you stay there.” Kat looked back at her daughter.

“But, Mommy—”

“Jerica, I said stay in the HUM-V.”

Jerica huffed and puffed, but stayed put.

Kat, Eric and Frank made their way through the grass. It whispered against their pant legs and folded under their boots. They carefully worked through the trees and thick foliage until they reached a spot that had been gouged through the woods.

The trees lay knocked aside, snapped in two like toothpicks. Some had been burned. The earth was churned up as if cleaved by an enormous plow. There was a pungent, scorched stink in the air.

A towering metal cone laying on its side in the trench. It had been seared black. It was as wide as at least four HUM-Vs and nearly as tall as the outer wall of the colony compound.

A cable sprouted from the top. It draped across the ground before coming to a burned stump a few feet away from them.

“What is it, Mom?” Jerica whispered in Kat’s headset.

“It’s part of the tether,” Kat replied quietly. “The gravitational tether.”

“The black box is inside it,” Eric said. “We’ll need the equipment out of the truck to get to it.”

Kat walked toward the cone. She stared at it, transfixed.

*How many times did I see this swing slowly past the window in my quarters? Watching it after Alex and I made love...we always just took it for granted...*

She remembered her first space mission. Nothing had prepared her for the strange, alien gravity of the oscillating tether. She had been sick from the moment she’d come out of cryostasis. She had eventually gotten used to it, and anymore, Kat would find herself feeling nauseous on Earth, where the gravitational pull was stronger, more insistent.

“You okay, Kat?” Eric’s voice, low and kind in her earphone.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I was just thinking...”

“Well, you know better than that,” he told her, and she laughed.

“Just hurry up and get the equipment we need,” she said. “I want to get this over with. The sooner the better.”

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They used industrial cutting lasers to strip the thick metal sheets from the hide of the tether cone. Smoke came rolling out in dense black clouds, forcing them all back, choking and sputtering. Frank sprayed the inside down with a fire extinguisher. The smoke cleared.

“You think it’s safe to send the probe in?” he asked Kat.

“Hope so,” she said. “It’s the only one the compound had. Let’s get this metal out of the way.”

She noticed Eric leaning heavily against a tree after dragging a large piece of metal back. He had his left leg folded slightly, resting most of his weight on his opposite hip.

“Eric, are you okay?” The metal she was pulling was still warm, and she put it down. She rubbed her hands against her pant legs.

He looked over. “Yeah. I just...I’m still sore from the crash.”

“I’m going to deploy the probe.” Frank set the small device in front of the opening they’d cut. “It’s already set to hone in on the black box’s locator signal?”

“Yeah,” Kat said. “Let it go. It should be okay. Shouldn’t take more than five, ten minutes.”

The probe scooted forward on its little wheels. It disappeared inside the dark opening.

The sun glared down on them. It was a hot afternoon, like summertime. Kat noticed, much to her disgust, that her armpits and back felt slippery and damp with sweat. She rubbed her forehead with the back of her wrist.

Eric had sat down in the cool shade beneath a tree and Kat joined him. She smiled at him, but his eyes were closed, so she settled for tilting her head back, feeling her sweat-dampened hair push against the back of her neck.

“Mommy, it’s hot,” Jerica whined quietly into the headset.

“I know, pup,” Kat said. “It should only be a few minutes.”

“Can I come where you are?”

“No, stay in the HUM-V.”

“Eric, will you come sit with me?” Jerica pleaded. “I don’t like it here all by myself. I’m scared.”

“Jerica, stop being silly,” Kat growled, feeling steamy, tired and irritable.

“I’m not, Mom...”

“Jerica—” Kat began, snapping now.

“It’s okay, Kat,” Eric said. “Yeah, Jerica. Hang on a sec. I’ll be right there, okay?”

“Okay,” Jerica mumbled in a pouty, baby voice.

“She’s fine, Eric.”

“I know.” He rose to his feet.

Kat heard it again this time, distinctly, that quiet, ominous hydraulic whisper from the hinges in his leg. She opened her eyes in time to see Eric supporting himself heavily against the tree trunk, his brows knitted in unmistakable pain.

“Eric,” she said, concerned. She touched his left leg and felt the smooth curve of muscle just above his knee. It felt so real.

“It’s okay.” He misunderstood the note of worry in her voice and shook his head. “This is scary for her. I don’t mind.”

He walked back through the grass, limping.

Kat looked over at Frank. He was standing under another tree, leaning back against it. He watched Eric walk away, and she wondered if he noticed the limp as well.

## Chapter Eight

Eric went straight to his room after they'd returned from retrieving the *Daedalus*' black box. Jerica had wanted him to play with her, to send the little probe roving through the air ducts. She had looked puzzled and hurt when he'd told her no.

He saw the guarded way Kat watched him as he went.

She wasn't a stupid woman, and he figured by now she knew something was wrong. She looked concerned, and he thought she would follow him, corner him, force him to tell her the truth.

And she could. He would do anything Kat asked him to, anything for her. Anything.

But she hadn't asked.

And he hadn't volunteered to tell.

He stretched out on his bed and touched his leg, running his fingers along his outer thigh. It was hurting. Not too badly with no weight on it, but he knew if he started walking around again, it would probably become unbearable.

He closed his eyes and fell asleep. He hadn't meant to, but all it had taken were a few brief moments of darkness and quiet for his mind to fade. When he came to, he had no idea how much time had passed. He didn't know anything at all except he was hot, his body ablaze and aching with fever.

Eric struggled to his feet and limped over to the sink. His stomach was queasy, doing lazy little somersaults, and his mind felt dazed. He splashed cold water on his face, and then ran his hands through his hair, pushing it back. The nausea struck again, worse than ever. Eric stumbled into the bathroom and

knelt in the dark in front of the toilet. He could feel the hard tiles pressing, unyielding, against his knees.

He vomited. His stomach wrenched tightly, heaving. He spat violently, and fumbled for the button to flush the toilet. He was trembling, shaking. He heaved again, but there was nothing to come up, and his stomach closed into an agonizing knot. He cried out miserably.

He flushed the toilet and slumped back against the wall.

*What's happening to me? What's wrong with my leg?*

But he knew. The only thing that could be wrong, that could make him feel so rotten, hurt so bad.

He was being poisoned.

Slowly, but certainly. The impact from the shuttle console falling onto the cyborganic limb had somehow damaged the conduits inside that kept lubrication flowing to the lift hinges and pistons and metal works. He didn't think he could fix it by himself, even if he could find the tools to get in to see if his hunch was correct.

He needed Doc.

And Doc was dead.

The lubricants were leaking throughout the leg, getting into his bloodstream, making him sick. He imagined that eventually enough would leak out to kill him.

Kat knew something was up, but he was afraid to tell her, of what she would say, what it would do to her. She'd gone through so much already. And she was counting on him now.

He closed his eyes and tried to imagine what it would feel like to have Kat there in the dark bathroom with him, placing her impossibly cool hands on his face, holding him, comforting.

"Eric?"

Eric blinked, opened his eyes. He had imagined hearing Doc's soft voice, his tone gentle.

And now he imagined seeing Doc, somehow alive and standing in the bathroom doorway, a silhouette against the backdrop of light from his chamber.

"Xian," Eric whispered, holding out his hand, his fingers trembling as he reached for his friend. "Doc...help me..."

“It’s your leg, isn’t it?” Doc walked toward him. He knelt beside Eric, draping his hands against Eric’s cyborganic leg. Imagined or not, Doc felt real enough to Eric. He looked real, too. He wore a Yankees baseball hat turned around backwards on his head, just like he had by fond habit. His parents were Vietnamese, but Xian had been born in New York—and was damn proud of it.

“Yes.” Eric nodded. “Yes, please, Xian, it...it hurts...”

“We’ll fix it.” Doc smiled at him kindly.

“Please...” Eric said to him.

“Shhh...” Doc whispered, soothingly, putting his finger over Eric’s lips. “Don’t be scared, Eric.”

Doc held a syringe. Eric could see the warm light from the bedroom wink off the needle. He cowered, but Doc caught his shoulder.

“It’s okay.” Doc leaned forward. Eric could see his face now, and the canvas brim of the cap. Doc was smiling at him. “This will make you feel better.”

“No.” Eric tried to pull away.

Doc unbuttoned the cuff of Eric’s sleeve and began to push the material back toward his elbow.

“No,” Eric said again. “Xian, don’t—”

Doc reached over and gripped Eric’s left knee, his fingers pinching down hard. The pain was immeasurable. Eric cried out. He tried to shove Doc’s hand away from his leg. His head rolled back, hitting the wall.

His brain swam from the pain. It felt like a wave broke gently across his mind and began to pull him back in its undertow. Semiconscious, he slumped sideways. Doc seized him by his hair and held the needle up in front of his face. The sliver of metal seemed to blaze with reflected light.

“Do you want it?” Doc’s fist twisted, pulling harder, forcing Eric’s head back. “Do you? Is this what you want?”

“No!” Eric knew what was in the hypodermic, and he knew that he *did* want it. He wanted it desperately. His leg was on fire.

The needle slipped out of his line of sight and suddenly Doc's hand crushed against his biomechanical leg again. Eric screamed in pain.

"You know you want it," Doc told him. "Say it. Say it, Eric. It will make the pain go away."

Eric stared at the syringe full of morphine. It was lustrous, beautiful.

"Do you want it?" Doc whispered in his ear, his breath hot against the side of Eric's throat. "Tell me, Eric. Say it."

"Yes." Eric nodded. "Yes, yes, I want it..."

He watched as Doc jerked something from his pocket, a strip of rubber tubing. He tied this around Eric's arm, and Eric watched, semi-lucid, as Doc tapped his fingertips against the inside of Eric's elbow. *It's like he knows what he's doing*, Eric thought, dazed. *How do you know about this, Xian?*

Doc slid the needle into his arm. It burned when he pulled it back. Eric felt the morphine rush through his body and slam into his brain. He moaned. His eyes rolled back and fluttered closed. He could feel Doc letting him go, easing him sideways, laying him against the floor.

The morphine was warm and kind and good.

"That's it." Doc chuckled quietly. "Take it, boy. Take your medicine."

*You're not Doc*, Eric tried to say, but it had been so long since he'd had a morphine rush and it felt so good. His body had been starved for the needle, emaciated without the drug.

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When he finally came back around, he was lying in his bed again.

*Again?* Eric thought. *Or still?*

He groaned and rolled onto his side. His leg ached vaguely, like a pulled muscle, but he wasn't in debilitating misery, like he had been when they'd gotten back to the compound. He straightened his leg out carefully, expecting pain, but again there was nothing serious.

He was incredibly thirsty. His mouth was dry and tasted foul, like he'd eaten a shit sundae or something before going out for the count. He sat up, swinging his legs around until his boots hit the floor. His head swam momentarily.

He ran his hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. He was still pretty sore from the crash landing in the shuttle, but felt pretty good other than that. He remembered he had felt wretched after they'd retrieved the *Daedalus*' black box.

*Must have been the heat*, he thought. *Didn't Jerica say it was close to ninety degrees out there?*

He glanced over at the bathroom door. It was open, a black hole looking out at him. The dream about Doc was still very much fresh in his mind. *It was a dream...wasn't it?*

Eric glanced down at his arms, but both of the sleeves of his jumpsuit were cuffed neatly at his wrists.

He dreamed about shooting up a lot. He didn't seem able to stop himself in his dreams. He had hated being a morphine junkie, but he had liked how it made him feel. It had helped him forget about the thing he had become because of his leg. *Half a man. I am half a man.*

He walked over to the sink and looked in the mirror. Once upon a time, he had been the best pilot in the Stellar Corps. He'd flown Sovereign fighter craft. It had been the greatest thrill he'd ever known.

Morphine wasn't as good a high, but it had served its purpose.

He turned on the cold water and cupped his hands under the stream, slurping greedily. It only seemed to make him more thirsty, so he abandoned his room for the kitchen. Here, he filled the largest cup he could find with water and stood over the sink, gulping it down. It dribbled down his chin and he wiped at it with the back of his hand.

"Thirsty?"

Startled, he looked over his shoulder just as Kat walked in, still looking at him in that cautious, concerned way.

"Yeah." He laughed. "I was parched."

"Are you feeling better?"

“I feel fine,” he said. “Had to take a good, long nap. I think the heat got to me.”

She smiled at him. Even when she looked exhausted, like she did now, he found her lovely.

She came over and stood close to him. “You’d tell me, wouldn’t you? If something was wrong, I mean.”

“Yes,” he lied. He touched her hair, ran his fingers along the curve of her cheek. She was beautiful, but her face was cast in a shadow of sorrow that broke his heart. *I can’t, Kat. You’ve already been through too much.*

She turned her face toward his palm, the corners of her mouth lifting into a fragile, nearly imperceptible smile. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Do what?”

“Trying to act like...I don’t know,” she said. “I keep pushing it away. I keep thinking this is all some terrible dream, and any moment now, I’ll wake up.”

She leaned forward, resting her cheek against his chest. He slipped his arm around her narrow waist. He liked feeling her body close to his, feeling her dim heat and the firm pressure of her breasts against his sternum.

“I keep dreaming about Alex,” Kat murmured.

“I know.” He could smell the faint, clean scent of her hair. “I wish I could take it back for you, Kat.”

“I don’t even miss him yet,” she said softly. “I don’t think I really know he’s dead. I’m afraid to see the tracks from the *Daedalus*. I think it will hit me then, that this is real. He’s really gone, and I...”

Her voice broke off. She had her head down, and he couldn’t see her face, but he felt her shoulders tremble against him and knew she was crying.

“Kat,” he said, holding her close. He touched her soft, blonde hair.

“I can’t do this.” It was the first time in a long time he’d seen her near anything resembling a breaking point, when she let her cool, controlling façade crumble. This sudden and

uncharacteristic frailty, the child-like fear and anguish in her voice pained him. “I can’t...!”

“Yes, you can.” She looked up at him, her eyes red-rimmed and tear-filled. He watched as one fat tear rolled slowly down her cheek. He wiped it away with his thumb. “We all can.”

She leaned forward, rising on the tips of her toes. She kissed him, her full, closed lips pressed against his briefly, like a dream, and her hand came up and caressed the side of his face.

And then she was gone, pulling away from him, leaving him startled and dumbfounded.

She wiped her eyes daintily with her fingers, the way a woman will when she is trying to save her mascara from smearing. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if something’d happened to you, too, Eric.” She sniffled and laughed, a quick, shrill sound. “You’re always taking care of me, aren’t you?”

“Well, you’re always running around doing stupid shit,” he said, making her laugh. He wanted to tell her that he didn’t mind doing whatever he could for her. More than a member of the crew, and more than just a friend, over the years, Kat had made Eric feel like he mattered again somehow, like he was part of her family.

After he’d lost his leg...after the media circus surrounding him had died down, he’d been left with nothing. The people he’d called friends before the crash had seemed different to him, distant somehow, and even his family had handled him with kid gloves. Everything had changed and he had felt so alone, a part of nothing. The morphine had been an escape from that isolation. He probably never would have stayed clean for as long as he had if it hadn’t been for Kat and Jerica, their faith in him. *Their love*, he thought. *You’ve taken care of me more than you’ll ever know, Kat. And that’s why I can’t tell you about my leg.*

“Hey, Kat.” Frank’s voice, sounding hollow and alien, came over the compound’s intercom system, startling them. “I think Jerica’s got this drive hooked up to the main computer here. We should be able to access the *Daedalus*’ records now.”

“I’m coming, Frank.” Kat looked at Eric. “Why don’t you tag along, too? Jerica’ll want to show off how she fixed the computers.”

“She and Frank are friends, now?” he asked, mildly surprised. Jerica had told him once aboard the *Daedalus* that she hadn’t liked Frank.

“He tries too hard to make people like him,” she’d said, her beautiful little face dour and almost stern.

“I guess so.” Kat shrugged. “It was only a matter of time, I guess, no matter what. They’ve been talking shop, like she and Doc used to. Something about string theories.”

“String theories?”

“I have no idea, either,” Kat assured him. “I didn’t realize Frank was so smart.”

Eric watched her lips, trying to remember exactly what it had felt like when she’d kissed him.

“You see something green?” Kat smirked, slapping playfully at him. “Come on. What else have you got going on? A hot date?”

He started to follow her and suddenly he felt dizzy and disoriented. He stumbled, bringing his hand up to his forehead, groaning.

“Eric, what’s wrong?” Kathryn asked. She looked frightened.

“Just got a little dizzy for a second.” The vertigo had passed, but he still felt a light-headed. *Like after a morphine trip*, he thought, remembering his strange dream.

“It’s this proximity to you,” he told Kat, winking. He managed a smile, not wanting to worry her any further. “You just have that effect on me.”

“Jesus, you’re full of shit.” Kat smiled, buying his act. “Come on.”

## Chapter Nine

On their way to the control room, Eric made a detour by the infirmary. “I’ll be right there,” he said to Kat. “I just need to get some more aspirin.”

He opened the small metal cabinet where Jerica had found aspirin earlier for him and abruptly drew his hand away as if the door had bitten him. The aspirin was gone, and the cabinet had been rearranged. The shelves were now lined with rows of little glass vials. Eric didn’t have to read the labels to know what was in each.

Morphine.

*Jesus there must be over a hundred bottles here,* he thought.

*Over a hundred hits.*

He took a step away from the cabinet, but stared, transfixed, at the small vials. He could feel his body craving it, a strange, insistent pang. His mouth felt dry again.

His hand inadvertently traveled to his right elbow. He was a southpaw; he’d always shot up on his right side. The flesh at the delta of his elbow joint felt sensitive and sore to the touch.

*If I took just a couple, no one would ever notice, a part of his mind whispered. No one would know and if—when—the pain in my leg gets too bad, I can just hit a little...just enough to make the pain stop...*

“No.” He slammed the cabinet door shut and shoved the heels of his hands over his eyes. “No, goddammit, no.”

He had worked so hard to get clean. He had been weaned off morphine; his doctors had administered slowly diminishing doses to him for nearly eight months, and in many ways, he still believed that was even worse than had he just gone cold turkey. His body hadn’t been fooled, not for one minute. He had gone

to a private rehabilitation clinic and sat through countless feel-good, bullshit group therapy sessions. Nothing helped. The shit the doctors gave him had only teased him, and made him crave the drug even more.

*And you know the pain is going to get bad, that little voice in his mind whispered. You know what's happening to you...those greases and oils are going to rot your leg from the inside out. You know it's going to be hell.*

Eric ran his hands through his hair. He looked at the cabinet, uncertain. The pain from his leg would only get worse, he was sure about that. Eventually it would get as agonizing as it had been when he'd first woken up from his almost twelve-month coma. He remembered clearly, as if it had just happened yesterday.

There had been no one in the room with him. The first thing he remembered seeing was all of the tubes draping down around him; intravenous feeding tubes, catheter tubes, dialysis tubes, tubes for the mask that breathed cool, distilled, oxygenated air directly against his mouth and nose.

He couldn't remember anything. He didn't know what had happened to him. The sight of all of those tubes, and the whistling, clicking, clattering, wheezing sounds of all of his life-support equipment had terrified him, panicked him.

He'd begun to struggle. An IV running into his hand ripped free, hurting, and some kind of thick, clear liquid began splashing around. It spurted onto his face, and Eric hadn't been able to move his arms to wipe it off.

And then he felt the indescribable, unbelievably excruciating pain in his left leg. It felt like someone had driven a metal stake from his heel clear up to his hip—which, he supposed, they had.

Eric had screamed.

People rushed in, doctors and nurses, all in starched white and baby blue costumes. They held his body still, forcing his wrists and ankles into tight restraining straps. They stuck him with needles and poked at him, prodded. They shouted and yelled at him.

*"Eric, can you hear me?"*

*“Eric, can you feel this?”*

*“Eric, does this hurt?”*

And then they touched him, moved his leg, and it hurt. He screamed and nearly blacked out from the pain.

There had been one doctor, a man with glasses and large, compassionate eyes who leaned over and comforted him.

*Get away, Mike, can't you see he's frightened? Get away from him all of you...Eric...? Eric, I'm Mitch Taylor. I'm a doctor, Eric. You don't need to be frightened. It's okay. You're safe now...*

His hands had been warm and kind against Eric's face, soothing.

*“...my leg...hurts...”* Eric had groaned, not realizing that these would be the first words he'd spoken in almost a year, and that they would be smeared across the front of every newspaper, magazine and web engine in the country by the time the sun rose that morning.

*I know, I know it hurts, Eric, I'm sorry. I want to help you. You don't need to be afraid. Do you know what's happened to you?*

From the background, behind Dr. Taylor: *For Christ's sake, I don't care if it's three in the morning, go call his goddamn family...!*

Eric touched his leg absently, staring at the metal cabinet in the compound, remembering Dr. Taylor. He had been a decent man, a good doctor. He had honestly thought he was doing the right thing when he had given Eric his cyborg leg. And, considering the alternatives, maybe he had. But the pain had been very, very bad.

*Eric, you crashed your fighter...do you remember? That was almost a year ago...you've been in a coma, asleep, for a year...*

He had heard Dr. Taylor trying to explain what had happened to him, but it hadn't sunk in, and wouldn't for a long time. He would have no clear, precise concept of what had happened to him for another three months.

All he had been aware of was the searing agony in his leg. He had struggled against the wrist restraints, pulling with all of his strength, fighting to free his hands. All he could think to do was claw his leg off, to make the pain go away.

*And that is what it's going to be like again, only this time there'll be no good doctor to help you...this time you have to help yourself.*

Eric opened the cabinet and stared at the morphine.

He'd always been told that the brain forgot pain. It would remember where there had been pain, but not the actual, physical sensation of it pain. Eric remembered. Eric had not forgotten what it had felt like when he woke up in the hospital.

He took three of the vials out and held them in his hand. He nudged the cabinet door shut and closed his fingers around the morphine.

"What are you doing?"

Eric turned, startled, jerking his hand behind his hip. "Jerica, you scared me."

The little girl looked at him, curious, unable to figure out what he was up to. She didn't know about his addiction to morphine. He tucked the vials into the hip pocket of his flight suit. "Did you and Frank switch stuff around in here? I can't find the aspirin."

Jerica nodded. "Earlier today. So stuff we use the most is easier to find." She went over to a drawer and pulled it open. "The aspirin's in here, now."

Jerica handed him a packet, and he smiled. "Thanks, kiddo."

"Are you better now?" she asked, and her voice was small, worried. She almost sounded like her mother. Her pinched, concerned expression was nearly identical to Kat's. "You looked so bad when we got back this morning. And you slept for so long. I wanted to come see if you were okay, but Frank said not to bother you while you were sleeping."

Eric knelt in front of her, and she put her arms around his neck. Her golden curls brushed against his nose and lips, and smelled clean, vaguely floral. "You don't ever bother me."

"I was worried about you." Her breath fluttered against his ear and he realized she was on the verge of tears. "I was scared you were hurt...that your leg was hurting you. I don't want to lose you, too, like...like Alex...and...and Doc..."

"You're not," he said, and she hugged him fiercely, tightening her grip on him. "I'm here."

She pulled away enough to look at him. There were tears smeared on her cheeks and Eric wiped them away, like he'd wiped away her mother's earlier. "You about ready for bed?"

She nodded at him, her blue eyes enormous and glistening with tears. "Will you tuck me in?"

"Sure." He gathered her into his arms and stood. He felt the knee hinges in his left leg protest. Pain lanced up through his thigh, but he tried not to wince. Jerica wrapped her legs around his waist and snuggled her face against his shoulder.

He carried her down the corridor. She wasn't very heavy, maybe fifty pounds, and Eric normally hefted her around easily. But tonight, the pain in his leg came rushing back immediately, unwelcome. He struggled to control a limp, not wanting to frighten or upset Jerica.

"Here we go," he said quietly, reaching Kat's room. He set her down in the bed and she curled up on her side, resting her knees against him. Her hair had fallen into her face in disheveled curls, and he smoothed them back with his hand.

"Eric, are you scared?" she asked him in a small voice. She had her little fist poised by her mouth, as if she thought about sucking her thumb.

"Scared of what?" It was dark in the room, the only illumination coming in from the open front door. He could see the light flash across her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Being here. What's going to happen to us."

"Nothing's going to happen to us. By now, the platform's heard our distress signal, and someone is probably already on their way down to get us. There's nothing to be scared of."

"Then why don't they answer?" Jerica asked. "Why haven't they called us back?"

"I don't know," he replied. "But they're coming—I know that. There's no reason why they wouldn't. They'll be here soon. The *Icarus* probably hadn't even docked all the way when our distress signal came in, and knowing your mom's friend, Trina, they're probably half a day away and coming in at light speed to rescue us."

She rolled onto her back and blinked up at him. "I hope so. I don't like it here."

“Me, either.” He reached down, touching her cheek. Her warm, delicate fingers curled around his. “But we’ll get to go home soon, I promise.”

He leaned over and kissed the tip of her nose. She giggled.

“Good night, Jerica.” He rose to his feet. It hurt to put weight down on his leg, but he forced himself to do it.

“G’night,” she said, but she didn’t close her eyes.

“You want me to leave the bathroom light on?”

She nodded.

He walked over and hit the bathroom switch. He swung the door almost all of the way closed, so that a sliver of orange light cut across the room. “How’s this?”

“Little more.” Jerica held up her forefinger and thumb about an inch apart.

“Here?” he asked, nudging the door with his foot.

“Good. Thank you.”

He leaned against the wall once he was safe out in the deserted corridor. Reaching down, he gripped his leg, splaying his fingers across the fabric of his pants and listened as the little vials of morphine clicked together quietly in his pocket.

He limped over to one of the compound’s intercom boxes. “Hey, Kat.” He pressed the “send” button.

After a moment, Kat’s voice came, sounding like she spoke through a tin can. “Yes, Eric? Are you on your way down?”

“Uh, no.” He tried to rest most of his weight on his right hip. “I just put Jerica to bed. I think I’m going to head that way myself. I’m still pretty beat.”

There was a long, quiet pause.

“Kat, I’m sorry. If you need me, I can—”

“That’s okay,” she interrupted. “Frank doesn’t know if he can get this working tonight or not after all. I’ll probably head off to bed myself here shortly. You go on.”

He felt like shit. “You pissed?”

“No,” she said, sounding amused. “Should I be?”

Eric smiled. “See you in the morning. Tell Frank I said good night.”

\*\*\*

Eric stopped by the infirmary again and snooped around until he found an empty hypodermic syringe. *Don't think about what you're doing*, he told himself, pocketing both the needle and the morphine, taking them to his quarters.

*Don't think about it*, he told himself again, pulling his jumpsuit off and sitting on the edge of his bed in his T-shirt and jockeys. He stretched his left leg out and studied it. Swelling and discoloration had begun around the knee. His ankle was swelling too, but he didn't need to look to know that. He could tell by how tight his boot lacings felt.

Slipping his belt out of the waist of his jumpsuit, Eric looped it through the buckle. He pulled the coil over his forearm and cinched it tight. He watched a small blue knot of veins rise. He put the end of the belt strap in his mouth, holding it secure with his teeth.

*Don't think about it*. But it was funny how it all came back to him, how the junkie in him surfaced once more so easily. The junkie remembered how to poke the needle through the foil cap on the morphine just so, then to invert the vial and pull back the stopper on the syringe. He watched it fill slowly with the drug. *Don't think about what you're doing*, he thought, and it was easier that way, disassociating himself, pretending he was only an observer.

When he'd drawn a full dose, he pulled the needle back and shook it quickly, back and forth. The junkie in him, still alive and damnably well, admired the play of light in the liquid.

*Don't think about what you're doing.*

He closed his eyes.

*I have to do this. I have to. It's the only way...*

He pushed the needle into his arm, pressing the plunger in. At the same time, he loosened the strap of the belt about his arm, letting it fall from his mouth.

The morphine hit him and he dropped the needle as his fingers went numb. His head rolled back and he stared up at the ceiling. He gasped loudly, felt the horizon side-slip. He

crumpled onto his side on the bed, and lay there, trembling, riding the trip.

He could feel the morphine coursing through his body, roaring in his ears like the ocean trapped in a conch. It fell over him like a heavy blanket, fresh out of the dryer and infused with thick, comforting heat.

Eric closed his eyes and moaned quietly. The morphine felt so good, so really fucking good. He could feel it eating away at the pain in his leg, chasing it back, washing it away in a numbing flood.

The room felt like a Tilt-a-Whirl, swirling and heaving around him. He tried to raise his arm, to bring his hand up to his face, but he couldn't seem to manage.

It was almost as good as flying.

The morphine swept over him, pulling urgently with its demanding fingertips, and he fainted.

## Chapter Ten

Images flashed before Kat's eyes, fragments like the pieces of a shattered bottle; glass shards that glittered and glistened, that sliced and cut and hurt.

An image appeared of Kat and Alex, walking down one of the hallways aboard the *Daedalus*.

She gasped, surprised, shocked. Her face grew hot and flushed as on the screen, Alex playfully pinched her ass. The Kat on the monitor whirled around, slapping at him, laughing. "Quit it!"

"Kat?" Frank asked gently.

They had been sitting side by side for several hours with neither of them saying much at all. Frank had been able to access the *Daedalus*' drive after all, and they had been watching the ship's video logs and security recordings.

Kat felt a tear roll slowly down her cheek. She wiped it away fervently. "I'm okay, I'm okay." She didn't know to whom she was offering this—Frank or herself. "It's just that...I mean, Alex and I...we were..."

"I know," he interjected kindly. "I kind of figured that out on my own."

Embarrassed and abashed, she started to giggle. "Well, so much for discretion."

"Hey, we all have needs." He smiled at her and gave her hand a soft squeeze. "I'll forward past this."

"No, no, I want to see, I want..." Kat said. *I need to see this. I need to know what happened. It's the only way I'm ever going to be able to move forward.* "At least we know we're on the right track, then."

That happened on the day of the crash. That morning...I remember..."

She watched as the image of Alex put his arms around her and tickled. On the screen, she squealed and twisted, trying to get free.

She could remember this, all of it. It didn't seem possible that Alex wasn't there anymore; he wasn't going to snuggle up with her anymore, or tickle her playfully like he was on the screen.

"Stop it!" she heard herself say.

*Forever ago...another world ago.*

Frank searched ahead through the images. Kat saw herself at the bridge, setting the ship's new coordinates, talking with Trina aboard the *Icarus* via the com link. She watched as, on-screen, Eric came in; she watched them both smiling and exchanging their playful, flirting banter, blissfully unaware of the impending disaster that was now less than an hour from occurring.

"Here," Kat said, as her on-screen image left the bridge and the doors closed behind her. The monitor showed only Eric, sitting alone in the bridge. The lights were dimmed, and he had his feet propped up on one of the consoles. "Play it from here, Frank. This must be about when it happened. Eric had bridge duty."

They watched Eric for a few minutes, and then he looked up as the bridge doors slid open and Leia walked in. "Hi."

"Hey." Eric swung his legs down from the console and rose to his feet. "What's up?"

"Not a whole lot." Leia stood near him, leaning back and resting against the corner of the console. "Having fun yet?"

"Oh, yeah." Eric uttered a nervous-sounding laugh.

Leia reached out and touched his hair. He flinched away from her. "You shouldn't be up here. I've got stuff I need to be doing..."

"Oh, really?" Leia stepped close to him again and leaned forward. "That's funny. So do I."

“Don’t...” he murmured, trying to duck away from her as she brushed his hair aside to kiss his neck. Undeterred, Leia stepped even closer against him and her hand slowly, deliberately slid down Eric’s chest and dropped between his legs.

“Here’s what I need to be doing.”

Kat watched in startled disbelief. It wasn’t that she couldn’t believe that Leia and Eric might have had a fling aboard the *Daedalus*, even though the idea of this left the pit of her stomach feeling twisted. Eric was handsome; Leia was pretty. Neither of them was blind, and both were single. It made sense.

*Why didn’t he ever say anything to me about it?* That’s what bothered her the most, or so she told herself. Eric knew about her and Alex. He’d always known, for as long as he and Kat had been friends. That he might have been sexually involved with Leia, but not trusted Kat enough to confide in her about it hurt her feelings.

“Leia, stop,” Eric said on screen, as she began to move her hand rhythmically against him.

“That’s not what you told me last night.” She smiled as Eric gasped at her touch. Her lips found his throat again, the pace of her hand growing quick and insistent. “Or the night before in the cargo hold...the morning before that in the rec room...my quarters...your quarters...the tech lab...”

He groaned, draping his hands against her shoulders. “Leia, stop,” he whispered again, breathlessly. “Leia...please...”

“Now that’s what you said.” Leia’s smile widened as she lowered herself to her knees in front of him, moving to unfasten the fly of his pants and let her mouth take the place of her hand. “That’s what you—”

Eric pushed her away, staggering back from her. “I said stop.”

She blinked at him in startled confusion. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I can’t do this anymore,” he said, struggling to reclaim his breath. He stumbled back further, widening the distance between them. “It’s over, all right? I can’t...I don’t want to anymore.”

The confusion in her face deepened, and then shifted toward humiliated outrage. “What do you mean, you don’t want to anymore? For two weeks now, you haven’t been able to get enough. Now, all of a sudden, it’s over? We’ve got five years out here. Where else do you think you’re going to get any?”

He shook his head and said nothing, turning away from her, running his fingers through his hair. “Just go away, Leia.”

She uttered a sharp, angry laugh. “What, are you going gay on me? You think Xian or Franklin is going to go down on you for some variety? Or what? You going to make a play for Kat? You’re not that stupid, I know.”

He turned to her, his brows narrowed. “Get out of here, Leia.”

Her eyes flew wide and she laughed again. “Oh, my God,” she said. “You are that fucking stupid, aren’t you? I should’ve known. I’ve seen the way you watch her, all moon-eyed and goof-ass. Good luck, Eric. Kat’s wrapped so tight around Alex’s cock, she wouldn’t do you if—”

Eric hauled off and smacked her across the face. Hard. Kat could hear the reverberating slap clearly.

On screen, Leia touched the side of her jaw.

“Get out of here, Leia,” Eric seethed. “Get the fuck off my bridge.”

Leia gasped softly, the sound choked as if with tears. “You asshole.” She spun around on her heel and stomped off.

Frank stopped the image and began to rewind it.

“What’re you...?” Kat began.

“Watch,” Frank said quietly. “Here. See?”

He let the disc play.

“What, are you going gay on me?” Leia was saying again.

“What am I looking for, Frank?” Kat asked.

“Here.” Frank rewound the image again, frame by frame. “Right here.”

He pointed, and she watched a small red light flash on the console of the bridge. “See that?”

Kat nodded, suddenly realizing. She felt the color rise in her cheeks in two hot, angry patches.

*Tethers*

“What was that?” Frank glanced at her. “Was it...do you think...?”

“I know it was.” She stormed for the door.

“Kat, what are you—?”

“I’ll be right back, Frank,” she said, and she was gone.

## Chapter Eleven

She opened Eric's door and flicked the light switch. Brilliant white fluorescents filled the room with bright light. Eric was sleeping and didn't stir.

"Wake up," she said, her voice trembling angrily. "Goddammit, get up!"

She grabbed a bar of soap off the rim of his sink and hurled it at him. It hit him in the shoulder, and he woke up, startled, bewildered.

"What the hell...?" he said, sitting up, blinking stupidly. He pushed his hair out of his face. "Kat, what're you—?"

"Shut up," she snapped at him. "What is it you told me? 'I keep replaying it over and over again in my head, Kat, and I just can't seem to remember anything going on in the bridge.' That sound familiar, Eric? Nothing, sure, except for Leia going down on you."

His eyes widened, any last vestiges of sleepy disorientation wiped away. "What? Kat, I...I don't..."

"You shut up!" Kat yelled at him. "You shut your mouth, goddammit! Was Leia good, Eric? You never told me about it before, so why not start now? Was she? I sure hope so. I hope she was a damn good fuck."

He flinched, looking hurt and confused. "Kat, please, what are you talking about?"

"Frank and I saw the tape just now. When you and Leia were fighting the night of the crash, fighting about you fucking her. There was an alarm light from the tech lab. Some kind of alarm Doc must have pulled and you didn't see it."

Eric blinked at her, his eyes enormous, stunned. He looked like he'd just gotten punched in the stomach. "What?"

Kat nodded. "Yeah, Eric. Doc pulled the tech lab alarm. And because you weren't paying attention, you missed it. You son of a bitch."

"Kat..."

"Fuck you, Eric. They're dead. Alex and Doc are dead, and it's your fault. It's all your fault because you weren't paying attention. Yeah, I hope Leia was a damn good fuck."

She was shaking, so pissed off she couldn't think straight. She walked out of the room, her hands closed in tight, trembling fists. She wanted to hit him so badly. She had never wanted to punch anyone more in her life.

*I want to punch him, hit him, hurt him, scar his goddamn face with my fingernails, make him fucking sorry.*

The door slid closed behind her, and she stood, shaking.

*Is this what it feels like to be like Chris?*

She stared numbly down at her hands, forcing her fingers to loosen. She could hear the harsh, labored sound of her breathing.

*Oh, my God.*

She wondered if Eric had thought she'd looked like the devil, just like she'd always thought Chris had when he'd go into one of his rages.

"Oh, Jesus," she whispered. She couldn't breathe. *What have I done? My God, all of these years, I've tried to put my past behind me, and here it is, tonight in my face—only I'm not the girl I used to be. Oh, Christ, I'm something worse—this time, I'm the monster.*

Kat had worked very diligently to erase any evidence of her marriage from her job. She had told Alex some things, but had kept most all of it, all of her bitter, painful memories private. She hadn't wanted anyone to know about all of the humiliation and pain she had endured for so long. She'd always kept her mouth shut, and spoke only vaguely of Chris when questioned.

The memories of his rages had always seemed too fresh.

Eric had found out by accident, really. And somehow, after that, she'd been able to confide in him every once in awhile

small pieces and fragments; the memories of another woman in another lifetime. *The one I used to be.*

The day Eric learned her grim secret had started out to be such a good day. She had gotten a letter back from a literary agent, the last one she'd sent her carefully plotted synopsis and sample chapters to, and the last one to write her back. The other letters hadn't even politely rejected her, and so Kat was ecstatic when one finally came in, asking to see her manuscript.

She'd practically sprinted across the loading dock tarmac, oblivious to the blazing heat that bounced off the blacktop. She was hoping Alex would be working; their shuttle module was parked at the far end, and from what she could tell, it looked as though someone was running a routine maintenance check on it.

The letter was folded neatly in her hip pocket. She'd meant to show it to him, feeling some strange, incessant need to prove it to him. She knew it was a hold-over from Chris, who had never believed her, never trusted her, and had always scoffed and ridiculed her writing.

"Hello? Anybody home?" she called, reaching the shuttle. She leaned against the open hatchway, panting slightly from the heat and from her dash. "Alex?"

There was no answer. Kat frowned and studied the spread of tools and module components around the shuttle.

Everything looked a hell of a lot neater than whenever Alex would run the perfunctory check of the shuttle. It had always really been the pilot's responsibility to run the operations checks prior to docking with the *Daedalus*, but Dylan had never seemed to end up doing it for some reason.

Kat figured the neat little arrangement of tools was probably just some new method to Alex's maintenance madness. She walked toward the nose of the shuttle, stepping carefully around the equipment. "Alex?" she called again.

"Hello, Kat," someone said from her left, and she jerked around, startled.

"Chris," she said, surprised and momentarily taken aback.

He was standing about twenty yards away from her, on the other side of a high chain-link security fence. Kat felt suddenly

happy and exhilarated to see him there, and at the same time, wary, apprehensive and even afraid. She found her eyes inexorably drawn to his hands, even though he wasn't being aggressive in the least. It had simply become habit to her.

She was so surprised to see him she didn't even think about the restraining order that was supposed to keep him at least twice as far away from her as he was now.

She saw he was holding a bouquet of flowers, daisies and black-eyed Susans; her favorites. The flowers were wrapped in wrinkled green tissue paper.

"What are you doing here, Chris?" She found herself walking toward the fence, toward him.

He was smiling at her. "I came to see you. I mean, I just..." He lowered his head, and she could see the color rising in his face. "Jesus, I miss you, Kat."

She stopped on the other side of the fence. He reached up and slipped his fingers through the links.

"You look so great," he said. "So pretty. You weren't at home so I figured you might be out here..."

"You look good, too." She smiled and tittered wildly, nervously. *Jesus Christ I feel like I'm sixteen again. It's amazing how quick it all comes back...how much I miss him and still love him...*

She touched his fingers through the chain, rubbing briefly, gently, and then pulling away.

"You going to let me in?" He wagged the bouquet, all smiles. "I brought these for you."

She blinked stupidly. "Sure. Here."

They walked abreast of one another down toward the gate. She didn't feel afraid of him at all now, just kind of warm and shy and silly and happy to see him.

She opened the gate and let him in.

"It's so good to see you, Kat." Chris hugged her fiercely, lifting her off the ground. It might have been her imagination, but she could have sworn his voice choked with tears. "I miss you."

"I...I miss you, too, Chris," she said, but when he went to kiss her she turned her face away.

“Hey.” He sounded hurt. “Hey, come on.”

He tried to kiss her again, and she pulled away, shaking her head. “Chris, no. Don’t do that.”

She knew it was going to start, and suddenly she was sorry she’d opened the gate. She had actually been happy to see him when he’d been on the other side of the fence, unable to touch her. Now, she felt uncomfortable and anxious. She remembered that Alex was somewhere in the shuttle, and probably spying on her, which made her even more abashed.

“Jesus Christ, Kat, all I wanted to do was kiss you,” Chris exclaimed. “I can still kiss you, can’t I? I mean, you’re my wife.”

“No.” Kat took a small, involuntary step away from him. “No, I’m not your wife, and no, you can’t kiss me anymore. Chris, please, can’t we just visit like two—”

“What? Like friends?” he interrupted. “Friends? Fuck no, we can’t just visit like friends. We’re more than friends.”

“No, we’re not.” There it was, that whiny, cry-baby edge to her voice that only seemed to creep around when she was with Chris. It made her feel weak and ashamed and frightened and she hated it. “Not anymore.”

“I just wanted to see you, to talk to you.” The color rose in Chris’ cheeks again, but this time it wasn’t from embarrassment.

“This was...” Kat dabbed at the sweat on her upper lip nervously with her fingertips. “This was a mistake. I’m sorry, Chris. You’d better go. The restraining order—”

“Don’t start that again,” he snapped, his tone low and menacing. He jabbed his finger at her and she flinched. “Why do you need a restraining order with me? I’ve told you I’m sorry. I’ve told you things are different now—I’m different now. I’m not going to hit you anymore. How many times can I fucking say it? What do you want from me?”

“I just...I want you to go.” Kat’s throat constricted to a pinhole, her voice forced through this narrow opening. “Please, Chris.”

“I just wanted to see you for a few minutes, to talk and try and work things out,” Chris said. “You owe me that much. You’re the one who let me in here, so fuck your restraining order.”

“There’s nothing to work out. Please, Chris, don’t be like this. Please just go, please? Just go.”

“God, you are such a bitch!” His voice grew loud, nearly a shout. “I come here, I don’t do shit to you, and you act like this. Fuck you, Kat.”

He threw the flowers at her and they smacked against the tarmac, scattering delicate, slender white and yellow petals.

Kat jumped at the motion, and felt her face burning, her eyes welling with tears. Had she actually been so excited and glad to see him? Why in the hell did she always seem to forget about all of the bad things?

“Go away,” she said, quietly, her voice trembling. “I don’t...I don’t want to see you around here anymore. Go away before I...I call security.”

“Go ahead.” Chris sneered at her, angrily. “Call them.”

He’d reached out for her then, to grab her, and she’d known his hand would clamp down and hurt her, and then he’d probably hit her, and she’d cried out, frightened.

“Is there a problem here?”

Kat spun around, and Chris backed immediately away from her, like a cowed dog.

Eric Nagel leaned out of a small opened hatchway just behind the nose of the shuttle. He swung his legs around and hopped down to the tarmac. “Hi, Kat,” he said, walking toward them, his gait easy and leisurely. He was wearing old, grease-spotted jeans and a white crew-neck tee-shirt. He was smiling amicably, but Kat couldn’t see his eyes behind his sunglasses. She wouldn’t realize it until much later, but it was the first time the pilot had ever referred to her as “Kat” and not as “Kathryn”. “Everything okay?”

Kat glanced apprehensively at Chris, and then down at the ground. She didn’t seem to be able to speak.

“Everything’s fine,” Chris told her. She could tell, even without looking at either, that the two men were sizing up each other. “No problem at all. Just talking to my wife.”

“Oh.” Eric raised an eyebrow. “Well, I think Kat’s about through talking to you. I believe she asked you to leave.”

“Do you believe that?” Chris’ hands coiled into neat, stacked fists.

“Yes,” Eric said. “I do.”

There was a long pause. Kat stared down at her feet and watched the breeze tug and push daisy petals towards her toes. She didn’t know what would happen if Chris wanted to fight. He was pissed enough to, and even though Eric was leaner and quicker and probably a better fighter, Chris outweighed the younger man by a good thirty pounds.

“Thanks, Kat,” Chris said. “Have a very nice fucking day.”

She heard him stomp off, heard the chain-link gate slam shut in his wake. Eric followed Chris and locked the gate behind him.

Kat sighed and brought her hands up to her mouth. Her fingers were shaking.

“Are you all right?” Eric took off his sunglasses and tucked them into the back pocket of his jeans.

She nodded wordlessly. She felt embarrassed and ashamed that Eric had seen how Chris would treat her. She was careful to maintain a cool façade among her coworkers, to always present herself as calm, collected and in control. Now he’d seen her secret, what she was really like.

“Are you sure?” Eric was standing directly in front of her, but she couldn’t meet his eyes. She was on the verge of tears. “He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

She shook her head. “No, I...I’m fine. Really.” She struggled to pull herself together, to force some strength into her warbling voice. “What...what are you doing here?”

The question seemed to surprise him. “I’m running the routine maintenance check on the shuttle. That’s part of my job description, remember?”

“I...I thought Alex would be...” Kat began. She stooped and tried to rescue the poor dilapidated flowers Chris had brought her. She gathered them into her arms and realized they were a pretty fair analogy for her ex-marriage. She clapped her hand over her face and burst into tears.

“Hey.” Eric sounded awkward and embarrassed. “Oh, hey, Kathryn, c’mon, don’t...”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry.” He put his arm around her shoulders, holding her at a stiff and uncomfortable distance as he led her into the cool shade of the open shuttle hatch. They both sat down on the edge of the doorway.

She tried to wipe her tears away, humiliated. “I’m sorry. I just...I’m sorry...”

He draped his hand against hers, a simple but powerful gesture that drew her voice to silence. “Stop saying that. It’s not your fault.”

It was like he had known, as if somehow simply from that brief encounter, he’d realized the entire dynamic of her miserable relationship with Chris.

She looked up and met his gaze for the first time since he’d approached her on the tarmac. “Please don’t tell anyone about this. Especially Alex. I don’t...I don’t want anyone to know how he...Chris, I mean...”

Eric nodded once. Again, it was like he understood, without her saying another word in explanation, he knew. “I won’t.”

She could see his bare arms, strange, small, dark marks dotted across the inner curve of his right elbow. They looked almost like bruises, and she remembered that not too long ago she and Alex had held a serious discussion about Eric’s on-again, off-again relationship with free-based narcotics.

*Needle marks. Those are his needle marks.*

But whatever prejudices she had held for him about replacing Dylan or because of his indiscretions with morphine seemed to dissolve immediately, and from that moment on Kat and Eric were friends, bound by that hot, humid August afternoon when they had each shared a dark and brooding secret.

She supposed that part of her had fallen in love with Eric that day, too, but it was never something she felt like talking about, and sure as hell was nothing she’d ever let Eric know.

Some secrets were meant to be private.

## Chapter Twelve

“Kat, it’s been a long day and you’re upset.” Frank offered her a mug of coffee. “Why don’t we call it a night?”

“No.” Kat shook her head. “No, we’re close. I want to keep looking.”

He didn’t look convinced, but shrugged in concession. “Okay. What next?”

“What’s this?” They were back at the *Daedalus*’ main menu, and she pointed to one of the folders.

“Let’s see, looks like personnel records, mail transcripts...here’s Eric’s daily flight log, Leia’s daily payload log...”

“Wait.” Kat pointed. “Click on that.”

She’d caught sight of a small transmission icon, an earthbound communication sent on the day they’d awakened from cryostasis. She recognized the numerical user identification listed with the transmission. Alex had made a call to Earth from the bridge.

Frank opened the log file, and Kat found herself watching a grainy video image of Cassandra Horne’s face—Alex’s wife, Cassie.

“...we’re all right anyway.” Alex’s voice filled the room, recorded as part of the transmission log. Kat was seeing what he had seen as he’d talked to his wife. “Just a few minor course corrections, but Jesus, it could have been worse.”

“I don’t want you doing this anymore, Alex,” Cassie said. “I mean it. It’s always one thing or another, and now the navigation computer is resetting itself? What if you hadn’t come out of cryostasis?” Her voice grew shrill, choked with tears. “It’s

bad enough you won't be back until after Crissy graduates from college—bad enough to know you're up there for five years alone with *her*—but to think that something might happen...? You might not come back at all?"

*Her.* Kat felt a sudden chill at that word, at Cassie's cold, bitter inflection.

"Cassie, you're overreacting," Alex told her in a gentle, condescending voice. "I told you. We're on course again and everything's fine. You don't have to worry about that, or about Kat, either."

Kat's face drained to ashen. *What?*

"I've seen how she looks at you." Cassie frowned. "For years now, I've seen her."

"So she looks at me," Alex said. "Let her. I don't look back. She's a single mom and you know how they can be—every man's their knight in shining armor. You smile at them crooked and they think you want to marry them."

It felt like the blade of a knife jabbed into Kat's heart. Her breath caught against the back of her throat.

"Kathryn Emmente is like a guy with tits to me," Alex told his wife, making her laugh. "She's nothing, just someone I work with, no different than Eric Nagel, I swear to Christ. In fact, I would probably rather fuck Eric, if I had to choose. At least he's pretty."

"Stop it." Cassie giggled, just as Kat's shattered heart pleaded the same thing.

*Stop it.*

"It's not always going to be like this, Cassie. I'm going to leave this job, leave the Shinkansan Company. But I can't right now, not any time soon. These things take time, and there's a lot to figure out in the meantime. But you know you're what I want."

Kat listened to the familiar words—repeated nearly verbatim to her—in stunned horror. *Oh, God...!*

"Kat..." Frank's voice seemed to come from miles away.

She stood, swaying dizzily. Suddenly the room felt very muggy and stifling. She took a staggering, clumsy step for the door.

“Kat!” Frank said, alarmed now. He stood.

“I’m okay,” she told him dazedly. “I...I just think I’m gonna be sick...”

She stumbled out the door. She didn’t know where to go.

She wandered down the hall, struggling to contain her tears. She found herself back in Eric’s room. He was asleep again, and the room was dark. She hesitated in the doorway, like a small child frightened in the night, and then went and crawled into bed with him. She curled up against his back, wanting some kind of comfort and security from his warmth.

He stirred and rolled over. The light in his bathroom was on, and in the dim yellow glow, she saw his eyes open, sleepily.

“Kat...” he murmured. He brought his hand up and rubbed his eyes. “What is it?”

“Oh...!” Kat’s tears spilled. “Oh...oh, God, Eric...!”

“Hey...” He touched her face, and she had no defense against such a tender gesture. She broke down into hysterical sobs.

Frightened and awake now, Eric propped himself up on his elbow so he could look down at her. “Kat, what is it? Tell me what’s wrong.”

She managed to hiccup out the story in between tearful gulps for breath. When she’d choked out as much as she could bear, she covered her face with her hands, ashamed. “Oh, Eric, I’m so sorry I said those awful things to you,” she whispered. “I didn’t...I didn’t mean them...”

“It’s all right.” He leaned over and hugged her. He canted his face and pressed his lips against her tear-stained cheek. “Please, Kat. Please don’t cry. It’s all right.”

“He said I was nothing.” Kat’s eyes flooded with new tears, and she gasped, anguished. “He...he said I was nothing, Eric!”

“He was wrong,” Eric said. He kissed her cheek again, his lips lighting against her skin, then the corner of her mouth. He

cradled her face between his hands, leaning down so that his nose brushed hers. "He was an ass, Kat."

She and Eric were good friends, but it had never stopped her from always admiring him from a distance. Many a time had she caught herself staring, transfixed, admiring the lines and aesthetics of his body.

*"Oh, my God," Leia had said to him. "You are that fucking stupid, aren't you? I should've known. I've seen the way you watch her, all moon-eyed and goof-ass."*

Had he really watched her like that, as she'd watched him, as well?

*All of this time, and I never realized. I've been in love with you, Eric.*

"I'm so stupid," Kat whispered.

"No, you're not," Eric said, and he kissed her mouth.

His lips were soft and warm and welcome against hers. Kat tilted her head up and kissed him back, opening her mouth, bringing her hands up to his face. His tongue glanced off hers, and as she pulled him closer, a low groan, a longing sound escaped his throat.

The kiss grew deeper still; he lay her back against the bed and pressed himself on top of her. She tangled her fingers in his dark hair, holding him near. They kissed with the sort of desperate passion that comes from having avoided something inevitable for far too long. When at last they parted for breath, he hovered above her, both of them gasping suddenly, windless.

"Kat..." He touched her face, brushed her hair back from her eyes. She could feel his arousal, hard and hot, straining against the fabric of his flight suit, pressing against her thigh. She trembled, turning her cheek into the basin of his palm, kissing his hand.

He breathed her name again, his voice anxious and uncertain, but she let him say no more. She caught his face between her hands and kissed him again, shifting her weight, parting her thighs to enfold his hips, to let the hardening length of him press firmly against her. He moaned softly, a wordless plea, as her hand moved between them, fumbling with the zipper-front of his flight suit.

He made love to her. She was afraid it would hurt him, hurt his leg, and so she eased him back against the bed and straddled him. He arched his back, drawing his hips up to greet her as she lowered herself against him. When they began to move in tandem, as she drew him deeply into her, he reached up to cradle her breasts against his hands and gasped out her name over and over.

She moved with him, watching the play of light and shadow across his face as he closed his eyes, undulating beneath her. She could see when climax came upon him; from the muscles between his neck and shoulders to the stacked plane of his abdomen, he tensed, hooking his fingers into the soft curves of her hips.

For the first time in her life, Kat found release at the same time as her lover; it was something she'd been cheated out of by Chris and Alex, neither of whom had ever seemed to consider her pleasure before their own. Kat threw her head back and cried out softly as Eric grasped her hips firmly, delivering himself into her with final, powerful thrusts.

When it was over, she leaned over him, her hair tumbling past her shoulders. She struggled to reclaim her breath; her arms felt tremulous and weak, and she shivered. She closed her eyes, weary and winded, but opened them as he touched her face, ran his fingers through her hair.

How long had she wanted that? From the day Eric had come to her aid on the tarmac? She looked down at Eric as he smiled up at her, his features glistening with sweat, his hair tousled and swept about his face. Somehow, even now, the answers to those questions terrified her.

“I have to go,” she whispered.

He shook his head as he ran his fingertips lightly, sweetly against her mouth. “What? No.”

She smiled, tried to make light as she shrugged away from him. She slipped her leg from over his hips and hated the sudden coldness that filled the space his warmth had only just occupied.

“Kat...” He reached out to stay her. She made it out of the bed, both feet on the floor, but he caught her hand before she could step away and reach for her discarded clothes.

“Jerica will be waiting for me, Eric,” she said quietly, slipping her fingers away from his. “I have to go.”

He didn’t say anything. He rolled onto his side and watched her step back into her panties, shrug her way back into her bra. She slipped her flight suit back on, and pulled her hair loose from beneath the collar.

“I...I’ll see you in the morning,” she whispered, because something needed to be said. She had never felt at a loss for words around Eric, and was somewhat dismayed to discover that now, she had no idea what to offer him. She leaned down and kissed him, a quick and hurried peck on the mouth that left him blinking up at her as she drew away, his large, dark eyes round and wounded.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” she said again, and then she left him.

## Chapter Thirteen

Eric sat alone in the commissary very early the next morning. The sun had not even crept up over the horizon yet. He hadn't slept much the night before, not after Kat had left, and he didn't expect anyone else in the compound to be awake. When he heard soft footsteps in the corridor, he looked up from the cup of coffee he nursed, hoping it was Kat.

Frank walked in, as haggard as Eric felt and seeming equally surprised to find someone else roused. "Hey."

"Hey." Eric nodded once in greeting. There was a palpable tension in the air between them, left over from the previous night's disagreement. Eric knew Frank could sense it, too, and that he had to do something to dissolve it. *Because I need Frank's help.* "What are you doing up?"

Frank got a coffee mug down from the cabinet. "I haven't been able to sleep worth a damn.

"Me, either," Eric said. "I keep having nightmares about the crash."

Frank nodded. He sipped his black, steaming coffee carefully. "Is Kat all right?"

"I don't know." Eric glanced down into his coffee mug. "She was pretty upset."

"Yeah, I could tell," Frank said.

Eric studied the doctor for a long moment. He didn't want to confide in Frank, but didn't see any way around it. Last night had changed Eric, had forced him to realize that he couldn't keep quiet any longer. He needed help. He didn't want to die. *I don't want to lose Kat. I can't. Not now. Not after last night.*

"Look, Frank, can I trust you to keep a secret?"

Frank raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

Eric wouldn’t look at him. He touched the pant leg of his flight suit, toying anxiously with the fabric. He didn’t want to say anything, but knew he had no choice. “Promise you won’t mention it to Kat.”

“No, you know I won’t, of course,” Frank said. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I think the wreck really fucked up my leg. I think something in it is broken.”

“Eric, Jesus Christ.” Frank stood, going over to him. “What’s wrong? Maybe there’s something I can do. For Christ’s sake, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t think there’s anything you can do. There aren’t any tools small enough here. I think it’s leaking lubricant solutions. It’s making me sick, making my leg hurt...” He looked down into the murky blackness of his coffee. “This morning, I saw blood in my piss.”

“Let me take a look at it.” Frank motioned with his hand. “Come with me to the infirmary.”

“Frank, there’s nothing you can—”

“You don’t know that, damn it,” Frank said. “Now come on.”

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“Something’s leaking in there, all right.” Eric had stripped down to his underwear and sat on an examination table, while Frank leaned over his injured leg. “You’ve got some pretty extensive edema developing around your ankle and into your calf, and here around your knee, too.” He glanced grimly at Eric. “And if you’re pissing blood, that means it’s already affecting your kidneys. I’m going to draw up some blood work, check your liver enzyme levels, too. That’s my biggest concern right now. Stopping this before you go into liver or renal failure.”

“Stop it how?” Eric asked.

Frank pressed his hands gently along Eric's knee and lower leg. "I don't know. But I'm going to try. This is real skin, right? Cloned tissue custom-developed for the prosthetic?"

Eric nodded.

"It's fed through a capillary system that ties into your bloodstream," Frank said. "The upper layers of underlying tissue, too, the muscles. That's how the lubricants from everything underneath, all of the mechanized parts, are getting into your system."

He glanced up at Eric. "They did a beautiful job of this." He patted Eric's leg. "Damn near a work of art. I may not have the right mechanical tools to get down in there, but I have scalpels. I can cut it open, try to figure out what's wrong once I'm inside."

He turned to a nearby cabinet and squatted, rifling through the contents. "I think I saw some surgical drains around here yesterday. Maybe I can rig up something with those so we can keep whatever's leaking out of your bloodstream."

Eric felt a glimmer of hope. "You think that will work?"

"At least until help gets here," Frank replied. "I'm hoping, anyway."

Eric forked his fingers through his hair. "I've been so fucking scared," he admitted shakily. "I thought I was going to die."

"In my line of work, that's only a last resort." Frank glanced at him and winked. "I think I can set everything up for surgery by lunch time. I'll find some way to distract Kat, don't worry. I'm going to give you something for the pain, in the meanwhile."

"No." Eric sat up.

"We've got plenty here," Frank said. "And there's no need for you to suffer."

"I can't." Eric was ashamed to tell Frank about his addiction; humiliated that Frank would discover he'd already been pilfering the compound's supplies. "I just...after the crash, when I lost my leg..." He looked down at his lap. "I got hooked on morphine. It took me years to get clean. It hasn't been that long ago, and I..."

Franklin opened the cabinet where the morphine was stored. If he noticed any missing, he didn't say anything. "You know what the difference between a junkie and a patient is, Eric?" He took a vial out. "A patient *needs* the drug. A junkie just *wants* it."

"Frank, I can't," Eric said, staring at the bottle of morphine.

Frank smiled at him. He opened a drawer and pulled out a fresh syringe. "Suffering is for martyrs and third-world countries. And while at the moment, this compound seems pretty damn close to that..." He winked at Eric again. "...it's not."

Frank set the morphine and the needle down. Eric jumped like he'd just placed a live rattlesnake next to him, and the doctor smiled.

"I'm your friend, Eric. You can trust me. I won't say anything to Kat. This'll stay between us. You're hurting. This can help you. *I* can help you—if you let me. That's my job."

"All right." Eric hung his head. He tried to tell himself that Frank was right; he wasn't going to use morphine because he wanted to. He needed to. *For Kat.*

Frank used a blood pressure cuff to cut off the circulation in Eric's arm. "How does that feel?" he asked, as he drew the needle out.

The effects were again almost instantaneous. Eric closed his eyes. "It feels great," he said, and he laughed. "Jesus Christ."

"Lay back, relax." Frank helped Eric lie down. "Ride with it. It's okay."

"Thanks, Frank," Eric murmured, his voice slurred, his eyelids drooping to half-mast.

"Like I said," Frank replied with a smile. "That's my job."

## Chapter Fourteen

“Frank,” Jerica whispered, tugging patiently on his sleeve.

Frank opened his eyes and looked at her from an examination table in the compound infirmary. He didn’t look sleepy or surprised at all. He looked at her like he’d been expecting her.

“Good morning, Jerica,” he said, and he unfolded his legs across the table. He stretched them and yawned simultaneously, like a cat in a warm sunbeam.

“I have to show you something.” She took a couple of steps back from him.

“What is it?” He swung his legs around and sat up. He didn’t move with the sluggish, dazed motions of someone who had been snoozing. He moved with a graceful, effortless ease, like a panther that had patiently waited for its prey to creep close enough to pounce at.

Frank puzzled Jerica. He was always friendly to her. Yesterday, he had deferred to her in connecting the black box from the *Daedalus* to the compound’s system. He talked to her like she was a grown-up person, kind of like Eric would, except Frank always seemed to have this sly look on his face when he was with her. It was almost like he was waiting for her to slip up, to do something that would prove she wasn’t as smart as everyone said she was.

She walked around him. She didn’t like the way he was watching her, studying her.

“Eric.” She shook the pilot’s shoulder. Like Frank, he seemed to have fallen asleep in the infirmary, but unlike Frank, she’d been unable to rouse him.

Eric groaned. He looked very bad. His face was pale and damp, shining with a light sweat. He wouldn't wake up.

"Eric," Jerica said again, more urgently. She turned to Frank. "What's wrong with him?"

Frank smiled at her, a sneaky little I'm-one-up-on-you smile. "He's just sick, Jerica. There's something wrong with his leg, and it's made him sick. I gave him a shot to help him sleep, to help ease his pain."

"He's hurt?" Jerica reached instinctively for Eric's hand.

"Not too bad," Frank told her. He hopped down from the table. "He just thinks it's worse than it is. It's in his head." He tapped his forehead. "You know what I mean?"

Jerica shook her head warily, suspiciously. She shied closer to Eric.

"I mean, his leg doesn't hurt him as much as his mind does. His mind wants morphine, so it tricks him into thinking he needs it, that he can't go without it."

"I heard Mom and Alex talking once," Jerica said quietly, ashamed and embarrassed that she'd overheard. "Alex said Eric was addicted to morphine."

Frank nodded. "He'll be okay, though, Jerica. As long as we're here, as long as I keep an eye on him. He can clean up again once the rescue gets here. In the meantime, I think you know as well as I do that he's suffering. Something is really wrong with his cyborg leg."

Jerica was silent for a long moment. She leaned over the examination table and brushed Eric's hair back from his brow. "He doesn't want it. It's not his fault. He didn't ask for that leg."

"I know." Frank stood next to her, and touched her blonde hair. "Eric's lucky, though. You know why?"

She shook her head, watching Eric sleep, listening to the rough, labored sound of his breathing.

"He wasn't an expendable commodity," Frank said. "Otherwise, he'd probably be dead. Let him sleep, Jerica. He's exhausted. What did you have to show me?"

She studied him for a minute. He smiled at her, friendly enough. She didn't really trust him completely. Certainly not like she trusted Eric.

"Come on." She led Frank out into the corridor. "I was playing with the probe, making it go through the service ducts and stuff. And I found it."

"Found what?"

She walked ahead of him, running her fingers down the wall as she walked along. Her skin made a soft whispery sound as it went. "You'll see."

They walked along in silence for a moment. Frank didn't press her to tell him more. Jerica found that odd. Most adults, even Eric or her mother, probably would have needled at her to tell. Frank seemed just the opposite, content to let her lead him to her discovery, to share it with him in her own time and fashion. She wasn't sure if she was pleased by this or not.

"What did you mean when you said Eric wasn't expendable?" she asked, glancing back at Frank.

"I mean, Eric was a military pilot," Frank said. "He was a very good, very well paid military pilot. He was an investment of a lot of time and a lot of money. He did a good job and he did what he was told to do."

"So?" Jerica watched the floor, her small shadow in front of her. She could see Frank's shadow to her left.

"So, the government controls the Stellar Corps. They were Eric's boss. It was their time and their money that made Eric a good pilot. They weren't about to let a little something like a crash, or a mangled leg ruin their prized investment."

"Eric is not an investment." Jerica looked at him, frowning slightly. "He's a person."

"Perhaps," Frank remarked musingly, and he smiled at her. There was something about the way the cold fluorescent light overhead flickered across his eyes, the way it seemed to caper across his grey, nearly silver irises; something that bothered Jerica. She looked away quickly, her long hair whipping across her face in soft tendrils.

"I mean..." Frank's shadow elongated, growing closer to hers. "Do you think if you or I, or your mother, maybe, had lost

a leg when we crashed here that anyone would have paid for us to have a replacement like Eric's?"

She frowned again and turned around to walk a couple steps backwards. She narrowed her eyes at him. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do. You know as well as I do Shinkansan wouldn't pay for that kind of operation. Eric was a soldier. A very good soldier. And the government took care of him because of that. You know what taxes are?"

Jerica glowered at him again and he laughed. "Right, silly me. We all pay them, people like your mom, Eric and me. That's where the government gets its money. All of it—including what was spent to fix Eric's leg. And because he was a good soldier, the government spent our tax money to help him. But they wouldn't do the same for your mom or me, even though it's just as much our money as Eric's. Do you think that's fair?"

Jerica didn't know what to say. It didn't seem fair to her, to hear Frank tell of it. "But Eric needed his leg fixed," she said. "He would have died."

"Yes." Frank nodded and now his shadow had drawn alongside of hers until the two ran together like warm maple syrup, pooling into one dark puddle. "He would have."

They reached the top of a flight of metal industrial steps that led into the sub-basement of the compound. Jerica looked between her feet, down the stairwell, holding the railing in case she lost her balance. "Here." She pointed.

Frank stood opposite her and followed her gaze. He made a harsh, harking sound in his throat, like he was going to cough up a loogie, and winked. She frowned, but she really thought it was pretty funny.

"Shh!" she told him. "Cut it out. Listen!"

They both listened. She could hear it, plain as day, and hoped he could, too.

"Sounds like water running," Frank said.

She nodded, and then started down the staircase, eying her footing carefully.

The sub-cellar floor near the foot of the stairs had been dry when Jerica had gone to find Eric and Frank. There was now at

least an inch of standing water there, shimmering, quivering. The golden lights on the ceiling bounced crazily off of its moving surface and danced across the walls.

Jerica and Frank stopped on the bottom steps.

“What the...?” Frank said.

The sound of rushing water was louder now, a dim roar.

“Jerica, where is this coming from?” Frank stepped into the pool. The water splashed up over his boot toes.

“This way.” Jerica led him through the water, over to a huge, hulking, rumbling piece of machinery. Pipes and conduits twisted and wound in and out of it. It was an enormous black metal octopus. Water gushed out of its belly in torrents.

“Holy shit!” Frank yelled over the din of the water. He stood in front of the machine, both hands on his head. The water by the machine was several inches deep, cresting almost above his ankles. It splashed him, drenching the front of his pants.

“Well, this is just great!” He waded over to Jerica and started to laugh hysterically. “Jesus Christ! Do you know what that is? It’s our water supply! This is the compound’s water purification and storage system. And it’s spilling all of our water all over the basement floor!”

Jerica stared at the machine in aghast.

“That pipe in the front, where all the water’s coming from, is busted,” Frank said. “It needs to be welded or sealed. You don’t know if there’s a water main or something around here, do you? Someplace we can turn the water off? Otherwise it’s all going to be gone and there won’t be any left for us.”

She shook her head. “Maybe there are schematics up in the—”

“There isn’t time for that!” Frank cried, and he began to laugh again. She knew he didn’t really think it was funny, and that he was laughing because he couldn’t figure out what else to do.

“Ah, goddammit!” Frank shouted, frustrated.

He splashed back over to the machine and began to wander around it, poking here and there, pulling on this and that. He

slammed his fist into it as hard as he could, angry and frustrated. “Goddammit! Jerica, help me, will you?”

She went over to him, flinching as the water peppered her face and hair.

“Look for something, anything—a gauge or a button or a knob,” Frank said. “Something to make it stop!”

Jerica began to circle the machine. The water level was rising fast, and was nearly halfway up her calves. She heard the pipes above her creaking and groaning from the force of the water racing through them.

“I can’t see anything!” she hollered at Frank.

She heard a light snap, like a green tree limb cracked over someone’s knee. The pipe directly over her head burst, and water gushed down on her.

Jerica screamed and sucked in a mouthful of water. She gagged. The force knocked her off her feet, face-down into the pool. The water falling on top of her was too great, and she couldn’t get up and scramble away.

“Frank!” she screamed, terrified, and then she swallowed water again. She began to struggle, unable to breathe. “Fuh...Fruh...!”

Suddenly the water stopped, slowing across her head and shoulders to a thinning stream. Its rushing roar fell silent, and was replaced by melodic trickling, spattering sounds.

“Jerica!” Frank splashed clumsily over to her. He got his arm underneath her and jerked her up out of the water.

“Ellie,” he said, frightened. “El, honey, are you okay? Can you hear me?”

She nodded, choking. She spit up water and began to cry.

“Oh, God!” Frank pulled her close, hugging her. “Oh, thank God!”

“Wuh...what happened to the water?” Jerica whispered.

“I found a cut-off switch over on the other side.” Frank knelt in front of her, cradling her face between his hands. His eyes were round, enormous with fright. “Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

She shook her head, shuddering with chill. "I want my mommy," she whimpered, her eyes swimming with sudden tears.

He hugged her again, gathering her in his arms and lifting her off the ground. "Of course you do," he said softly, as she wrapped her arms fiercely about his neck.

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They met Eric in the corridor on the way to the infirmary. His gait was shuffling, clumsy and he leaned his shoulder against the wall.

"Jerica...Frank, what happened?" He reached out to touch her, but she was suddenly angry at him, furious for not telling her about his leg.

She ducked around his hand. "Leave me alone," she snapped at him hotly, watching with satisfaction as he recoiled, hurt. "Just go away!"

She took off running down the hall, feeling the water squish up out of the soles of her shoes every time her feet smacked against the floor. She was freezing, and her wet clothes clung to her skin, feeling nasty.

She ran until she reached her mother's room and ducked inside. The door slid shut behind her. She kicked one shoe and it bounced off the wall over the bed, leaving a wet spot. She hopped on one foot and yanked the other shoe off.

She wriggled out of her wet clothes. She pulled on a clean, dry shirt and began to fight with the buttons. Her fingers felt like ice, numb and uncooperative. She shook her head and her damp ringlets whipped around. She grabbed a towel off of the chair by the bed and tried to wrap her hair up in it the way her mom would.

There was a knock at the door.

"Go away!" Jerica climbed into bed and curled up, fetal-style. She drew the covers up to her chin and shivered.

"Jerica, it's me, Eric."

"I don't want to talk to you."

The door opened and Eric walked in. Jerica could tell he was limping, and she could hear the noises the hinges and lifts were making in his leg; soft, sliding sounds, metal against metal.

“Get out,” she said. But she was worried about him, even if he had lied to her. He looked like he was hurting.

“Jerica, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Get out.”

“What did I do?” he asked, bewildered. “Why are you mad at me?”

Jerica sat up. The towel dropped off her head. “I thought you were my friend.” She scowled and threw the towel at him.

“I am your friend.” He caught the towel, came to her bedside and knelt before her. “What are you talking about?”

Jerica looked at him solemnly. “Your leg is really fucked up.”

Eric blinked and then laughed. “Don’t say that.”

“What?”

“Fucked up. Don’t say that.”

“Why? You can say it. Mom says it. Frank says it—a lot.”

“So?” Eric raised his brow. “Doesn’t mean you can—”

“Why didn’t you tell me about your leg?” She touched his face, tracing down the slope of his nose with her fingertip.

“I just...I...how come you know, anyway?”

“Frank told me. I kept trying to wake you up, and he finally just told me you were sick because of something being wrong with your leg.”

Eric looked down at the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“I mean, I can see why you wouldn’t want Mom to know. She’d just freak out. But you know I won’t say a word. Frank said he had an idea of how to fix it. Maybe I can help.”

He smiled at her. He touched her cheek and his hand was warm. “Thanks.”

“I knew anyhow, though. You look terrible. And you’re limping. And it’s making some kind of weird noise.”

“I know.”

“What’s the matter with it?”

She was afraid, terribly, desperately afraid for a second that he was going to open his mouth and talk to her like she was a little girl, like she was dumb or something. She really wouldn't blame him if he did. She *was* a little girl, and no matter how smart she was, it was a difficult thing to forget sometimes.

"Jerica, there's something wrong with the fluid system," he said instead, looking at her straight in the eyes. "I think when it got crushed in the shuttle, it ruptured some of the conduits. So now I think there's lubricants leaking, making me sick, hurting my leg."

"What're you going to do?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know. Frank wants to try surgery, to cut my leg open and see if he can stop the leak somehow."

"What if that doesn't work?"

"I don't know," Eric admitted.

"Are you...are you going to die, Eric?"

"No, Jerica," he said, pressing his hand against her face. "I'm not going to die."

He tried to smile but his eyes were round and bright and afraid. "I don't want your mom to know about this, okay? Promise me you won't tell her. She can't handle it right now, so I need this to be our little secret."

It wasn't a little secret by Jerica's estimation, but she didn't say anything. He was trying to make her feel better, and she wanted him to believe that it had worked. "I promise, Eric." She grabbed hold of him, hugging him. "You'll be okay. I won't let anything happen to you."

She knew he wouldn't take any real comfort in her saying that. She wished she was bigger, a grown-up, like her mom. He would believe her, be comforted by her if she was a woman, if her arms were strong, a woman's arms.

But she was just a little girl.

"Thanks," he whispered. "I need that."

## Chapter Fifteen

The morphine was wearing off fast.

Eric stumbled in the corridor outside of Jerica's room. He caught himself against the wall. He rested his forehead against the back of his hand and stood there, leaning heavily, his breath coming in quick, ragged gasps.

His face was hot, burning up. His leg hurt so bad he wanted to curl up and cry.

He tried to walk a few more paces, and staggered into an open doorway. He saw Frank standing with his back to the door. He was naked from the waist up, pulling on a clean, dry jump suit.

There was a strange, raised mark on Frank's left shoulder, maybe four inches long and two inches wide. It looked like a figure eight rolled over onto its side. It was familiar to Eric, but he couldn't figure out where he'd seen it before.

Frank seemed to sense him standing there, and he glanced over his shoulder. "You shouldn't be on that leg."

"I know, but I..." Eric began, still troubled by the mark on Frank's back.

Frank straightened and pulled the suit up over his shoulders. "See something green?" There was a strange, cutting edge to his voice. Eric glanced down at his feet, admonished.

"The morphine wear off already?" Frank said.

Eric nodded. "I don't...I don't feel so good."

"Come here." Frank went to his side and led him across the room, helping him sit against his bunk. He knelt beside Eric and prodded carefully at his knee. "The swelling's getting worse."

You're going to have to keep off your feet as much as you can. Did Jerica tell you about the water tank?"

"Yeah."

"We're going to have to postpone that surgery now, at least for today." Frank glanced at him, apologetic. "I'm sorry, Eric. Kat's going to need at least one of us to help survey the damage. We can try tomorrow."

Eric nodded, even though the idea of waiting even another day, enduring the swelling pain in his leg made him press his lips together, stifling a dismayed whimper.

"Lie down," Frank said, easing him back. "Let me go down to the infirmary, get you some morphine. You're due for another shot."

Eric closed his eyes against a miserable wave of vertigo. He heard Frank's footsteps as he walked out of the room. He lay against Frank's bed, trembling in pain.

"Eric?"

His eyes snapped open as he heard Kat's voice, tinny through the intercom. "Frank? Where are you guys?"

He sat up, and this time there was nothing he could do to stop himself from groaning aloud. He doubled at the waist, crumpling against Frank's tangled bedclothes. He knocked Frank's nightstand with his elbow, sending a dog-eared paperback and Frank's watch spilling to the floor.

"I'm in the infirmary, Kat," Frank said over the intercom. He sounded light, nearly chipper, as if all was well in the world. "Good morning. There's coffee in the commissary, if you want any."

Eric grimaced as he reached down, picking up Frank's fallen watch and returning it to the nightstand. *God, please don't let Kat see me like this*, he thought.

"Why is there water all over the floor in the hallway?" Kat asked.

Eric leaned over, his fingertips fumbling against Frank's book. He picked it up and caught sight of the title before he set it back on the bedside table: *Foundations for A New World Economy*, by David McDonald. The book was cheaply made, the

cover stock thin, the binding flimsy, as if someone had them made at a small-town print shop.

“Why don’t I meet you in the commissary?” Frank said to Kat over the intercom. “I’ll explain it to you then.”

Like the peculiar mark Eric had seen on Frank’s back, something about the book seemed familiar to him. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He turned the book over in his hand, trying to focus his bleary gaze on the back cover blurb:

*In this practical handbook for a changing global market, David McDonald identifies key elements for continuing domestic diversification and international profit-sharing while exploring...*

“David McDonald,” Eric murmured. *I’ve heard that name before.*

He glanced down at the floor and saw a business card lying face-down against the tiles. Frank had been using it as a place marker in the book, and it had fallen out. He reached for it, lifting it in hand. He had less than a second to read the name *Reba Crowe* and to see the words *New England Militia* inscribed beneath that same strange, sideways eight he had seen on Frank’s back before he heard footsteps in the hall—Frank returning from the infirmary.

He tucked the business card at random inside the book and shoved it back onto the nightstand just as Frank ducked through the doorway.

“You shouldn’t be sitting up.” Frank held a readied hypodermic needle in his hand as he hurried to the bedside. “You’re only making things worse for yourself, Eric. You need to listen to me.”

*David McDonald, Eric thought. New England Militia. Why the hell does that seem so familiar to me?*

“I need to go talk to Kat.” Frank slipped his arm around Eric’s waist. “Come on. I’ll help you to your room.”

They limped together down the hall, with Eric leaning heavily against Frank. He all but collapsed onto his mattress once they staggered across his threshold. Frank pulled a rubber strap out of his pocket and knelt in front of the bed.

He pushed Eric’s shirt sleeve back and tied the rubber band taut about his arm. Eric thought of his dream when they’d

returned from retrieving the black box, of how Doc had come to him and forced morphine on him.

*Take it, boy. Take your medicine.*

“See something green?” Frank asked him again, glancing up and smiling slightly as he pulled the needle back from Eric’s arm.

“No.” Eric shook his head, feeling the morphine sweep over him in a heavy, soothing cloak. “No, I...I didn’t see anything...”

His voice faded, his eyelids fluttered and his mind succumbed to shadows.

## Chapter Sixteen

“You better this morning?” Frank asked Kat.

She sat across from him in the kitchen and shook her head, sipping her coffee. She hadn’t seen Eric yet that morning, but had made no effort to do so. She had deliberately taken a different route through the maze of hallways in the compound to avoid his room. She didn’t know why, but the idea of seeing him, of acknowledging even wordlessly what had happened the night before left her filled with clammy anxiety. “No. I don’t think I’ll be better for awhile.”

“I wish I had something good to tell you...” Frank said.

“But you don’t.” Kat half-laughed. “Hit me with it, Frank. Nothing else could make it worse.”

Frank raised his eyebrows as if to say “Okay, you asked for it.” He told her about the water purification and storage machine.

Kat stared at him blankly. “How...” she said, and then she licked her lips. “How much water do we have left?”

“Near as I’ve been able to tell with the shitty equipment in the command center...ten, maybe twelve days. And that’s if we all cut down to a shower every other day and don’t flush the toilets.”

“Ten to twelve days?” Kat exclaimed. “Jesus, what else! Well, that’s no big deal. The platform will respond to our emergency beacon sooner or later and send help our way. And we know it rains here. We must have driven past a dozen streams and ponds on our way out to the crash site to retrieve the black box.”

“Yeah, but they’ll all have to be tested,” Frank said. “I mean, we don’t know anything about the toxicology of the resources on this moon. If the water here is drinkable, why would the company’ve gone to all the trouble of that fancy storage and purification system?”

Kat sighed. “Thanks for the optimism.”

“Kat, optimism is nice, but I think we need to be realistic here. Besides, there’s more. I found these.” He handed her three empty glass vials.

“Morphine. Where were they?” But she didn’t need to ask. She knew where he’d found them; she knew with a terrible, despondent, twisting feeling in her gut.

“In Eric’s room, just under the bed,” Frank said, wrenching that knot all the more. “And there are more bottles missing out of the infirmary. He’s got to be shooting up again.”

Kat closed her eyes, dismayed. “God, Eric...”

“He’s bad off, Kat. I cornered him about it this morning, and he told me there’s some kind of lubricant leaking in his leg. It’s poisoning him, Kat, affecting his judgment. He didn’t want me to tell you about it. Kat, we’ve got to do something. If we were on board the *Daedalus* I’d say put him in stasis until someone comes to—”

“If we were still on the *Daedalus*, none of this’d be happening.” *If we were still aboard the Daedalus, Alex would be in charge. Alex would take care of it.*

Frank was coming to her because they weren’t on the *Daedalus* anymore, and Alex wasn’t in charge. Kat was. Alex was dead, and Kat was second-in-command. And all at once, she would have given that up in a heartbeat.

Frank met her gaze evenly. “I know this is hard for you. But you know I’m right. We have to do something.”

Kat sighed heavily, blinking past his shoulder to stave off the sudden sting of tears. “What do you have in mind?”

“There’s medication here that can put him into a stasis of sorts,” Frank told her. “It will keep him sedated. And there’s plenty of narcotics to help his pain...”

“No.” Kat shook her head

“Kat—”

“No, goddammit!” she snapped. “No.” Her voice faded, choked with tears, and she looked down at her lap as she felt them spill down her cheeks. *I can't do this*, she thought, the damn, whining voice of the girl Chris used to beat rising to the surface in her mind. Kat had thought it behind her forever. *Please just leave me alone. I don't want to be in charge anymore.*

“We can put him under and I can try to open up his leg surgically. If I can find whatever's leaking in him, maybe I can stop it somehow, or at least keep it from getting into his system anymore. He's not going to let me do that on his own—I've already tried. I told you, he's irrational. The pain, the drugs, the leaking chemicals—they're affecting his mind.

“This is his only chance. If we don't do it, he'll probably die. Do you understand? If the infection in his leg doesn't kill him, then he'll kill himself on morphine.”

Kat thought of the ominous, hissing sound Eric's leg kept making; the pain that would visibly cross his face. She wiped her eyes with the side of her hand and drew in a deep breath, struggling to compose herself, to force the weak and frightened woman within her away. “All right. Tell me what you have in mind.”

## Chapter Seventeen

She'd agreed to Frank's plan, but that didn't mean she had to like it. Or not feel like shit about it. Kat stood outside the door to Eric's room, hesitant and uncertain, her hand raised to knock, but unmoving. Frank didn't know she was there. She'd offered him some pretense of taking a shower first, before they put his plan into action. *I can't do this to Eric*, she thought. *Not until I'm certain. Not until I look at him again—see with my own eyes that what Frank wants to do is for the best.*

She rapped her knuckles lightly against Eric's door, but there was no reply. She knocked again, more loudly this time, but still no response. "Eric?" she called quietly through the door, sparing a quick, cautious glance over her shoulder to make sure the corridor was clear. She didn't want Frank to hear her, or come upon her in the hallway.

*Because he'll want to know what I'm doing, and he'll try to talk me out of it. His mind is made up, and he thinks mine should be, too, but it's not. I don't want to do this—any of it. I don't want to be in charge, but goddamn it, I am, and I need to be sure. I have to know this is the right thing.*

She opened Eric's door and slipped inside. The room was dark, the lights all off, except for the dim glow of fluorescents from the bathroom, spilled in a narrow path along the tiled floor. She could see him lying on his back in bed, bathed in this faint illumination. He was naked from the waist up, the sheets swathed about his hips, hiding his legs from her view. She could hear him breathing; even from across the room, she could tell her was hurting. She could hear it clearly in each ragged gasp.

*Oh, God, Eric*, she thought, moving toward him. She knelt beside the bed. His skin was glossed with a light sheen of

feverish sweat. He was trembling. She touched his face, stroking his hair back from his brow and his forehead felt flushed and ablaze. Her heart ached. *Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you tell me? Maybe we could have done something, Eric, figured out some other way...*

He jerked in start at her caress, his dark eyes flying wide. "It's me," she said softly, and he visibly relaxed, blinking at her in sleepy bewilderment.

"Hey," he murmured.

Kat smiled at him. "Hey, yourself."

He reached for her, uncurling his fingers and cradling her cheek against his palm. He propped himself up on his elbow and leaned toward her. She let his hand guide her near, and closed her eyes as he kissed her. His lips settled softly, and then parted, his tongue slipping against her own with deepening passion.

She moved from the floor, climbing into bed with him, and he rolled onto his back as she straddled his hips. She kissed him desperately, urgently, helping him fight with her clothes, jerking against the fasteners of her jumpsuit, shrugging and tugging her way free. She wanted him; she needed him—all at once, more than anything, she needed Eric because she'd made up her mind to go along with Frank's plan. She'd decided from the moment she'd heard his pained gasps for breath when she'd stepped into his room, when she'd understood at last just how bad things had become for him.

Eric's hand fell against her breast, pulling her bra down. He kissed her throat, his lips settling against the angle of her jaw, the tip of his tongue circling the pulse point of her flesh. Kat whimpered as his fingers toyed with her nipple, stroking until the sensitive nub hardened fully, and when his mouth moved from her neck, trailing toward her breast, she closed her fingers in his hair, moaning aloud. He slipped his fingers beneath the hem of her panties and between her legs, stroking against her, exploring the wet warmth of her apex. She shifted her weight and tightened her grasp against his hair as he slid first one finger and then two deep inside of her, reaching up into her sheath.

She could feel his arousal, hard and hot against her, and she reached between them, shoving the sheets aside. He was naked

beneath, and with a few quick movements, a wriggle and kick to send her flightsuit and panties tumbling to the floor, so was she. They said nothing; they didn't need to. His urgent, nearly frantic need was apparent, mirroring her own.

He caught her hips between his hands and lowered her against him, pushing himself fully into her. Kat folded herself over him, kissing him fiercely, falling into an immediate, pounding rhythm, driving him in and out of her. She closed her eyes and tried to cement this in her mind—the scent of him, the taste of him, the feel of his body, strong and warm against her. She knew what she meant to do when this was over, and that it would be a long time before she could be with Eric like this again—if he'd even want her when it was over. When she climaxed, she felt tears that had been stinging behind her eyelids spill down her cheeks. *Oh, God, Eric, please forgive me.*

He clutched at her, gasping against her mouth, his fingers tightening as her release drew his own. His entire body went rigid with the force of it, and when at last, he relaxed beneath her, she tucked her cheek against his shoulder, turning her face away so he wouldn't realize her grief.

“Please don't go,” he breathed. He sounded exhausted and in pain, and when she rolled onto the bed beside him, frightened that her weight was hurting his leg, he reached for her. “Please don't leave me, Kat. Not yet. Please.”

She managed to wipe her eyes without his notice and looked at him, tucked against his side. “I won't,” she promised. She caressed his face with her hand. He nodded once, his eyelids drooping closed.

She thought he fell asleep, and she lay in the darkness watching him, her eyes still swimming. *It's not fair*, she thought, pressing her lips together in a thin line to stave their trembling. *It's not fair, goddamn it, Eric. It shouldn't be like this.*

“I...I remember before,” he murmured suddenly. “When my Sovereign crashed, I remember that was the worst part, thinking I would die all alone.” He opened his eyes and looked at her. “I don't remember how it happened, the crash. They told me later something had malfunctioned on my navigation system. Flying in space...it's like swimming underwater sometimes. You can get turned all around, flipped upside down,

going ass-backwards and you don't even realize it. There's no horizon, like with a plane—nothing to orient you.”

He never talked about his crash, not like this; not more than in passing. Kat watched as his gaze grew distant, his eyes somewhat forlorn, and realized she was likely the only person to whom he'd ever confided.

“It didn't hurt at first,” he said. “I crashed on this piss-ant, half-forgotten little chunk of rock orbiting Saturn, but it had enough gravity that I was stuck there.” He moved his hand demonstratively between them, hovering it in the air. “Like being in a swimming pool almost. Everything was floating. Broken pieces of metal and glass, engine fluids, coolants...blood from my leg...everything in big, round globules, everywhere, all around me. Everything in my ship was cut off, only the auxiliary generator was operational, so I had this one pale blue light from somewhere over my shoulder to see by. It glittered off of everything.”

He looked at her. “Christ, I was scared. I'd never been frightened of anything in my whole life, I don't think, but I was all alone there on that rock, and I...I could see how bad off my leg was. There was so much blood. The nose of my Sovereign had struck first, and had pretty much sheared off sideways on the surface. The entire front console had collapsed, and I could look down and see the inside of my leg. My flight suit, my skin...it had all ripped away, and I...I could see meat and bone, and everything was mangled...”

His voice faded, growing momentarily choked.

“You don't have to tell me this,” she whispered, her brows lifting in gentle sympathy.

“Yes, I do.” He nodded, his brows narrowing slightly as if he summoned some inner resolve. “I've never told anybody. I've spent the last few years trying to forget...pretend it never happened.” He looked at her, pleading. “I want you to know.”

Kat kissed him lightly, sweetly. “All right, Eric.”

“The life-support system to my helmet was leaking. I knew that. I could hear it in my headset, this hissing sound, and I could see it—my oxygen leaking out in this thin, silvery little vapor trail in the cabin. It beaded on the windshield, freezing

there in a spiderweb pattern. It was so fucking cold. My auxiliary power wasn't enough to run any of the heaters. I...I couldn't stop shaking."

He was trembling again beside her, although whether from the recollection, or the fever his leg was causing, she didn't know. Kat snuggled closer to him, wanting to comfort him now, wishing she could somehow go back in time and hold the frightened young man who had nearly died on that desolate moon so many years earlier.

"All I kept thinking was that I didn't want to die," Eric said. "Not like that. Not in some piece of shit corner of space where no one would ever find me. Not all alone. That's a scary fucking thing...to be all alone."

"You're not alone, Eric. Not here, not anymore." *And you're not going to die*, Kat added in her mind. *I promise, Eric. I'm going to help you.*

He smiled at her. "I know." He leaned forward and kissed her, letting his lips linger against hers.

"How long were you out there?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Long enough to succumb to hypothermia. It was so cold, and I remember this strange feeling coming over me all of a sudden, like I just didn't give a shit anymore. I wasn't scared or hurting. I just...I remember looking at the windshield, and it was frosted thick now with ice from my airpack, and I knew I had to be about out of oxygen, but it didn't matter. I just felt tired. I fell asleep. I had this weird dream where my dad came to get me, that he was standing outside of my ship somehow in the middle of space, and he kept knocking on the glass, trying to get me to wake up. I was going to be late, he kept saying, late for my classes at West Point."

He wagged his hand in front of her, and she caught the wink of light from the bathroom against a gold band on his finger; his class ring from the military academy. "Never mind I'd already been through classes and graduated by that point," he remarked with a smile. He raised his brow slightly. "Jerica ever mention to you that she wants to go there some day? West Point, I mean."

Kat smiled. "Because you went there, yes." *Jerica wants to do everything like you do, Eric*, she thought and she blinked against the sting of new tears. *You've been a better father to her than her real one ever could be...or Alex, too...anyone, for that matter. And she's smarter than me, because she's seen it all along. She's always known.*

Eric noticed her tears, and his brows lifted. "What is it?" he asked, brushing the pad of his thumb against her cheek, catching one as it spilled. "Kat, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She ducked away from his hand.

He studied her for a long moment, his dark eyes somewhat sorrowful, and she knew he didn't believe her. Not for a moment. "Kat, I..." he whispered. "There's something else I want you to know. It's important and I...I should have told you before now, but I...I just..."

His voice faded, helpless and pained. *It's all right, Eric*, she wanted to tell him. *I know*. Instead, she rolled toward him, straddling him again, positioning herself astride his hips once more. "Make love to me, Eric," she breathed, leaning over and kissing him. "Please just make love to me again."

He cradled her face between his hands. "All right," he said, smiling and nodding against her mouth, and anything else he might have told her went unsaid as he tenderly obliged her.

## Chapter Eighteen

When Kat awoke later, she found herself alone in the bed. She dimly recalled having heard the shower running earlier, but there was nothing but silence now. She sat up, feeling groggy, tucking her hair behind her ears. Eric's flight suit from the *Daedalus* lay in a pile on the floor by his closet. His wallet, watch and West Point ring all lay, neatly arranged, on his bedside table.

"Eric?" she called. There was no reply. For a moment, she nearly forgot about Frank and his plan, but when she glanced at Eric's watch and realized the time, her heart seized with sudden, dismayed recollection.

"Shit!" She crawled out of bed, retrieving her own clothes from the floor and hurriedly redressing. She had wanted to draw Jerica aside before they put Frank's idea into action, to explain what they were going to do to Eric and why, so that the little girl wouldn't be frightened. Now, she realized, there probably wouldn't be time. "Shit!"

She left the room and rushed down the corridor, almost running headlong into Frank as he ducked out of a neighboring storeroom.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked, his voice low and sharp, his brows narrowed. He grabbed hold of her elbow and she frowned, flapping him loose.

"I fell asleep."

"Asleep?" His eyes flew wide and incredulous.

"Yes, Frank, asleep," Kat hissed, balling her fists. "That's what people do when they're exhausted—when it feels like their whole goddamn world is crashing in on them. They fall asleep. And then when they wake up, they're better."

His expression softened, growing sheepish and somewhat ashamed. “I’m sorry. I know this is hard for you. Do you think it’s easy for me?”

He looked pained, genuinely distraught, and Kat sighed. “No, Frank. I know it’s not.”

“I’m trying to help Eric,” Frank said.

“I know.”

“He’s in the kitchen.” Frank nodded down the hall. “If we’re going to do this, then we need to now.” He pulled something out of his pant pocket and offered it to her—a capped syringe. When she didn’t immediately reach for it, his brows raised. “Kat, we’ve talked about this. I thought we agreed—”

“We did.” Kat snatched the syringe out of his hand.

“It’s what’s best, Kat. He’s hurting. He’s in bad shape and he—”

“I know, Frank,” she snapped, shoving past him and tromping down the corridor.

“Remember our plan,” Frank said.

*It’s your goddamn plan, Frank, not ours,* she thought, frowning. *I’m just going along with it because it’s what’s best for Eric. God, please, it has to be.*

She found Eric in the kitchen. He was leaning heavily—too heavily—against the metal cabinets, watching coffee drip down into a small glass pot.

“Hey,” she said, and he turned, smiling at her.

“Hey, yourself.” He was pale, nearly ashen, and his normally handsome features were gaunt and haggard. There were deep, cruel shadows around his eyes. He rested most of his weight on his right leg and hip.

“How are you?” she asked, but it was an unnecessary question.

“I’m okay. How about you?”

She walked over to him, ran her fingers through his tousled hair. “Much better.”

His smile was weary, fragile. She leaned forward. “Oh, Eric,” she whispered.

She kissed his mouth gently. He kissed her back, with no hesitation.

“I love you, Kat.” He ran his hands up her back, tangling them in her hair.

She felt tears well in her eyes at this, and she struggled to contain them. “I love you, too, Eric.” *More than anything, Eric, please you have to believe me.*

She forced herself to pull away. The longer she stood against him, the weaker her resolve became.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, and she walked over to the large, industrial refrigerator. She opened it and pulled out a small container of flour, and a small carton of liquefied eggs. “I thought I might make some pancakes.”

“Man, I haven’t had pancakes in forever.” Eric folded his arms across his chest and watched her hunt for a mixing bowl. “I don’t think since I was a kid. I’m not much of a cook on my own. Open a can of something and heat in the microwave—that’s my idea of dinner.”

Kat didn’t look at him as she measured flour into the bowl. She blinked against the sting of tears in her eyes.

“My mom used to make pancakes for me and my brother,” Eric remarked. “She’d put little blueberries or slices of apples in them. They always tasted best in the winter, on a snow day, when we’d get to stay home from school.”

Kat couldn’t look at him. She began to feel vaguely nauseous. She made herself to turn around, to put a smile and force a note of nonchalant good cheer into her voice. “Damn. Would you do me a favor and grab the milk out of the fridge? I forgot to grab it.”

“Sure,” he said, and when he moved, she could see his limp clearly, and how it hurt him to put weight on the leg. She could hear the hiss of the mechanics in his hinges and lifts. She wanted to warn him, to cry out, protect him, but that sound haunted her, silenced her.

He walked toward the refrigerator. “Does the name David McDonald ring a bell to you?” he said, turning to look at her. His expression had changed, his eyes growing troubled.

Puzzled, Kat shook her head, but then remembered. “Wait a minute. Yeah. *Colonel* David McDonald? He’s a politician or something, isn’t he?”

At the word *Colonel*, something in Eric’s face had shifted. “Not a politician. He’s the head of Legion.”

“Legion?” Again, it took Kat a moment. She recalled a snippet from her conversation with Trina, less than an hour before the *Daedalus* had exploded. “They’re a militia group, aren’t they? The ones that tried to secede Texas? Trina told me they’ve been blowing up federal buildings back at home while we were all still in cryostasis.”

“Yeah, I read that on the news feed before the crash.” Eric opened the refrigerator door. She had no accounting for the troubled look on his face, the way his brows started to narrow. “Where’s Frank?”

“He’s...uh, around, I’m sure.” As she spoke, she saw Frank duck through the doorway, creeping into the room. She cut her eyes back toward the mixing bowl before Eric noticed her attention and followed her gaze.

“I need to talk to you later on, then, when he’s not,” Eric said, propping the refrigerator door open against his hip, an odd note in his voice. “In private, just the two of us. Maybe after breakfast?”

She looked at him. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head, reaching for the milk. “I mean, probably nothing. I saw something today, this morning, a mark on his back. It looked familiar at the time, though I couldn’t quite place it, but then I saw a book on his—”

Frank grabbed him from behind.

Startled, Eric dropped the milk, and it fell to the floor, splashing across his boots and the tiles.

“Kat!” Frank yelled. Eric struggled with him, fighting.

Kat slipped the hypodermic Frank had prepared out of her jumpsuit pocket and pulled the little plastic cap off the needle.

Eric saw the syringe and began to fight harder with Frank. “What are you doing? Kat! No! No, no, goddammit, let go of me!”

He managed to pull his arm away from Frank and accidentally hit Kat, knocking the syringe out of her hand.

“Goddammit, Kat!” Frank yelled.

Kat dropped down on her hands and knees and tried to reach the needle. It had fallen underneath a cabinet, and it was a tight squeeze. She looked up and saw Frank ball his hand into a fist and slam it into Eric’s leg. Eric twisted, screaming, and immediately quit fighting. He slumped, limp, in Frank’s arms.

“Eric!” Kat cried.

“Get the needle, Kat!” Frank was red in the face, breathing hard from the struggle with Eric.

Her fingers brushed against it and she grabbed it.

Frank twisted Eric’s arm and forced it down across the countertop. “Do it!”

Eric tried to pull his arm away. “Kat, no!” He shook his head. “Please don’t do this—whatever he’s told you, don’t—”

Frank clapped his hand over Eric’s mouth, muffling him. Kat stuck the needle in his arm, deep into the meat of his muscle like Frank had instructed, and depressed the plunger. She glanced at his face, and that was a mistake. His eyes were wide and dismayed, screaming wordlessly at her, *What are you doing?*

She pulled the needle out and staggered away, horrified and disgusted. It slipped out of her fingers and bounced off the floor.

Frank let Eric go and he staggered against a nearby countertop. Frank reached for him, but Eric shrugged him away. “Don’t...touch me...” he seethed. He directed his words to Frank, but kept his eyes pinned on Kat, hurt and bewildered.

“Eric, I...” Kat began, but she didn’t know what to say.

The drug worked fast, and he swayed, collapsing clumsily to his knees. Frank knelt beside him, and again, Eric tried to push him away.

“Don’t touch me,” he groaned, his voice breathless and slurred. “You...you son of a bitch...” He crumpled forward, slumping against Frank’s chest. Kat watched as Frank gently lifted the younger man in his arms. Eric moaned lightly.

“Yes, I know,” Frank said to him, quietly, soothingly, turning his face down toward Eric’s. “I know that hurts.”

Kat followed Frank as he carried Eric to the infirmary. She felt ashamed of herself for tricking Eric, for what they were about to do to him.

*It’s not too late, she told herself. It’s not too late to stop it. You’re still in charge. Frank will listen to you. Say something. Stop it now, Kat.*

But the frightened girl inside made her keep her mouth shut, pressing her lips together, biting down against them, the way she would when she tried to avoid rousing Chris’ violent anger.

*It is too late. I’ve done everything wrong. I don’t want to be in charge. Frank is right...this has to be what’s best for Eric...*

She followed Frank into a small room off the infirmary. It was bare except for a small hospital cot. Frank laid Eric down and immediately began to cinch restraining straps around his wrists and ankles.

“What are you doing?” Kat said, dismayed. “No, Frank, come on—”

“It’s to protect him, and us. You saw how violent he got. He hit you. What if he wakes up and decides to go after Jerica?”

Kat blinked at him. “Eric wouldn’t do that. He’d never hurt Jerica.”

“You don’t know that, Kat,” Frank told her grimly. “You don’t know him now. He’s in pain and he’s an addict—he’s not the man you knew. He’s totally irrational.”

She fell silent, clutching her hands together, rubbing her fingers, pushing against her knuckles. “Please don’t hurt him.”

Frank turned to her, and his brows lifted in pity. “I’m not going to hurt him.” He walked over to her and pressed his hand gently against her cheek. “I’m a doctor, Kat. I want to *help* him. This is so hard for you. I know. But we’re doing the right thing. Please believe me. You can trust me.”

He stroked her hair. “Let me give you a mild sedative. Something to calm your nerves and I’ll finish up here. I’ll take care of everything.”

“No,” she said. “No, I’m in charge, and I...”

“It’s okay. Let me take care of it.”

She nodded wordlessly, and let him lead her back into the infirmary. She watched him prepare the syringe. “Roll your sleeve up, Kat,” he told her.

She did, fumbling with her cuff button.

“Now I want you to go straight to your room and relax.” He wagged his finger at her, feigning severity. “What is it you told me earlier? That’s what people do when they’re exhausted—when it feels like their whole goddamn world is crashing in on them. They fall asleep. And then when they wake up, they’re better.”

Kat knew that if she slept for the next hundred years, she wouldn’t wake up any better. But at least it would dull her pain away, and help her forget what she’d done. “Okay.”

“Smile,” Frank told her.

She cracked a small grin that felt flat and insincere, but it seemed to appease him.

She didn’t even wince when he stuck her with the needle.

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She found Jerica in the TV room. The little girl lay snuggled under a blanket on one of the couches, watching a movie on the enormous TV screen.

“Scoot over,” Kat said, wriggling under the covers with her.

Jerica slid her body over to make room. When Kat was situated, Jerica turned onto her side and rested her head just above her mother’s left breast.

“Pup, I gotta talk to you for a sec.” Kat kissed the top of Jerica’s head. She put her arm around her daughter’s narrow, delicate shoulders.

“You and Frank are going to keep Eric drugged up in the infirmary because of his leg,” Jerica said without even looking away from the movie. “I know. Frank talked to me about it earlier. He wanted to know if I thought it was a good idea or not.”

Kat blinked, startled. “What did you say?”

“I said I thought it was. Otherwise, Eric’d keep trying to pretend nothing was wrong. He’d keep sneaking morphine. He needs to be off his leg, Mommy. It was only making things worse.”

Kat followed Jerica’s steady, unflinching gaze. People were screaming on the TV, and things were exploding in great, fat fire balls.

“This is what’s best for Eric.” Jerica shifted slightly and snuggled closer to Kat. “I think so, anyhow. So does Frank. So will you, you’ll see.”

Kat was quiet. She closed her eyes and tried to think of how to go to sleep. She wondered if she could hibernate, like a bear, and sleep for months.

## Chapter Nineteen

Two days later, Kat had not budged from her bed. She stayed there all day and all night.

Frank explained to Jerica that she was suffering from shock and exhaustion. “She just needs some time,” he told her, resting his palm against the cap of Jerica’s head in a kind, somewhat fatherly gesture. “This is all been very shocking to her.”

Jerica still found it unsettling and a bit creepy.

Two nights after Eric had been sedated, Jerica peeked around the corner into Frank’s room. It was late, and he had snuggled her under her covers several hours ago. He had left the bathroom light on, and the door open slightly, as per her instructions, but Jerica had been unable to sleep anyway.

She’d tiptoed down the corridor, hesitating outside of Frank’s doorway. She was uncertain about turning to Frank for comfort. She’d always gone to her mom before, or Eric. She’d almost gone down to sit in the infirmary with Eric. She thought maybe she could draw some comfort simply from his presence, but in the end, the thought of the dark, cool, silent infirmary, and Eric laying there as still and quiet as a corpse was too creepy.

He was sitting with his back to her at a small table. His shirt was off, draped across his chair. She sniffled quietly, and he glanced behind him, startled. “Jerica, hey.”

He turned around in the seat to face her. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to straighten it. “What’re you doing up?” His voice was low and gentle.

She shrugged uncertainly, pressed against the doorway.

“Come here,” he said and he held his hand out to her.

She shuffled over to him, twisting her fingers in her tousled yellow curls.

Frank touched her shoulder and pushed her hair back. “You okay, punkin’?”

Jerica nodded.

“You scared?”

“A little,” she said, and she was certain he would laugh at her. The little genius scared of the dark.

But Frank didn’t laugh. He hoisted her onto his lap, put his arm around her narrow shoulders and drew her close. “You don’t have to be scared. Everything’s going to be just fine.”

“I don’t want bad things to happen to my mommy,” she whispered. “Or Eric.”

“Nothing will.” He gave her a squeeze. “I promise, El. I’m going to take care of you.”

She closed her eyes and leaned against Frank’s chest. “Who’s El?”

“Huh?”

“El. You’ve called me that twice now. Once, down when the water tank busted, and just now.”

“I...I’m sorry,” he said, and there was something very sad in his voice that made her look up at him. “It just slipped out.”

“Who is she?” Jerica asked, and she happened to catch a glimpse of the tabletop over his shoulder.

Frank had spread the contents of his billfold out: small, battered wallet-cropped photos. Pictures of a beautiful dark-haired woman, another of an Indian woman, and one of a little girl with black hair and bright, piercing blue eyes.

“Here.” Frank moved, twisting at the waist and taking one of the photographs. He handed it to her, and she studied it for a long moment, running her fingertips across the worn, curling edges. “Elaina. She’s my daughter. She’d be your age now. She was four there.”

Jerica looked at him, puzzled.

“She died,” Frank told her. “Two years ago. She was very sick, and there was nothing anyone could do for her.”

“She was very beautiful.” Jerica could plainly see the look of stunned, raw pain in his face. His eyes were distant, staring at the tiled floor.

“Sometimes I think she was the whole world,” Frank said. “I loved her so much. It felt like someone had just...cut my heart out.”

“I’m sorry, Frank.”

Frank shook his head slightly as if emerging from a reverie and smiled. “No, don’t be silly, Jerica. It’s nothing for you to be sorry for.”

“Is this your wife?” Jerica asked, pointing to the woman in the other picture.

Frank nodded. “Yes. That’s Lauren. We’re divorced now. Do you know what that means?”

“Yes. My mommy and daddy got divorced a long time ago.”

Frank smiled. “Well, anyway, that’s how I ended up doing this. Deep space travel. I didn’t have anything waiting for me at home but memories, and I...” His voice faltered and broke off. “It was cheaper than therapy,” he finished, winking at her.

Jerica smiled politely. She knew Frank was only trying to make a joke so that she wouldn’t be upset.

“You remind me a lot of El. I guess that’s why I slip up and call you that. I’ll try to be more careful.”

“That’s okay.” Jerica put her arms around his neck because he looked like he needed it. “I don’t mind.”

As she hugged him, she noticed a mark on his back, just slightly down on his shoulder, a figure eight rolled over onto its side, like a scar. “What happened here?” she asked, touching the raised curve of flesh curiously.

“What?”

“This mark, here.”

“It means infinity,” Frank said.

“Is it a scar?” Jerica frowned. “It looks like it was burned.”

“It was. It was a brand.”

“Did it hurt?”

“A little.” Jerica looked at him, her eyes wide and he laughed. “It’s all right. I wanted it done. It was a gift of sorts, from a friend.”

He tapped the photo of the Indian woman. She was plain looking, and her eyes were small and closely set. Jerica thought she resembled a cartoon rat; there was something dark and not quite right about her.

“She did that to you?” Jerica asked, and Frank nodded. “Who is she?”

“Her name is Reba Crowe.”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

Frank chuckled. “I guess you could say that, sure.”

“Really?” Jerica asked, and she frowned. “She looks scary.”

Frank laughed. “No, she’s not scary, Jerica. She’s really very smart. She knows a lot, about a lot. You’d like her. You two’d get along great.”

“You think?”

Frank nodded. “Oh, sure. Maybe you’ll get to meet her some day.” He stood, lifting Jerica easily into his arms. “I think I’ve spilled enough guts for one night, huh? Besides, it’s time for you to go to bed.”

“I’m not tired,” Jerica said, but she was stifling a yawn with the back of her hand.

“No, not at all,” Frank agreed, and Jerica giggled. She rested her head against him, and let him carry her back to her room.

## Chapter Twenty

Kat waited four days before going to see Eric. She spent that time in her room for the most part, curled up in bed.

She listened carefully. She could hear Jerica and Frank sometimes, their voices drifting up the corridors from the kitchen or the infirmary or the TV room. She didn't pay attention to the words. There didn't seem to be any discernible, actually. Just gentle, rhythmic, hollow sounds.

Sometimes she could hear Jerica laughing, high, shrill, squealing, and the rapid thump-thump-*thump* of her feet as she scurried up and down the hallways, playing. She didn't come in to sleep with Kat anymore.

Frank brought her in plates of food, but Kat had no appetite. She didn't really feel like eating. She picked at it and forced most of the meals down.

She didn't miss the careful, guarded way Frank looked at her.

She was afraid of them talking. She was afraid he and Jerica would decide to drug her up, too.

After four days, she got out of bed. Her body had become stiff, sore and cramped. She knew she had to smell, and took a long shower, despite the water situation. She brushed her hair and dressed in clean clothes. She went down the hall, walking softly, resting her weight on the balls of her feet. She didn't want Frank or Jerica to hear her.

The infirmary was empty, and she crept into the adjoining room. Eric appeared to be sleeping. There were several IVs hooked up to him, dripping mysterious clear liquids into him.

He looked so peaceful.

Kat reached out and took his hand. His fingers were unresponsive, but very soft and warm. “Eric,” she whispered, squeezing his hand. She touched his face. “Eric, can you hear me?”

His fingers tightened slightly, pressing against hers. His eyes opened half-mast, and he blinked at her sleepily, dazed. “Kat,” he murmured. His voice seemed to come from miles away. He closed his eyes again.

“Eric, how...how are you...?” she said, and suddenly her eyes burned. She felt tears coming, swelling into fat beads, and starting to drip down her cheeks. She reached up and rubbed at them, ashamed, guilty, embarrassed and lonely.

“How were your pancakes?” he asked in an exhausted, stoned voice.

“Please don’t hate me, Eric. I’m sorry. I thought...I thought I was doing the right thing...”

His eyes opened. He looked at her. “Please...” He tugged weakly against the wrist restraints. “Please, Kat...you can’t keep me here...like this...”

“Eric, no, no, you have to. You’re in so much pain, and—”

“No,” Eric said, his voice stronger. “No, Kat. I can...I can deal with the pain. I’ve been through worse...much worse...and you and Jerica...you can’t be alone with him...you can’t...”

“What?” Kat leaned forward. “What do you mean, Eric?”

He closed his eyes and was so quiet, she thought he had drifted back to sleep.

“Kat,” he murmured, semiconscious. “Kat...he’ll hurt you...he’ll...”

“Who will? Frank?”

Eric nodded once, not opening his eyes.

“Eric, no, Frank’s not going to hurt us.” She stroked his hair. “It’s okay. Frank’s a good man. He’s our friend. I know it must not seem like that to you, but he’s worried about you. He wants to help you. That’s why he—”

“You...you don’t...” Eric gasped, and she could tell he was struggling to remain conscious. “You don’t know...what he is...what he does...he’s not...”

His voice faded off, and he lay still and silent, asleep again.

Kat felt his fingers relax and go limp in hers.

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She found Jerica and Frank in the TV room. They were watching a movie and sharing a huge bowl of popcorn.

Jerica saw her coming, and rushed over to her. She leaped up into Kat’s arms and hugged her. “Mommy!” she cried with a grin. “Mommy! You’re okay now!”

“I’m fine, pup,” Kat said, and Jerica kissed her lips. Her small mouth tasted salty from the popcorn. “I’m just fine now.”

Jerica’s long golden hair was piled up into a ponytail on top of her head. “This is pretty.” Kat tugged on it playfully.

Jerica giggled. “Frank did it.”

“He did?”

Jerica nodded. “Are you gonna be better?” she asked, her pretty, porcelain-doll features pinched with stern, parental concern. “I was worried about you.”

“Positively. I promise.”

“Cross your heart?” Jerica still didn’t look convinced.

“Of course.” Kat kissed the tip of Jerica’s nose. “I love you, pup.”

She sat on the couch opposite where Frank was stretched out. Jerica plopped down next to her, wiggling happily. “How is Eric?” Kat asked.

Frank smiled. “He’s just fine. The drugs have slowed his systems down. It should keep the stuff that’s leaking from spreading so fast through his body. His swelling has slowed tremendously, and he’s resting comfortably.”

“When are you going to do the surgery?”

He acted like he was absorbed in the television. “Soon. Maybe tomorrow.”

*What are you waiting for?* Kat wanted to ask. She pressed her lips together. She didn't know what Eric had meant when he'd said Frank would hurt them.

*You don't know...what he is...what he does...he's not...*

*What?* she wondered. *He's not what?*

"I'd like to see him," Kat said and Frank cut her a sideways glance.

"Ah, Kat, I don't know if that's such a great idea right now. This is a critical time. I don't want to take a chance of upsetting him. It'd just make things worse. Maybe after the surgery, a few days, when I can be sure he's going to be okay. I promise you can see him then. As much as you want."

"Me, too?" Jerica asked.

"Of course, Jerica," Frank said. "I know how much you both care for him."

This seemed satisfactory to Jerica, and she tucked her legs underneath her like some sort of small egret. "Quit hogging the popcorn, Frank!"

He handed her the bowl. It was almost twice again as wide as her lap.

"Want some, Mommy?" Jerica offered the bowl.

"Sure." Kat glanced over at Frank, but he was lost in the movie again, his gaze riveted away from her. "I'm starving."

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They stayed up late. In Kat's absence, Jerica and Frank had uncovered a horde of games that had been put into storage for the colonists. After they grew bored with the movie, Frank produced a deck of cards and they all sat around the coffee table, munching popcorn and laughing while they played spades. Jerica grew sleepy the longer they played, and finally Kat called it quits so that they could all turn in.

"Oh, Mom!" Jerica protested, but it was just for the principle of the whole thing. She was tired and wanted to go to bed.

“You want to sleep in with me?” Kat stood, holding out her hand.

“No, I have my own room now,” Jerica replied primly, hopping to her feet. “I’m not a baby, you know.”

“No, of course not,” Kat said. “Lead the way.”

Frank walked with them to Jerica’s room, and stood in the doorway while Kat tucked the little girl in. “Good night, pup,” Kat told her and kissed her. “Sweet dreams.”

“You, too, Mommy. I love you.”

Kat walked with Frank to his room, only a few doors down the corridor.

“This is my stop,” Frank said with a smile.

Kat paused for a moment. “Thanks for looking out for Jerica, Frank. These past few days, I mean...I...”

“I didn’t mind. She’s a great kid.”

*You don’t know...what he is...what he does...he’s not...*

Kat studied Frank’s face for a moment before walking away. *What were you trying to tell me, Eric?*

She didn’t go straight to her room. She waited until the light under Frank’s door went out and then tiptoed up the hallway, toward the command center.

To her great surprise, she found all of the monitors operational, and all of the surveillance cameras apparently functioning. There were bird’s-eye vantages of all different areas of the compound. She observed the empty TV room, and Jerica’s darkened bedroom. She could see the little girl, curled up in her bed, her hand in her hair, snoozing. In another, she saw Frank lying on his back in bed, his eyes closed. In other monitors she saw the darkened and empty kitchen, the infirmary and the small room where Eric lay in his induced coma. She also saw her room, and her messy, empty bed.

Someone had pulled a chair up close to the monitors, like they’d had a seat and just observed.

She found Eric’s room on one of the screens. There was some kind of recording device underneath the screen, and Kat examined it for a few minutes before figuring out how the “rewind” worked.

She stopped it after a moment. She saw herself, lying on Eric's bed. Eric was next to her, propped on his elbow. There was no sound, but Kat watched as Eric leaned over and kissed her. She watched as in the video, she spread her fingers in his hair and pulled him down toward her.

Kat's hand shot out and she slapped the "stop" button. The monitor obediently jumped back to its current view of the empty bedroom.

"What the fuck...?" She could have sworn Eric had told her on their first day that none of that kind of stuff was hooked up. Only the most primary computer functions were supposed to be active upon their arrival. It was to have been Doc's job to bring everything else, including the security system, online. And it had never been online before, when she and Frank had been examining the *Daedalus*' black box.

*Frank must have brought them online.* She couldn't imagine Jerica doing it, even if the child had been able. *Why would she want to?*

*But then again, why would Frank?*

Again, her mind turned to Eric, and the delirious warning he'd offered. *You don't know...what he is...what he does...he's not...*

*There's four people in this compound,* she thought. *Why in the hell would you want to spy on four people?*

## Chapter Twenty-One

The next day, Kat woke up and dressed without showering. She didn't pull her boots on. She walked down the hall in her bare feet. Her footsteps were quiet, although she wasn't really trying to be discreet. She decided if Frank was up and about, if he cross-examined her, she would be up front and honest with him. *And then tell him to go to hell.*

She had tossed and turned most of the night, too troubled to sleep. The surveillance cameras bothered her. The images of her and Eric making love bothered her.

*He was watching us, she thought, the idea making her shiver. Frank sat there in the dark and watched us. He recorded it so he could watch it over and over again.*

*You don't know...what he is...what he does...he'll hurt you.*

What did Eric know about Frank that she didn't? He'd tried to tell her; the morning that they'd tricked him, in the kitchen as he'd reached for the milk, he'd started to tell her. *I saw something today, this morning, a mark on his back...*

*What were you trying to tell me, Eric? And why the hell didn't I listen?*

The infirmary was dark and quiet. The tiled floor was cold against the soles of her feet. She went into the small adjoining room. She hesitated, lingering in the doorway. She watched Eric sleeping.

His face was turned toward the doorway, his expression peaceful and serene. Kat walked over to the bed. She reached down and touched his hand, tracing along his fingers. "What were you trying to tell me?" she whispered.

Her eyes flew wide and she abruptly jerked her hand away. It fluttered up to her breast like a small dove with a broken wing.

Eric's skin was cold.

*Oh, my God.*

"Eric?" Kat whispered.

She pressed her forefingers against the side of his neck.

*Oh, my God.*

His throat was cool. There was no pulse. She could see that he wasn't breathing.

"Oh, my God!" Kat sucked in a whistling mouthful of air. She jerked her hand away from him. She held it suspended in midair, out in front of her and floundered back away from the bed. She could hear herself gasping for breath, wheezing, nearly hyperventilating. "Eric...oh...!"

She thought of making love to him, the incredible warmth of his body against hers, the press of his breath against her face, the sound of his voice as he'd gasped her name over and over with mounting insistence.

She thought of his kiss, his touch, his smile; that day on the Illinois tarmac so long ago, when she had first fallen in love with him, when he had been her hero for the first in a long series of countless times.

Her shoulders hit the doorframe, and she stumbled. She was making strange mewling, hiccupping sounds. Her knees folded and her legs buckled underneath her. Her spine slid down the wall until her ass met the floor.

She thought of him telling her about crashing his Sovereign fighter, of how frightened he had been in the ruins of his spacecraft. *All I kept thinking was that I didn't want to die. Not like that. Not in some piece of shit corner of space where no one would ever find me. Not all alone. That's a scary fucking thing...to be all alone.*

"Oh, God," she whispered, because that's exactly what had happened. Eric had died alone in the infirmary, tucked in the corner of some wretched compound in some piece of shit corner of space where no one would ever find them. *And it's all my fault...!*

She didn't cry. She couldn't breathe. Her chest hurt, deep down beneath her breast. Her throat tightened and constricted.

"Mommy?"

Jerica stood in the door to the infirmary. Her hair was fuzzy and disheveled, and her eyes were swollen and sleepy.

"Jerica, get out of here," Kat gasped at her.

"Mommy, what is it?" Jerica walked in, bare-legged and bare-footed. "Is it...is it Eric?"

She started to move past Kat, to go to him but Kat grabbed her small wrists. "Jerica, no."

Jerica tried to pull away. "Stop it, let me go."

Kat held her easily. "You can't go in there, pup, let me explain...you just—"

"Let me go!" Jerica screeched, struggling violently. Kat realized that the girl understood what had happened. "Let me go, Mommy, let me go! Let me go!"

Kat released her, and Jerica stumbled. Her cheeks were bright with color, and her eyes glistened moistly. She brushed by Kat and scurried over to Eric's bedside.

Kat turned her face down to the floor. She touched her bottom lip with her fingers.

"Eric?" she heard Jerica say, so quietly and tenderly it nearly broke her heart. She watched Jerica take his hand, either oblivious to or unafraid of the coldness of his skin.

"It's okay." Jerica reached up through the bars around the bed and touched his face. Her tiny fingers traced along his brow, his eyelids, the slope of his nose. She touched his mouth, and ran her fingertip along the arch of his cheek. She pushed his hair off of his forehead. "It's okay, Eric."

"Jerica... Pup, Eric is...he's..."

"No," Jerica said calmly. "He's okay. He's just sleeping."

Kat slowly got to her feet. She felt light-headed. She swayed, and struggled to focus on her land legs. She didn't want to go near Eric again. She thought it would shatter her heart to look at him.

She made herself walk toward her daughter. “He’s dead, pup,” she whispered, and then she thought for sure she would cry. But there was nothing.

“No, he’s not. He’s just sleeping. He’s okay.”

“He’s not sleeping, pup.”

“Yes, he is!” Jerica jerked away from her, her eyes flashing angrily. “He’s not dead, he’s sleeping! I told him I wouldn’t let anything happen to him. He’s my friend.”

“I know, Jerica,” Kat said. “He’s my friend, too, and I love him as much as—”

“No, you don’t!” Jerica’s hands were balled into angry fists. She glared up at Kat, and she was suddenly the little woman again, with her ramrod-straight spine and her furious, adult eyes. “You let this happen to him! You don’t love him! Look what you’ve done to him!”

Kat drew back, hurt.

*But there’s more than that, isn’t there?* a hateful, scolding part of her mind—Chris’s voice within her—hissed. *You stupid bitch, you did let this happen to him—and you know it. Frank may have done the dirty work, but you didn’t stop it. You’re in charge. You had the power to prevent this, to take control, but it’s too late now.*

“Jerica, please don’t say that...I...”

Jerica shoved past her, fleeing the infirmary, her voice choked with loud, distraught tears. “Leave me alone! I hate you! Leave me alone!”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Frank sat in front the little monitors, watching them. It was dark in the command center except for the soft blue glow of the screens, which bathed his face in dim, eerie light.

*You don't know...what he is...what he does.* Eric's words echoed in her mind. *He'll hurt you.*

"Frank."

He looked over at her. His expression was unreadable; she could have sworn he was bored.

"Frank, Eric's dead."

He just kept looking at her in that blank, dull, what-the-fuck-do-you-want way. It made her nervous, and she took a hedging step back.

"I know he's dead, Kat. I killed him."

Kat blinked at him. Her breath drew abruptly still and she struggled to find her voice. *I misheard him, that's all*, she thought. "I...I'm sorry...?"

"I said I killed him, Kat." Frank leaned forward and crossed his arms in his lap. "I gave him an overdose of morphine."

She thought she was going to faint, or throw up. She couldn't believe what he'd just said. Her legs shook and weakened under her. She caught herself on the back of the closest chair. It swung in her grip and she stumbled again. She fell to her knees.

Eric's words resounded in her mind—*You don't know...what he is...what he does...he'll hurt you*—and she looked around quickly, frantically for some sort of escape. She hadn't closed the command center door behind her. She could bolt for it, but

Frank was less than three feet away. She couldn't be sure that she could beat him.

"Here, I'll show you." Frank held his hand out to her, his wrist cocked. She saw he was holding some kind of remote control.

All of the screens jumped in unison and flashed to show the same scene. It was the room where Eric lay, prone in bed. She saw Frank standing next to the bed, his hands in his pockets.

She watched Eric's head roll toward Frank.

"Now listen closely," Frank said. There was something in his voice that was nearly gleeful. "The sound quality is for shit, but you can make it out."

"Frank..." Kat heard Eric say, his voice low and clouded with static.

"How are you feeling, Lieutenant Nagel?" Frank asked, sounding cheerful.

Eric tried to raise his arms, but the restraining straps held him securely.

On the screen, Frank chuckled. "Whoah, that was effective, wasn't it? Might as well lie still. You aren't going anywhere."

"I know you," Eric said, surprisingly lucid. "That mark on your back...that brand...I...I know what you are..."

"Yeah, well, I'm really fucking worried, can't you tell, Lieutenant?" Frank reached down and grasped Eric firmly by the chin, forcing his head back.

"You...you killed Doc..."

Frank laughed. "I did. I cut his goddamn gook throat wide open—right after I set thermal charges in the cargo bay of the ship."

Kat swung toward Frank, her mouth dropped in a shocked, disbelieving gape. "You..." she whispered. "Alex and I did hear an explosion. You blew up the ship."

"Wuh...why...?" Eric asked on screen, taking the words out of Kat's lips.

“Because there was no other way to get this,” Frank said to Kat, spreading his arms wide. “All of this, the entire colony of X-1226. Unspoiled, undisturbed—a whole new world.”

She watched as Frank delivered Eric’s lethal injection. He had pumped the morphine into one of the many IV tubes sticking out of Eric. She watched Eric struggle against the restraints that held him firmly. She saw the unmistakable expression of terror on his face as Frank administered the morphine.

“No!” Eric cried. “No, no, God...don’t...”

Frank leaned over the bed rails again. Eric tried to turn his face away, but Frank seized him roughly by the hair and forced his head back.

“Don’t worry, Eric. I’ll take good care of Kat and Jerica in your absence.”

“You son of a bitch...” Eric seethed. “You son of a bitch...don’t you fucking touch them...”

And then the morphine had smashed into his brain.

His voice immediately faded as he swooned, his mind caving to the effects of the drug. His struggles fell still, his entire body relaxing against the restraints. She could hear his breathing slowing, growing heavier and weaker with each ragged, rhythmic draw.

“Eric,” she whispered helplessly, and she placed her hand on the nearest screen as if she hoped somehow to reach back through time and touch him, comfort him.

In the video, Frank kept his hand across Eric’s forehead as if to console, murmuring in a low, taunting voice. “Take it, boy. That’s it. Take it all.”

Eric was finally still. His head rolled to one side, and he looked just as he had when Kat had discovered him.

“I’m sorry, Kat.” Frank pivoted in his chair toward her and started to rise to his feet. “I would have let him live, I really would have, but he—”

Kat grabbed the nearest terminal keyboard and smashed it into the side of Frank’s face. He staggered sideways, crashing into the security monitors and then Kat whirled. She moved instinctively, scrambling for the door, but it slid shut in her face.

She heard the audible whine of the laser locking mechanisms. She whirled to face Frank, frightened, and pressed herself against the door.

“Amazing little things, these computer remotes,” he remarked, wagging the little control at her. “Especially once I figured out everything I could hook up to it. Doors, cameras...you name it. I guess I’ve always had a knack for this shit, though. Did I forget to stick that on my resume?”

He touched his fingertips gingerly against his temple, where the keyboard had gouged blood. He winced slightly and looked at Kat. “You didn’t have to do that. I’m not going to hurt you, Kat. You or Jerica.”

“What do you want from us?” Her main avenue of escape was gone; she cut her gaze around the dimly lit room, searching for any other exit, anything else she could use as a weapon.

“Everything,” he said. “I want it all, Kat. Only...you don’t know what that is, do you? You don’t even know what you’ve got.”

He laughed. “Right here, this place, this compound—you, me and Jerica. It’s the greatest thing in the world. I mean, can you imagine...no, no, of course you can’t...your heart ripped out of you, thrown on the table so you can watch it wriggle and dance and squirm...”

He began to pace, muttering and laughing, his fingers toying with the bloodied place on his forehead. Kat stared at him in blank fright and disbelief. *He’s crazy. Oh, my God, I’m locked in here with a crazy person.*

“I held my baby girl’s hand and she died!” Frank whirled to her, screaming, making her shrink back in terror. “Why? I’m a doctor, for Christ’s sake! It was my responsibility, my job...and I let her slip away...I...”

He fell silent. He lowered his head, and his shoulders slumped in toward his chest. For a moment, Kat thought he was weeping.

“Frank...?”

He raised his head, and she saw he was laughing, silently, nearly breathlessly.

“I can have it all again,” he said. “A goddamn bona fide family. All for me. I can see it in Jerica’s eyes. Ah, sweet Jesus, such a beautiful, fucking brilliant piece of genetic engineering is that kid, Kat. My friends are gonna love her.”

“Your friends?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” He started to unbutton the front of his flight suit. “We’re Legion. Maybe you’ve heard of us.”

A leaden chill shuddered through her as again, she remembered the day the *Daedalus* had exploded; she had been talking to Trina, aboard the sister ship, *Icarus*.

*That militia group, Legion’s been bombing government buildings again. They blew up federal depositories in six states. Killed several hundred people. Really gruesome.*

Frank pulled his arm out of his sleeve and turned around slightly so she could see an odd mark on his back. She remembered the morning they’d tricked Eric, he had tried to tell her something about it. *I saw something today, this morning, a mark on his back...*

And then, just now on the recording, she’d heard Eric mention it again. *That brand...I...I know what you are...*

*Oh, God.*

“We’re branded with the mark of infinity,” Frank said. “Our fight will never be over until democracy flourishes again.”

He turned to her. “And this is where it will happen. X-1226. Fuck American colonists...fuck an American stellar empire. Legion is going to conquer and control the Number Nine platform, and then we’re going to establish our own world, our own democratic, free home here.”

Kat blinked at him, unable to comprehend everything he was saying.

*I think it’s safer up here, personally, Trina had told her. Where freaks like that can’t get to you.*

*Don’t count on that, Trina.*

“It’s already starting.” Frank walked toward her. “Why do you think we haven’t heard back from the platform yet? Because by now, Legion will have seized control of it.

Hopefully, they've already dispatched some men down here, so we can get to work setting up some kind of defenses."

He had been speaking in a robotic fashion, as if he regurgitated someone else's rhetoric from memory. Now, his face softened. His eyes lost some of the manic glaze. "But none of that matters to me, not really. Those are their plans, their agenda—Legion's, not mine." He looked at her, pleading. "All I want is to have a family again. A wife, a daughter—you and Jerica."

Kat blinked at him. "Me and Jerica? You're crazy. No." She shook her head fervently. "No."

Frank went to her, and she had nowhere to run. When she tried, he caught her roughly, his hands clamping painfully against her cheeks. "Kat, don't you see? Legion would have just loved to come down here and find Eric. I mean, a goddamn Sovereign pilot—the government's golden boy? I had to kill him. That was the kindest way...the only way. I knew if they found out who he was, they would torture him. Just for shits and grins. Just because of who he was."

"No," Kat said. "That wasn't kind, you bastard. What you did to him wasn't—"

He slapped her in the face, sending her sprawling.

The shock of the blow stunned her more than the pain, at least at first. It had been a long, long time since a man had last struck her. Kat landed hard against her hip on the floor. She touched her mouth and her fingertips came away spotted in blood. She could feel it filling her mouth, warm, bitter and salty.

Frank moved toward her again, and in that moment, she felt her strength dissolve, the strong woman she'd built up over the years abandoning her. All that was left was the frightened girl, Chris Emmente's timid bride, and she cowered, trying to cover her face with her hands.

Franks grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked. Kat cried and stumbled to her feet. He clasped her by the throat and slammed her backwards, into the wall. Her head hit painfully, and her brain rattled.

"What do you think Legion will do to you and Jerica?" he snapped. "Jesus Christ, Kat, they'll kill you both, too, without

me here to protect you. You need me. You and Jerica—if you want to stay alive, you need me.”

He slapped her across the face, first with his palm and then again with the back of his hand. She wailed miserably, and then pressed her lips together, her voice stifling to a mewl. She had learned about being beaten a long time ago from Chris, her ex-husband.

*Lesson Number One: the sooner you stopped crying out, the sooner it might be over.*

“We’re going to be a family, Kat.” Frank leaned toward her until they were nearly nose to nose. “You understand me, you stupid bitch? You, and Jerica, and me.”

Kat didn’t answer him. It was Frank Brown speaking, but Chris Emmenté’s voice she could hear, his face she could see before her, superimposed over reality in her terrified mind. She could feel blood coursing down her face now, from her nose as well as her mouth. She could feel her left eye starting to puff up and burn; soon it would bruise and swell closed.

Frank shoved Kat with all of his might across the room. She fell against a console, taking the brunt of the blow with her belly. He was somehow still right behind her, with his hands in her hair again. Kat tried to twist out from under him, and he slammed her face-first into the console.

“We don’t really even need you,” he seethed at her. “You’re expendable, Kat. I’ve got a woman coming down from the platform who will make a better mother to Jerica than you could ever dream of being. Reba could teach her things you can’t even imagine.”

She felt him jerk her face up again and slam it back down again. The room began to swim.

“But I don’t want that, Kat,” he said, his breath against her ear. “I want you to be a part of things. I want you to understand how things are going to be from now on.”

She felt him jerking at her pants, trying to force them down over her hips.

“No.” She tried to struggle against him. “No, Frank, please...”

He was leaning over her, using his superior weight and strength to keep her pinned forward. He jerked her pants down, and she heard the zipper fly break from the force. The material cut into her skin, raking her outer thighs as he pulled them down.

“I want you to understand.” His fingers touched her bare ass, fumbling roughly between her legs.

“No.” Kat began to squirm harder, forgetting the pain in her head and face. “No, no, please, don’t...”

He covered her mouth with his hand, and forced her legs apart, using his thigh to shove his way. She felt him against her, the swollen, awful length of him and then she began to cry, weeping against his palm as he forced himself inside of her with rough, scraping, furious thrusts.

She lost herself.

In her mind, she snapped back to a summer day...

*At the picnic...in Illinois...Jerica had been smaller then and Eric had picked her up...her bare legs had brushed against the gun he kept tucked in a small holster in the waistband of his faded Levi’s...*

“What’s that?” she asked him. She had this ridiculous pair of hot pink plastic sunglasses on. They were too big for her face. The lenses were purple.

“What?” Eric replied, glancing over at Kat and handing her his bottle of Heineken before Jerica could kick it out of his hand.

She remembered taking it, stealing a sip. The beer was cold and tasted good. Alex had his arm around her, and he smelled good, and she felt loved by him.

“This.” Jerica reached down toward Eric’s ass, startling him. She remembered leaning her head against Alex’s shoulder and how the two of them laughed.

“That’s my gun.” Eric caught Jerica’s hand against his hip.

“Why do you have a gun?” Jerica asked.

“I’ve got one, too,” Alex said, swallowing a mouthful of beer.

“Why?”

“In case we have to shoot somebody,” Alex told Jerica solemnly, and then he and Eric laughed.

“No, really, we got them in the Corps,” Eric said to Jerica.

The sky was so blue and flawless. The sun blazed in Jerica’s golden mane.

“Officers always carry their guns with them.”

“But you two aren’t in the Corps anymore.” Puzzled, Jerica looked between the two men. She had a pink, sun-kissed nose and cheeks.

“We carry them anyway,” Alex explained. “Always. Don’t leave home without them.”

“I don’t think I could ever use a gun.” Kat eased closer to Alex without even realizing, shivering despite the warm day.

She remembered Eric looking at her, smiling, as Alex had offered her a momentary squeeze. “Sure you could, Kat. You have to defend yourself, your home, Jerica? Yeah, you’d use a gun.”

Frank finished and she slumped to the floor. She could feel something sticky and wet against the small of her back, her buttocks. It had splattered there when Frank had pulled away from her.

She thought she was going to throw up.

Frank turned to her, and Kat shrank. He was flushed and winded, running his fingers through his hair, trying to smooth it back. “I didn’t want to do that,” he said, his voice hoarse. “You didn’t leave me much of a choice.”

He pulled the remote out of the pocket of his suit, and opened the command center door.

“Go on, clean yourself up. If you try to run from me, or hide somewhere in the compound, I’ll find you, and I’ll kill you.”

Kat believed him. She scrambled into the corridor, and then forced her tired, hurting legs to run. She began to sob. It had been a long time since she’d been beaten up, and she had almost forgotten how it felt to have a busted lip, a boxed, blackened eye, a bloodied nose.

Her crotch ached. She felt filthy and nasty and dirty. Her pants kept wanting to slip down her hips, and she had to keep hitching them up around her waist. She heard footsteps, light and soft, coming toward her from behind and she shrieked crazily, whirling around.

*Oh, God, he followed me!*

She crumpled to her knees and cowered against the wall, trying to make herself as small as possible.

*Please no, no, no I can't.*

“Mommy?” Jerica said. She ran over to Kat, her little feet pounding noisily against the floor. “Mommy, what’s wrong? Mommy!”

Jerica touched her mother’s shoulder, and Kat looked up at her. Jerica shrank back when she saw Kat’s bloody face. “Mommy...!” she gasped, bursting into tears. “Mommy, what happened? Mommy!”

She threw her arms around Kat’s neck. Kat took her daughter by the shoulders and pulled her away so they could look at each other in the eyes. “I’m all right,” she said, struggling to speak coherently. “Jerica, Jerica, honey...listen...listen to me...”

Jerica touched Kat’s mouth with careful fingers. “You’re bleeding, Mommy...”

“I know, pup.” Kat nodded. “Listen to me. Frank...Frank is not your friend. He’s a very bad man.”

Jerica blinked at her, her eyes swimming with new tears. “Frank did this to you?”

“He’s a very bad man, Jerica. He...he put bombs on board the *Daedalus* and that’s why it crashed. He killed Eric...pup, he murdered him...and now he wants...he wants...”

“It’s because of the Legion, isn’t it?” Jerica whispered.

Kat stared at her. “How do you know...?”

“Because he told me,” Jerica said. “He said they just wanted to come here and live and be free. Free from the government.”

“Oh, my God.” Kat jerked Jerica against her, squeezing her tightly. “Oh, Jerica...”

“I didn’t know it meant he’d kill Eric, Mommy.” Jerica began to cry. “Or...or that he’d hurt you...I just thought...I didn’t know...!”

“I know, Jerica.” Kat glanced up and saw a wink of yellow light. She frowned, puzzled, and then realized it was a surveillance camera, hiding in the shadows near the ceiling. It had turned toward them, and light had reflected off of its small, smooth lens.

*Frank doesn’t need to follow me. He’s got his cameras.*

*His goddamn cameras.*

“Come on,” Kat said, and she stood, holding Jerica’s hand.

The little girl stared up at her, wide-eyed. “Where are we going to go, Mommy? What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Kat led Jerica down the hall. She scanned the ceiling with suspicious eyes, watching for more cameras.

They walked until they reached Eric’s room.

“In here,” Kat whispered, ushering Jerica in quickly.

Jerica stood by the bathroom door, looking confused. “Why are we here?”

Kat placed her index finger over her lips. *Shhhhh.*

Jerica’s eyes widened; she understood. She nodded, pushing her lips together into a thin line.

Kat looked around the ceiling, trying to remember the angle of the view on the command center monitors. She saw the camera angled just above the doorway.

She picked up the small aluminum trash can from near the sink. She went underneath the camera and raised onto her tiptoes. She swung the trash can up over her head and smashed it into the unblinking, unflinching black eye of the camera. There was a tinkle of broken glass, and a spattering of blue-white sparks. Jerica squealed and backed away, frightened.

Smoke rose in a thin grey line from the broken camera.

“Fuck you, Frank.” Kat dropped the trash can.

She closed and locked the door to Eric’s room.

“Come on, pup,” she said, and she wiped at her face on her sleeve. The blood was staving, crusting on her cheeks and chin, making her skin feel tight. She began snooping around the

room, poking in the closet, nosing through the small metal bureau.

“What are you looking for, Mommy?” Jerica asked quietly.

“Something,” Kat said.

*Something I remember from that picnic in Belleville...*

*“Don’t leave home without it.” Alex had laughed around a mouthful of baked beans, and I’d seen it tucked down the back of Eric’s jeans. When the wind would blow, it would push the material of his shirt against it, outlining it.*

She lifted the mattress up off the bed, and there it was, lying against the box springs.

*Of course! How stupid of me! He would’ve put it here, where Jerica wouldn’t find it.*

“Mommy?” Jerica said. She was all eyes on the military-issue 9-millimeter semi-automatic pistol that Eric had carried on him at all times, tucked in the back of his flight suit, probably like he’d had it in his blue jeans that beautiful summer’s day a million or so years ago.

*Even when we crashed, Kat thought. Don’t leave home without it.*

Kat snatched it up, and felt its reassuring weight in her hand. The well-oiled metal was cold against her skin. She slipped the clip out and checked to make sure it was full. She smacked it back in, and then double-checked the safety.

“You’re my hero again, Eric,” she murmured.

Eric’s wallet was on the nightstand, along with his watch and gold ring. Jerica had found this, and was holding it in her palm, studying it.

“Look, Mommy.” Her voice was soft, reverent. “It’s his West Point ring.”

Kat took it and held it up. It had a large, smooth red stone in the middle of it. She could read the words carved around the ruby: *West Point Military Academy*.

Inside the ring band, in a small, gilded script, *Eric William Nagel*.

“It’s so beautiful,” Jerica remarked.

Kat looked down at her and smiled. It made her lip sting, and the gash along her cheek hurt. "I think he'd like for you to keep it." She pressed the ring against her daughter's hand.

Jerica held it uncertainly, looking at it. "I'm afraid I'll lose it."

"No, you won't." Kat sat on the bed, wincing at the pain that shot through her lower body. She put the gun next to her, and picked up his wallet.

There was nothing spectacular inside; less than maybe fifty dollars, his well-worn American Express card, his driver's license.

Kat looked at the license for a long time. He was younger in the photo; his hair was shorter, closer to the tight crop he'd worn in the Stellar Corps. But his eyes were bright and confident, and he had a cocky, go-to-hell grin on his face that she had loved.

She wanted to memorize that picture, to remember him like that, and not how he'd looked after the crash; gaunt, haggard, hurting. *Alone*, she thought. *Oh, God, he looked alone, and that's what terrified him the most...how I left him to die. Alone.*

Kat folded the wallet closed and pressed it against the base of her throat.

"I have to take a shower, pup." She tried to stand, and pain lanced through her pelvis. She winced, buckling slightly.

"Mommy?"

"I...I'm okay," Kat said, forcing a smile for her daughter. "I'm okay. I just...I need a shower. I'll only be a few minutes, but you don't open the door, okay? Not under any circumstances. Got it?"

Jerica nodded mutely. She had wrapped her fingers around Eric's ring, and held it against her chest.

Kat limped into the bathroom and stripped naked. She stepped into the shower and turned the water on as hot as she could stand it. The pelting stream hurt her face and she burst into helpless tears as she tried to clean the wounds. She scrubbed between her legs with a washrag until she was sore and tender. She could still feel Frank's fingers on her, feel him shoving himself inside of her.

*Tethers*

“Bastard,” she muttered, weeping more and hating him. She rested her forehead against the shower wall. “Bastard!”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

She finished her shower and turned the water off.

She stood, shivering in the stall, momentarily bewildered. She tried to think about what she should do next.

She wrapped a towel around her trembling body, and patted carefully at her face with another. Her eyes were still swollen and sore, but at least all of the bleeding had stopped. She ached all over. It sure as hell wasn't the all-time grand champion of beatings—that particular honor was reserved for Chris, and that sunny Easter morning when he'd seen fit to knock out her teeth and to try and force a miscarriage of their child—but it had been awhile since a man had struck her, and it hurt like hell.

She walked out of the bathroom. “Pup?” She looked over at Eric's bed, and Jerica wasn't there. “Jerica?”

She whirled, her gaze darting all around the room but didn't see the girl. “Jerica!” Kat cried, pulling open the closet door and looking inside. She knelt down and looked under the bed.

Jerica was nowhere to be found.

“Oh, my God,” Kat whispered.

The gun was still lying on the bed, next to Eric's wallet. Kat grabbed it. The towel drooped down off of her and fell onto the floor. She ran over to the door, naked.

It was unlocked.

The intercom on the wall beeped loudly, and she heard Frank's voice.

“Hey, Kat, you feeling better?”

She looked around, as if expecting him to be hiding in the room with her. She smacked the com. “Where is she, you son of a bitch?” Her voice shook uncontrollably.

Frank chuckled. “She’s up here in the kitchen, with me. I thought I’d fix us some breakfast. How about it? You hungry?”

Jerica spoke over the intercom. She sounded bright and cheerful. “Come on, Mommy. Frank found some cans of little potatoes, and we’re going to fry them. Get dressed and come down!”

Kat stared at the intercom in disbelief. *I told you to stay put. I told you not to answer the door.*

“Mommy? Are you coming? Everything is almost finished. I’m starving, come on!”

“Yeah, Kat.” Frank’s voice dripped honey. “Come on.”

She heard her daughter’s high, sweet, melodic laughter, and then the com transmission ended.

Kat looked around wildly for something to wear. She grabbed Eric’s flight suit from the *Daedalus* from a pile on the floor and pulled it on. Her fingers flew on the front fastens, and she tucked the pistol into her hip pocket. The suit was baggy and loose on her, and the gun was well hidden in the drooping folds.

She pushed the sleeves up. She caught a faint, familiar whiff of Eric’s cologne from the material. It made her feel lonely and helpless. She touched the bulge of the gun. Its solidness, its presence reassured her and strengthened her.

She headed for the commissary.

Jerica was sitting on top of one of the kitchen counters, eating bite-sized cubes of fruit from a can of sweet cocktail.

“Jerica!” Kat cried, running over to her.

“I’m okay, Mommy.” Jerica frowned, trying to push her away when Kat went to hug her. Frank walked over, and Kat hedged away. He reached out and grabbed her by the front of her flight suit. He jerked it so he could read the name patch above the left breast, “NAGEL.”

“Nice skivvies, there, Kat,” he told her, dropping a wink. He gave her a small shove backwards, releasing her clothes. He took her face in his hands and she cringed.

“Why don’t we...” He leaned close to her. The tips of their noses touched, and his breath pushed against her lips. “...find you something else later on?”

She nodded, frightened, expecting him to strike her again. Instead, Frank kissed her on the mouth. His lips squelched down hard against hers, and he forced his tongue between her lips. She tried to pull her head away, and he let her.

“Frank, they’re going to burn,” Jerica whined. She had hopped down from the counter, and was trying vainly to stir the potatoes.

“Here, I’ll get them.” Frank was all smiles. He left Kat, and she began to rub slowly at her lips with the sides of her fingers, wiping away his saliva.

“Get me one of those plates over there, yeah,” Frank said to Jerica. She brought him a plate, and he began to scoop golden-fried potatoes onto it. “Why don’t you get some milk out, too?”

“Okay.” Jerica nodded

They all sat around one of the cabinets. Frank and Jerica had made potatoes, scrambled eggs, and had fried some canned meat. Kat watched them eat. She picked dully at her plate, pushing the eggs around with her fork.

It felt strangely familiar to her, sick and surreal. *This is how things always were with Chris. First he’d hit me, then he’d pretend nothing had happened. Like everything was the same as it had ever been.*

“You’re not eating, Mommy,” Jerica observed, taking a long drink of milk.

“My mouth hurts. The salt burns where it’s cut.”

“Drink some milk.” Jerica offered her cup. “It’s nice and cold.”

Kat took a quick sip. She forced a dry smile. “You’re right, Jerica. That feels much better.”

“You want a cold pack for your eye?” Frank reached out and touched her hand gently.

“No,” she replied, pulling her hand away and letting it fall into her lap.

“Frank says Legion will be here soon,” Jerica said. “At least a month. And guess what, Mom? After that, they’ll start bringing lots of people down. Kids, too.”

Kat looked at her. She seemed genuinely excited by the prospect. Her eyes were bright and happy.

“I think we’re going to be real happy here.” Jerica finished off her milk.

“I know we are.” Frank smiled at Kat.

“Frank, will you get me some more milk, please?” Jerica asked, shoveling in a large forkful of potatoes.

“Sure, pup.” Frank took her cup. “Think those are any good?”

Jerica nodded, chomping.

Frank walked away from them, toward the refrigerator.

Kat stared at the back of his head, hating him.

She felt Jerica kick her shin.

Hard.

She looked over at Jerica angrily. Jerica narrowed her eyes and cut her gaze toward Frank. “Do it,” she mouthed silently at Kat. “Do it now.”

Kat blinked, startled.

Frank opened the refrigerator door and leaned forward, looking for the milk.

Jerica stared at Kat, imploring, alarmed. *Do it! Do it!*

Kat reached down into the pocket of her flight suit. Her fingers curled around the metal barrel of the gun. She slipped it out. She and Jerica watched Frank’s back.

She brought the gun up.

*“I don’t think I could ever use a gun...”*

*you have to defend yourself...*

*your home...*

*Jerica...*

*yeah, Kat, you’d use a gun*

She aimed for the base of Frank's skull.

"Do it," Jerica whispered, her voice gossamer.

Kat thumbed the safety off, and Frank paused, as if he'd heard the faint click. He started to turn, his mouth open as if he would speak.

Kat shot him.

Frank jerked violently, slamming into the refrigerator. Plastic bottles and containers of food spilled, falling to the floor. He dropped the milk bottle and it bounced off the tiles, splattering milk everywhere.

He slumped to his knees. He clutched at his shoulder, his fingers splayed and clawing for his back. Already, the dark scarlet spread of blood across his shirt was widening in circumference.

He didn't cry out, but Kat could hear his quick, dragging gasps. He looked at her, his eyes wide and genuinely surprised.

"You..." he said. She saw blood pepper up out of his mouth, lighting on his chin and upper lip in a faint spray. She could hear the whistling, sucking sound of his labored breathing; the bullet had punched through a lung.

"...you...bitch..." Frank wheezed.

He fell forward, catching himself clumsily with his arm. His face twisted with pain.

Kat walked around the edge of the cabinet and regarded him evenly. Jerica hopped out of her chair and went to stand by her mother. She stayed close to Kat's hip.

"He's not dead." Her voice was flat and cold. She studied Frank with great scrutiny, her eyes calculating, almost aloof.

"You little bitch," Frank gasped at Jerica in complete shock. "You...you tricked me...you little—"

Kat fired the gun again, and Frank's right knee exploded, spraying blood and thick clots of bone and flesh. He shrieked and flopped onto his side, clutching his leg desperately.

"Go to the TV room, pup," Kat said.

"But, Mommy, I..."

"Go on, Jerica. I'll be there in a minute."

Jerica stared down at Frank for a long moment, and then turned away and left the room.

“You...you can’t do this...!” Frank gasped. “Don’t you get it...? When Legion gets here...finds out what you did...they...they’ll kill you...you and Jerica...they’ll kill you...”

“But you can protect us,” Kat said.

He nodded frantically. “Yes! You know...I can...”

“We can all be a family,” Kat said. “You, me, Jerica...”

“Yes...they won’t...hurt you with me...”

Kat fired again.

Frank’s left knee shattered. He screamed again, arching his back and howling. “OOOOWWHH GODDAMN YOU BITCH!”

“That was for Eric,” Kat said calmly.

“Just do it, then!” Frank shrieked. He spat blood. “Do it, goddammit!”

“Eric kept his clip full,” Kat told him. “And that only made three shots.”

She shot him in the crotch.

He screamed, his voice ripping up octaves, hitting soprano notes.

“That makes four, you fuck.”

And then five.

*for what you did to me*

The gun bucked against her palm.

Six.

*for what you did to my friends*

And seven.

*for fucking with my daughter*

the smell in the air

thick and bitter, smoke and blood

The kick of the pistol against her hand.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Kat hummed as she and Jerica dragged Frank's body outside.

It was another scorcher on X-1226. It was barely noon, and already it sweltered at somewhere around 90 degrees, with what felt like 90 percent humidity.

Kat whistled as they hauled Franklin out past the security field. He was heavy, and their progress was slow. She watched flies buzz around his face, landing on his lips, darting into his mouth, preening their small, fuzzy legs on his eyes.

She saw them prance on the ruins of his knees and on the bloody smear that had once upon a time been his testicles.

The flies rose in a small, indignant, buzzing cloud when she shoved his body down a steep incline, toward a creek bed. She listened to the rustle of leaves and rapid snapping of branches and brambles as he rolled past them.

She whistled some more as she and Jerica walked back into the compound.

\*\*\*

Kat and Jerica held a quiet, simple ceremony for Eric.

She fought terrible pain in her battered face and abdomen to dig a long, relatively deep ditch along the east wall of the compound. There was something close to shade there, but it was still amazingly hot, and she ended up doing a majority of the work in her underwear.

When she was finished, she showered again. She tried to be quick; she could feel the water pressure waning, and realized that the shortage was going to become a very engaging problem by the end of the week.

The gurney Eric had died on rested on four small wheels, which made getting him outside relatively easy. Jerica stayed close to Kat, almost pressed against her hip. She watched quietly as Kat tried to gather the sheets around Eric, and smoothed the folds against his hips, shoulders, and the cyborganic leg that had cost him so much so dearly.

Kat started to bring the sheet up over Eric's head.

"No..." Jerica murmured, suddenly touching the pant leg of Kat's fresh jumpsuit. "Don't cover his face."

Kat looked down at Eric. In the dim light of the corridor, she couldn't notice the ashen, waxy, almost transparent appearance of his skin. He looked like he was sleeping, like at any moment he would open his eyes and blink at her.

She pushed the gurney outside, into the bright, hot sunshine.

They buried him, and Kat cried. She sat in the dry earth next to her friend's grave—the man she had loved—and covered her face with her hands.

\*\*\*

It rained the next ten days.

Every day, Kat and Jerica would put pots and pans and bowls out in the downpour to fill. They began to store the water in the kitchen's large walk-in coolers.

Kat didn't let Jerica drink any of the rainwater at first. She tested it on herself to make sure there was nothing wrong with it. After several days without dying or getting dysentery or some other horrendous ailment, Kat decided the rain was safe for drinking, and the water problem was taken care of.

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*Three weeks later*

“Mommy?”

Kat woke with a start as Jerica shook her shoulder.

“Mommy, come quick.”

Kat sat up and tucked her hair back from her face. “What is it, pup?”

“There’s someone outside the compound,” Jerica said, wide-eyed and breathless.

“Okay.” Kat untucked her legs. The floor was cold under her bare feet.

“I think it’s them.” Jerica watched Kat pull on her clothes and wiggle her feet into her boots.

“How many did you see?” Kat asked, fumbling with the lacings.

Jerica stood by the door, looking out into the hallway uncertainly. “Just one outside the perimeter field.”

Kat stood up straight. “Where is the...?”

“In the drawer there.” Jerica pointed to the nightstand. She flipped her yellow curls back off her shoulder. She had hung Eric’s ring from a piece of black string around her neck. It bounced against the front of her shirt.

Kat opened the drawer and pulled out the pistol. She made sure the clip was secure. “Show me, pup.”

She followed Jerica down the corridor.

“I’m scared,” Jerica said.

“It’s okay,” Kat told her. “Stay inside while I go check it out.”

There was a woman in the front yard of the compound.

She was taller than Kat, wearing a khaki brown uniform. She staggered across the lawn, her long black hair hanging in loose, disheveled strands from her ponytail. She appeared to be a Native American.

She saw Kat standing just beyond the doorway to the compound and froze. Her eyes widened. She looked like a doe pinned by a tractor trailer’s headlights.

The woman held a strange, awkward-looking rifle in one hand, and some sort of square metal box in the other. Kat's appearance startled her, and she dropped the box in the grass. She raised the snout of the alien rifle at Kat and stumbled back a step.

"Who are you?" she said. Her brows pinched together, and she regarded Kat with dark, suspicious eyes. Her face was narrow, her features standing out in precise angles and curves. She had a long, narrow nose, and small, thin lips. Her skin was a deep golden brown, with patches of bright, frightened color in the apples of each of her high cheeks.

"I...I'm Kathryn Emmente," Kat replied. "Who are you?" She still held Eric's pistol at her side. She was shocked to see another human being, she hadn't even thought to raise it.

The Indian woman kept staring at her. Kat realized she had a huge, bluish-black bruise forming on her forehead, above her left eye. Kat noticed that there was a fat column of dark grey smoke rising above the tree line, not too far past the security perimeter.

"Where is Frank?" The woman ignored Kat's question and cut her gaze around the yard, wide-eyed and dazed.

The door opened behind Kat, and Jerica came out.

"Jerica, no—go back inside," Kat said.

The woman swung the rifle toward the little girl. Jerica shrieked and darted behind Kat.

"No!" Kat cried, and she brought Eric's pistol up, aiming the muzzle at the woman's head. She reached behind her with her free hand and touched Jerica's hair. "I told you to stay inside, damn it."

"I'm sorry, Mommy." Jerica hiccupped. "I got scared. I didn't know what was going on!"

"Where's Frank?" the woman shouted at them, clutching her gun with both hands. Her voice ripped hysterically.

"Put the gun down and I'll tell you!" Kat yelled back, not lowering her pistol. "Put it down now!"

They stood there, facing off in silence until a loud explosion ripped through the woods. The line of smoke darkened,

becoming black, and began blowing across the horizon in fat, billowing clouds.

*That was a ship—her ship—exploding!* Kat realized.

The woman pivoted at the noise and watched the smoke. She turned back to Kat and Jerica. She looked anguished, horrified. “Where is Frank?”

“It’s her,” Jerica whispered suddenly, her voice quiet and stunned. “Reba Crowe.”

“What?” Kat glanced down at her.

“Reba Crowe,” Jerica repeated, louder, stepping slightly from behind her mother. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

“Shut up.” The woman had let the muzzle of her rifle lower, but she raised it again, shoving it at them. “Where is Franklin Brown? He said he would be here, he’d be waiting for me. Where is he?”

“He’s dead.” Kat nodded toward the tree line outside of the perimeter field. “He’s over there somewhere, out in the bushes.”

The woman’s mouth dropped open in a nearly perfect circle. “What?” She shook her head. “No...he...this is all wrong. Everything...it’s all gone wrong, but he said he’d be here...he said... How did he die?”

“I killed him,” Kat told her evenly.

She could see the rage flash across the woman’s face, like the edge of a breaking wave. She could see it ignite something behind the woman’s coal black eyes.

“Jerica—” she began, and then the woman fired her rifle.

Kat felt something slam into her chest, just north of her left breast. The force was incredible. It jerked her backwards; she felt her boot heel dance hard across Jerica’s small feet behind her.

Another round punched into her forearm, and another into her right shoulder.

Behind her, Jerica began to scream.

Kat toppled to her knees. She tried to catch herself on the ground, but the grass was suddenly slippery and soaked with

something hot. She stared dumbly at the blood spilling down her arm and pooling around her splayed fingers.

“Mommy! *Mommmeeee!*” Jerica shrieked. Kat could feel her little hands on her, grabbing desperately. She raised her head and saw the woman point the rifle at Jerica. Kat threw her elbow back, smacking hard into Jerica’s chin.

*Get down*, she wanted to scream. *Jerica GET DOWN!*

“Guungh!” Jerica cried, and she crumpled.

Kat forced her arm to work, to bring Eric’s pistol up. Her finger squeezed in on the trigger, and she felt the gun kick against her palm...one...two...three times.

“You murdering bitch!” the Indian woman, Reba Crowe screeched, and then a bullet ripped into the left side of her face, shearing away a large section of her scalp and skull cap. She twisted and fell back, landing in the lawn. She moved smoothly, her arms trailing in her wake, like a marionette whose strings have been abruptly severed.

The gun fell out of Kat’s fingers, and she pitched face-first into the grass. She drew in a gasping, hurting mouthful of air. She was dimly aware of Jerica shaking her shoulder, sobbing and pleading: “Get up, Mommy, *pleeeeee* get up! Mommy! *Mommmeeee, nooo, no please no NOOOooo!*”

And another sound. A faint roaring sound that was growing louder and louder, reminding her of static on an open com link. It felt like someone had covered her up with a feather-lined comforter, and she was suffocating. Somehow, despite this, Kat was freezing.

*Oh, pup*, she thought, over the increasing roar of the static noises. *Just let me sleep for a little while and I’ll be okay. I’ll fix you a grilled cheese, how about that? I’ll even cut the crusts off because I know you like it that way the best...*

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Kat sat in a white oak rocking chair on her enormous wraparound porch, looking out over the northern California coast.

Jerica was down on the beach, standing at the very edge of the ocean, and Kat watched her poke daintily at sea foam with her toes. She was talking to a young man whose family vacationed in a house up the beach from them. He was seventeen, tall and handsome, and completely infatuated with the beautiful, fifteen-year-old Jerica.

Kat studied her daughter's posture, the casual angle that pushed her young bosom out toward her beau. Jerica gave her head a quick, coy nod, and her sheaf of golden hair flipped obediently over her shoulder.

Kat reached over and gently, absently massaged her left forearm. There wasn't much sensation left in her arm or shoulder, only what her doctor called "phantom sensations". It had been explained to her that these ghostly feelings of pain, itching or burning were common among amputees.

She sometimes wondered if Eric had felt the ghost sensations in his leg.

Legion's attempt to conquer the stellar platform and X-1226 had failed. But by the time rescue ships made it down to the moon's surface, the bullet wounds Kat had suffered had gangrened terribly. She had been lucky to be alive.

The tissue damage had been so extensive, almost 95 percent of her arm was now cyborganic, like Eric's leg had been. The entire left side of her shoulder girdle had been refitted with biomechanical joints, bones, muscles, ligaments. The

government had paid for the operation and prosthetic, every last dime. She'd received an official commendation from President Conner Dade himself, and she and Jerica had been invited guests at the White House.

In the five years since, Kat hadn't really thought too long or often about what had happened to them. She thought about Eric sometimes, like when her arm would itch in places that no longer should.

The left side of her body always felt heavy and numb, like it had been shot up with Novocain, or carved out of wood. She often wondered if Eric had felt that way.

Sometimes she would forget his face, and she would pull out his driver's license and touch the young man in the picture. She couldn't remember the sound of his voice, but sometimes, late at night, alone in her bed, she could remember what it felt like to have him laying beside her, with his arm around her. If she tried hard enough, she could imagine his hand holding hers, the warm pressure of his fingers through hers.

Sometimes she still cried for him.

Kat had become a writer. Her first two novels had been modest best-sellers, enough to have paid for the beach-front house. She was at work on a third, and had ideas already in mind for a fourth and even a fifth.

She hadn't written about X-1226, or about her life before that, even though she was frequently pressured to. In fact, she and Jerica rarely spoke to anyone except for their therapist about what had happened.

She had become a quiet advocate for abused women and children, donating funds to various organizations, and helping to found a local support center called Harmony. She spent lots of time at the center, finding strength and comfort from the past with her friends there.

She had found the she was no longer the frightened girl Chris Emmette used to beat, but nor was she the tough-as-nails woman she had struggled to be aboard the *Daedalus*. She had changed; X-1226 had changed her, and she had become a combination of these, strong and weak, vulnerable and capable all at once.

She found she liked it best that way.

The phone rang, breaking Kat's train of thought. It was Brenda, her agent and self-appointed best friend.

"Hey, Kat, these chapters look great."

"Thanks, Brenda."

"Is...is she all packed yet?"

Kat looked out at Jerica and the young man. They were standing very close together now, and she watched her daughter tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"I don't really know." She laughed. "She's been saying good-bye to all of her suitors."

The melody of Jerica's sweet laughter floated up from the water's edge, reaching Kat.

"...she's going to do great," Brenda was saying. "How many girls get in the West Point Sovereign fighter program period, much less fifteen-year olds?"

"Jerica can do anything she sets her mind to."

"Gets that from her mother. Are you sure you're okay with this, Kat?"

"Yes," Kat said quietly, although the prospect of the big, hulking, empty, silent house terrified her. "I just...I'm really going to miss her."

Brenda rambled on and on about how Kat should be grateful she was going to miss the height of Jerica's teen rebellion years, but Kat didn't pay much attention.

*"I know it's hard, but it'll be good for you, you'll see," her friend Melanie at the center had told her. "You need to find your own place in things, on your own. It's your turn, to be true to yourself."*

*"Yeah," Kat had replied somewhat sadly. "I need to be my own hero."*

She watched Jerica rise onto her tiptoes and kiss the boy lightly, briefly on the lips. Then she turned and ran up the beach toward the house, looking back to wave once. Her long skirt billowed around her legs, and she gathered a handful of the material to keep from tripping over the hem.

"I'll talk to you later, Brenda." Kat cut the agent off gently and hung up the phone as Jerica mounted the porch steps. "Hey, pup."

“Mom.” Jerica frowned slightly, insincerely. “I’m not a pup. You know I hate that.”

She plopped gracefully down in the rocker next to her mother, kicking her long, pretty legs up in the air and tilting back in the chair. She picked up Kat’s glass of lemonade and took a long sip.

“Ooo!” Jerica’s nose wrinkled, and she set the glass back down. “Spiked it pretty good there, Mom.”

“Just a little vodka,” Kat replied primly.

The two laughed.

“Who’s that?” Kat brought her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun. She watched the young man Jerica had kissed walk away down the beach, his head hung, his footsteps dragging.

“Brandon Hall,” Jerica said.

“Nice guy?”

Jerica glanced at her mother and smiled wryly. “Pretty nice, yeah.”

“You ready to go tomorrow?”

Jerica pushed at the folds of her skirt. “I guess so. I’m pretty nervous.”

Kat reached over and touched Jerica’s hand. Jerica looked at her, and wrapped her fingers through Kat’s.

“Will you be okay, Mom?” she asked quietly, her eyes large and round. It took Kat back for a moment, back five years—a whole lifetime—ago.

“Yeah, pup.” Kat squeezed Jerica’s hand.

They sat quietly on the porch for a long time, watching the sun slowly, inexorably sink toward the horizon.

Jerica reached up to her throat and Kat watched out of the corner of her eye as she began to pull Eric’s West Point ring back and forth across a chain around her neck. Jerica’s fingers absently rubbed at the gold, pressing and prodding across the lettering, the bright red stone. She looked distantly, dreamily out at the ocean, at the small gathering of sea birds that ran this way and that on the sand.

Kat pressed her fingers against her biomechanical arm, trying vainly to scratch an itch that wasn't real but sure bugged the hell out of her anyway.

"You ready for some supper, Jerica?" she asked.

Jerica blinked dazedly. "Oh," she said, coming out of her own little private garden of thoughts. "Yeah. Sure, Mom. I'll probably turn in after that. I mean, I've got to get up pretty early tomorrow to catch the red-eye shuttle and..." Her voice faded, leaving an awkward silence.

"Yeah." Kat smiled at Jerica. "I know, pup."

They stood and gathered up their drinks and towels to go inside.

"What sounds good to eat?" Kat asked.

"How about grilled cheese?" Jerica suggested. "With the crusts cut off. They're best like that."

Kat looked over at the lovely young woman her daughter had become. In her heart, she started to loosen the tethers that bound them together.

*Oh, pup, I will miss you so much.*

"I know," she said.

She followed Jerica inside, leaving the screen door open to let in the fresh evening breeze.

***End***

## About the Author

“Definitely an author to watch.” That's how *Romantic Times Book Reviews* magazine describes Sara Reinke. *New York Times* best-selling author Karen Robards calls Reinke “a new paranormal star” and *Love Romances and More* hails her as “a fresh new voice to a genre that has grown stale.” *Dark Thirst* and *Dark Hunger*, the first two books in her Brethren Series of vampire romance are available from Kensington/Zebra Books, while the third installment, *Dark Passion*, is available from Double Dragon Publishing. Find out more about Reinke by visiting online: [www.sarareinke.com](http://www.sarareinke.com)



