

# PITCH DARK

COURTNEY ALAMEDA



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS  
NEW YORK

To all the girls who write their own histories,  
Who resist men telling them to “stop,”  
And save themselves in the end,  
This one’s for you.

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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“Fortune and glory, kid. Fortune and glory.”

—INDIANA JONES,

*INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM*

“You can do this, Lara. After all, you’re a Croft.”

—CONRAD ROTH, *TOMB RAIDER*

“Oh *crap!*”

—NATHAN DRAKE MORGAN, *UNCHARTED*

USS JOHN MUIR NPS-3500  
SHIP'S DEEPS, TIER ONE, SECTOR SEVEN  
DATE: UNKNOWN  
TIME: UNKNOWN

## T U C K

The wake-up shock hits like a sledgehammer to the chest.

I jerk awake, blind, cold, and wet. My muscles twitch. Bones creak. Joints pop. Air tubes are stuck down my throat and up my nostrils. The plastic clings to my spongy insides like cellophane. A mechanized puff of air forces my lungs to expand. The feeling tickles. I cough. Bad idea—the air tube's not ribbed for my pleasure.

It's a hell of a way to wake up.

*Where am I?*

Besides shivering like a little kid in the dark, I mean.

I reach out, my knuckles stumbling across a flat surface in front of me. My bones make small knocking noises on metal: *Tock-tock, tock-tock-tock*. The darkness moves, creaking open, letting in a dash of light.

It's a door.

No, a lid.

I'm in a box? . . . No, not a *box*. It's a windowless stasis pod, which is cozy.

As a vertical *coffin*.

No wonder I've got a jackhammer of a headache and am deep-throating an air tube. *How long have I been in this thing?* My neoprene circulation suit used to strain across my arms and chest. Now it sags loose, my muscles atrophied. My balls feel hard and shriveled as walnuts, and my bony shoulders no longer brush against the pod's sides. My head's restrained with a strap, my torso's harnessed to a webbed nylon gurney, and my legs are belted separately. Vitawater ripples around my feet. The skin on my fingertips sticks up like stiff fins.

When I try to move, bile shoves a fist up my esophagus. I swallow it down. Last time I threw up in an air tube, I was ten and on my first spacewalk. The stuff got into my air supply tank, and . . . you know what? Not a story you need to hear.

Gravity licks water off my fingers and nose. My arms are free to move. At least I'm upright, and at least there's gravity. It's the little things in life that make it worth living. You know, like *air*.

As I shake off exhaustion, my last memories surface: Me. Lying on a gurney while arctic-cold vitawater bubbled around my body, initiating hypothermia. Gasping. Stasis chems put my brain and nervous system on ice. Mom had leaned over my stasis pod. *Sleep tight, Tuck. Don't let the bedbugs bite.*

Mom's sense of humor was never on point. She thought she was being funny, but her voice cracked with the stress of our situation. I guess it was her way of saying *good night* without having to say *good-bye*. For now. Maybe forever, if our ship wasn't

found or rescued. It feels like centuries ago. Could've been, for all I know.

My eyes adjust too slowly. *C'mon, shake it off, bruh.* Blue light leaks in from outside, highlighting the other stasis pods but nothing else. I don't need Mom's literal rocket science to know something's wrong. Where are the people in white lab coats barking orders, wrapping up the freshies in heated blankets, injecting their bones with thermal marrow, and rubbing their wasted muscles? I've woken up from stasis before. I know how this is supposed to go down, and this isn't it.

We were supposed to wake up saved, or not wake up at all. That was the deal we made with fate.

But it looks like karma crapped out on us again.

This time, it feels personal.

"Hey," I say "aloud" on the coglink network. Before we launched, every member of the USS *John Muir*'s crew had a coglink chip implanted in their prefrontal cortex. The coglinks connected the crew's bionics with the ship's AI for monitoring and regulation, but they also allowed the crew to communicate with one another and the ship. Mom called it *silent spatialized communication*. The rest of us called it telepathy.

I never "heard" my crewmates' undirected thoughts, per se; but their presence, their *awareness*, always created a subtle static in my head.

There's no hum now. Only silence.

*"Anyone out there? Mom? . . . Hello?"*

I wait for three full seconds, mentally checking the coglink network for a signal. No response. No blip of human or artificial cognitive activity.

"Bueller . . . Bueller?" I ask, knowing Mom and her boyfriend, Aren, are the only ones aboard who would get the joke. They love retro movies and old pop culture just as much as I do.

"Hello? Dejah?" Dejah's the ship's main AI. While Mom put the AI into hibernation when we went into stasis, it should've roused with us, too. "Mom?"

Why isn't anyone answering me on the coglinks?

My stomach churns.

Maybe it's because there isn't an *us* anymore.

I've got to get out of here. No way could I be the only one awake. Reaching up, I work the breathing mask off my face, dragging the tubes from my throat and nose. They rake my insides, tracking bloody chunks on my tongue. I cough, spit. Pressure from coughing pounds on the insides of my eyes—they feel ripe, like they might burst from their sockets. Warm blood flecks my lips. My lungs shudder as I take an unassisted breath of air. It tastes metallic, tinged with the blood on my tongue.

"Shite," I whisper without any real voice. My vocal cords are stiff, dry. Static crackles in my ears. Tinnitus. My favorite after-effect of stasis, next to nausea.

Over the static in my head, a groan rises and tumbles through a few different octaves. The sound's one part dying whale, another part nails-on-chalkboard. Pain spikes under my right temple, right where my coglink chip's implanted in my frontal lobe.

*The hell?* I think, tugging my legs out of their restraints. The voice sounds alien. But *figuratively* alien and *literally* alien are different things. We never found alien life, but I guess it could've found us out here. In reality, it's probably some poor bastard with a voice as raw as mine. That, or my eardrums are more

like earmuffs, and it's someone screaming at the top of their lungs.

Let's hope for option one.

*Think positive, Tuck*, Aren would say. My mom's boyfriend is the patron saint of persistent optimism. Even after we ended up on the far side of the universe with dead engines, a busted communications array, and zero hope of rescue, he still said, *Hey, at least we're alive*.

Sorry, Aren. Being alive isn't the same thing as living.

I pull the release tabs on my head brace, thrilled to see I'm as toned as a corpse. And not a fresh one, either. My head falls forward, my neck muscles too weak to hold up my skull. It takes three tries for my fingers to grasp the loose straps around my chest. Another five to work them free. When I manage to get them off, I tumble into the bottom of the pod in a heap. The water at the bottom of the pod's dead cold. My blood creeps through my veins like mud. I've got no feeling in my feet or calves yet.

Shivering, I push myself into a sitting position, fall into one of the pod doors, and tumble my sorry ass onto the walkway outside.

I'm alone. Some of the other pods hang open. Empty. Black. Others are sealed up tight. Mom's pod and Aren's pod had been on my . . . *What, dammit?* Left, or right? Had they been across from me? I can't remember. A few of the pods look fresh-cracked, their lids gleaming wet in the low, bruised light. The ones on my right hang open. The ones to the left are sealed.

"Hello?" My voice rasps one note above a whisper. No answer. Fear makes a fist in my guts.

I'm sure everyone else is just stella, because I'm going to be all optimistic and stuff.



Yeah, maybe stella *dead*.

I manage to half crawl, half slide across the walkway, then prop myself up against a closed pod. The digital interfaces on the pods' lids show their inhabitants' stats: brain activity, height, weight, the temperature inside pod, *et cetera, et cetera, et cetera*, as Mom would say, quoting an old musical I couldn't stand.

Mom liked everything to come in threes: her spouses (my dad was number one, he left; we don't talk about number two, who's aptly named; Aren was supposed to be her "third time's the charm"). She always had three coffees in the morning, and three was the number of times she showered every day. The woman was hell on our water tanks out here.

The numbers on the digital interfaces flicker, changing order and position, creating weird patterns across the screens. Only one set of numbers remains constant across every pod:

02 07 2433

*The hell?* I crush the heels of my palms into my eyes and rub.

02 07 2433

It looks like a date.

*Nah. Uh-uh. No, no, no-no-no. Not possible.*

We went into stasis in 2087. While my thoughts are a little too tangled to do the math, I know there's a big jump between 2087 and 2433.

02 07 2433

*No way nobody ever found us.*

02 07 2433

*It's a glitch.*

02 07 2433

*A giant-ass glitch.*

Scrubbing my face with my palms, I take stock of myself. My circ-suit's falling apart, left sleeve ripping off, zipper broken almost to my crotch. My hair's as long as a girl's. Not sexy, though. Neither are my nails, which twist like spikes off the tips of my fingers. I can count my own ribs. My skin's fragile as rice paper, but my blood runs so thick, it beads from the rips in my skin in silicone-like bubbles.

*What if Mom woke up before me? What if she's already dead and gone? What if everyone's gone? I'd be alone. Lost in space on this godforsaken—*

Something moves on my left. I turn my head, groaning as a rocket of pain launches itself up my spine. I wince.

A man stands about six meters away. In the darkness, he's a shadow. His head's down, and it rattles and twitches back and forth, like he's having a super-localized seizure.

"Hey," I huff, finding myself breathless. My voice scrapes out, gritty. "You . . . okay?"

A dark mark skids down the front of his circ-suit, staining it from collar to navel. His bony hands and forearms are covered with an oily, dark substance. It drips off the ends of his fingers and patters on the metal floor. *Drip. Drip. Drip.*

He takes a shaky step forward, wheezing.

Stasis has a lot of nasty side effects. Seizures aren't supposed to be one of them. I try to get up, but my legs won't respond. I can feel my hips and thighs, but not my knees or calves. Fragging stasis paralysis. Fear reaches past my ribs, pinching the soft things inside my chest.

"Hey, bruh," I say. "How long have you been—"

His head spasms, lolling back on his shoulders.

“—awake . . .”

Even in the dimness, the unnatural swell of his throat’s visible. His cheeks are torn open, jaw unhinged like a snake’s. Tentacles reach from between his bloated lips to suckle his torn flesh and chin.

*Holy mother of—*

He groans, and the weight of his voice hits my temple, physical as a fist. Pain explodes from the crown of my head to my cheekbone. My nose cracks. Blood faucets from my left nostril, splattering over my mouth and chin.

*Ah crap, ah hell. Literal alien shite going down.* I scramble backward, half kicking, half dragging my useless legs. Fear’s got me by the balls, and they’re doing all the thinking. Not something I’d recommend.

The man takes two shambling steps toward me. He wheezes again, head convulsing. His breath hitches several times in a row, like someone about to sneeze. I look around for a weapon, for a place to hide. There’s nothing but stasis pods for meters around, most of which hang open. I could pull myself back into a pod, but I’m too weak to keep the door closed against this bastard. And I can’t outrun him with bum legs.

With a growl, he shambles forward.

My next heartbeat hits like a spike through the chest.

We’re going to go mano a mano with me stranded here on my ass.

The guy trips, tumbling atop me. He smells of bile. His jaws snap twice, centimeters away from my nose. I jam my palm against his mouth, holding his face shut. His tentacles wrap around my wrist. Needle-like teeth bite into my palm. I grunt. No way will

I be able to fight him off. Half my body isn't responding to my brain's cries of *fight or fragging flight, you dumbass!*

A mechanical whirr explodes behind him. White light bursts over the pods. The bright blade of an ion saw bisects his forehead. I jerk my hand away. The beam splits his head in two and pops the balloon of his throat. Blood strikes me in the face and chest. He gurgles, and I shove him to the floor beside me. It's only then I notice his eyes are blackened and swollen shut. *He couldn't even see me . . . what the hell?*

"Tuck?"

I look up, panting. Aren stands in front of me, an ionized chainsaw guttering in his hands. Red blood sloughs off its glowing teeth. He wields it like a sword, trembling. "You're alive."

His face crumples as if he's about to cry. All I can do is nod. If he cries, *I'm* going to cry. And I don't need to puss out any more than I already have today, thanks.

Aren looks like hell, soaking wet and so bony, his circ-suit hangs off his body like a drape. He used to be a big guy. Mom liked them muscular, but not necessarily dumb. Now he's a pole. His hair clings to his face in wet, black spirals. His eyes are sunken like deep wells, more skull than face. He's weak, and it takes him four tries to shut the ion chainsaw off.

I'm so damn glad to see another human being, I don't care that it's my mom's much younger boyfriend. And I can't imagine I look any less piss-scared than Aren does at the moment. "Where's Mom?" I gasp, throat burning.

He swallows hard and looks down, but not at the corpse on the ground.

"Dead?" I ask.

"Let's hope not." He steps over the man, almost tripping. "Your mom's the only one who can save this ship."

"What happened to him?" I say, gesturing at the corpse.

"We don't know yet."

"We?" As in, other survivors?

"We," he affirms, offering me a hand up. I grab his bony forearm. He pulls me to my feet. We limp forward in the slowest three-legged race ever run.

"You're skinny enough to be a crutch," I huff.

"Yeah? And you're just a regular Rambo," he retorts. Told you he loves retro movies. "Glad to see a near-death experience hasn't affected your sense of humor."

"Just trying to lighten the—"

Another scream echoes through the darkness, cutting me off. Aren shudders. "Been awake an hour. The pods are opening on their own. The ship's AI is nonfunctional"—he takes a deep breath before continuing—"so we can't work with Dejah to rescue the people inside. Not sure we'd want to, since they're half-mad ninety percent of the time anyway."

"And Mom's pod? Open or closed?"

Aren exhales through his nose, making his nostrils flare. "Open," he says. "But dry. She's gone. We woke up in this nightmare without her."

"Come on, Aren, bubby," I say. My feet are still light and handy as bricks. "You're supposed to be the optimistic one on this mission."

"Huh, a *Die Hard* reference, nice," he says as we stumble down the aisle, both trying to stay vertical. "Well, yippie-ki-yay, kid, that is optimism. Otherwise, I'd say we woke up in hell."

PART ONE

# THE CRASH

As a student of Exodus-era history, I am often asked, “If the ecoterrorist cells of Pitch Dark still exist, why haven’t we heard from them in decades?”

In almost four centuries of operation, Pitch Dark has managed to deprive humanity of her past and undermine her future, leaving us in a tenuous present. During the Exodus of 2087, the Pitch Dark organization jettisoned almost one-third of Earth’s surviving population into deep space. Since then, they have bombed our places of government, blighted our soil, poisoned our water, and assassinated beloved leaders. With our torus colonies now far beyond peak efficiency and on the brink of collapse, it seems that the organization’s goal of destroying humanity may be within reach. If Panamerica fails to terraform Mars within the next fifty years—or make significant advancements in cloning the bacteria Pitch Dark has stripped from our soil—our colonies will fail.

The organization has heralded the twilight of humanity. Now its adherents wait for full dark to come.

*FROM THE NATURE OF DARKNESS: THE IMPACT OF PRE-EXODUS  
IDEALS ON A POSTCOLONIAL WORLD*

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PRESENTED TO THE PANAMERICAN HERITAGE ORGANIZATION,  
SEPTIEMBRE 2433

SS PANAM-12715 *CONQUISTADOR*  
H II REGION, IC 4703, 7,000 LIGHT-YEARS  
FROM THE COLONIES  
SHIP'S NARROWS  
12 ABRIL 2435  
0123 BELLS

## L A U R A

Tonight, my future hangs by the tips of my fingers. Never in my life did I want to break any of Mami's rules—but here I am, climbing the ship's massive silocomputers during the late bells. Breaking rules.

But this may be my only chance to escape.

As I reach for a new handhold, a translucent ioScreen dialog box opens over my wrist, displaying a ping message from my friend Alex: *You on your way, chiquita?* Its notification buzz tremors through my arm bones. My fingers slip. *Wedge it*, I curse in my head, nearly losing my grip. I halt my climb, wrapping my left thumb around the tops of my nails, anchoring myself to a black-body radiation meter. *That was close.*

Jutting fifteen centimeters off the silocomputer's facade,



the radiation meter makes a decent grip. But I can't rest here long. Radiation meters were designed to measure the potency of the electromagnetic waves in deep space, not to support the weight of a fifty-kilogram girl.

A second ping follows the first, this one from Faye: *Where are you, Laura?* The dialog boxes hover over the bioware node embedded in the back of my left wrist, shimmering, demanding my attention. No pasa nada if I'm hanging sixty meters above the floor, right? Strung up by a rope and barefoot? In a place I'm not supposed to be at *any* hour of the day, but especially not now? It's almost two bells past midnight. My little detour's taking longer than I imagined it would.

*No mames*, Faye adds in disbelief, *this is the most important party of your life. If you miss it, I'll never forgive you.*

Liar. She always forgives me. But if I don't make an appearance at Faye's soon, someone will realize I'm not at my family's party or my friends' party, or at *any* party, for that matter. If that someone is not as forgiving as Alex and Faye, they could ruin my plans for tonight.

Mami allows for few holiday permits once the ship's past the Interstellar Guard's—or ISG's—dead zone, but it's not every day one's archeologist parents stumble across what *appears* to be a fully operational, yet potentially abandoned, terrarium-class starship. If the ship contains even a remnant of the extinct bacteria and enzymes humanity needs to finish terraforming Mars, my parents will be national heroes. Tomorrow they might save the world; so tonight everyone's celebrating. Naturally.

Everyone but me.

Securing my rope, I sit back in my ancient climbing harness, wiping the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand. I snuck out of the family party early, after Mami and Dad made their ship-wide public speeches, then their private, family-only ones. I waited till Lena slipped away with her boyfriend, then ran to my room, changed into my climbing gear, and headed out the back door. Nobody noticed me missing. Till now.

A third ping arrives, again from Alex: *We're missing you, cari*. Still braced by my climbing harness, I open the image he attached. In the foreground, Faye waves at the camera. She looks radiant, her long brown hair falling in barrel rolls around her shoulders, big topaz eyes warm as Nueva Baja's solarshine.

Behind Faye and out of focus, my ex-boyfriend, Sebastian Smithson, holds court, surrounded by a gaggle of milk-pale, leggy girls. Emphasis on *gag*. Looking at Sebastian causes the muscles in my throat to constrict.

*That pendejo. Why isn't he celebrating with his bruja of a mother?* My stomach curls up into the fetal position when I realize he's probably waiting for me. After all, he's the heir to the Smithsonian Institution's legacy, and my parents just made the greatest find of the twenty-fifth century. No doubt he's planning to make my life even more of a living hell.

I swallow hard. The small piece of tech hidden in the hollow of my throat grates against my windpipe. I have to escape it, I have to finish my work here. *I must*.

Holding my left arm parallel to my chest, I select *Reply All* and type: *Give me 30, but tell my mamá I was with you all night*.

The replies ping back in nanoseconds.

Alex: *People are noticing you're not around, Lalita. Your cousins are here.*

Me: *Mierda, which ones?*

Alex: *Marta and Lena. Thought I saw Esteban, too.*

I blow out a breath. Marta and Lena won't tattle. Esteban might, since he makes it his business to "take care" of me. The fool. I'm the daughter of Elena Cruz. I take care of myself.

Faye shoulders her way back into the conversation: *Why do you hate fun, Laura?*

*I don't hate fun*, I type. My harness creaks as I sway back and forth on the rope. If I could be at Faye's party now, I would. But tonight provided too perfect an alibi, and I knew the ship's silo-computers wouldn't be monitored for a few hours. Maintenance workers are at gatherings all over the ship, everyone taking advantage of the captain's holiday permit. The ship's guards presented a minor concern, so I hacked their secure-cams and inserted a few protocols to blind them to my bioware signature. Then I spoofed Mami's geopersonnel locator. If she checks her GPL tonight, it will show my biomarker in the Pérez-Spiegels' apartment, not in the ship's Narrows . . . where I am *definitely* not supposed to be.

My bioware pings. It's Faye again: *I swear, Laura Cruz, if you're studying some nerd history of Uzbekistan in the twenty-first century during my party . . .*

*Pachanguera*, I type back, clicking my tongue. *Party girl*. It wouldn't hurt her to do a little more studying, seeing as how she's just putting in her uni applications *now*. I'll finish college in another year, maybe two. *Don't be so dramatic, I am not studying*. Though I almost wish I were doing something so plebe.

*I'm an artist, drama's what I do*, Faye replies. *He keeps asking me when you're going to get here, y'know.*

*Who?* I ping back.

*You know who*, Faye says.

She's right, I do.

*The güero*, Alex answers.

*I don't know what you saw in him*, Faye writes. *Seb's like cotija cheese—pale, but twice as bland. But I guess you both like to study?*

I almost type *Don't let Dr. Smithson hear you two throwing the G word at her son*, but don't. Had it not been for Sebastian, his mother, and their gringo attitudes, I wouldn't be here now, climbing the Narrows during a ship-wide celebration, lying to everyone I love and breaking all of Mami's rules. I won't defend Sebastian's actions, nor those of his mother.

*Be there soon*, I type as that familiar, yet artificial, lump rises in my throat. *Don't let Sebastian out of your sight*. He's the square root of trouble.

*Obvi*, she writes back, eye roll implied. *Hurry, k?*

*I will.*

Shaking my wrist to shut off my bioware's ioScreen, I consider the route up the rest of the silocomputer's face. Mami and Dad nicknamed the computers Lucita and Etel. I'm currently halfway up Lucita's portside face.

Lucita and Etel stand parallel to each other, two towering, hundred-meter-tall defenses between the *Conquistador*, her crew, and space's utter desolation. White lights wink like tiny stars across their surfaces. Heat radiates off the silos' absorption shields, bringing the temperature up to almost ninety degrees.

Hot enough to make me sweat while climbing. The computers hum and beep. Except for the whirl of cooled air through the HVAC systems and the blinking of machines, the Narrows lie quiet at this time of night.

I love the *Conquistador's* silos more than any other part of the ship; Lucita and Etel represent almost five hundred years of evolution. Their ancestors were born in garages and labs on a defunct Earth. Now these masterworks of engineering soar into the deepest regions of space.

“¡Ay!” I say, sparks nipping at my fingers when I grip the wrong end of a transfer tube. I shake out my hand. On either side of me, the ship's crysteel flanks let the Eagle Nebula's light inside. There's a murder of stars out there, lurking past the *Conquistador's* hull. Despite the danger, I'd rather cling to the edge of the universe by a fingertip, riding the edge of disaster, than stand on the Colonies' bioengineered but dead soil, safe and sound.

So it seems like I climb through space itself, cradled in a mountain-climbing harness I'm not supposed to have. Anchored by a rope I stole during the Alpha Centauri archeological dig. Hacking a computer I'm not supposed to touch. As captain and lead archeologist on this mission, Mami decides on all my *supposed to's*, none of which include having access to the ship's main systems.

Mami's nicknamed the Lioness of Baja for good reason—her honor, keen intelligence, persistence, and temper are all as legendary in Nueva Baja as the extinct beasts themselves. I'd never betray her trust if I weren't so desperate to escape the Smithsons' invisible shackles.

If my hands tremble as I climb, it's because this is the closest I've been to true freedom in three months.

After another seventeen meters, I reach Lucita's upper partition gates. Clipping myself to one of maintenance's U-bars, I pause, patting the silo's forepanel affectionately, like one might a cat.

"Come on, Lucita bonita, let's end this now." I take a deep breath to steady the drums beating in my chest. My lungs rattle as I breathe. *You can do this, Laura.* I repeat the words Mami always says to me. *You're a Cruz.*

"Fortuna y gloria," I whisper to myself.

*Go.*

I pop the silo's forepanel, then shut down a meter-high section of the absorption shield. The blue haze surrounding the partition gates automagically snaps off. So does the static hum. Shaking my left wrist, I rouse one of my bioware units again. Bioware consists of a pair of millimeter-thick crysteel diodes set into the user's wrists and wired to the nervous system, one that acts as a personal computer, a communication device, a GPL tracker, health monitor, games server . . . and more, if the user's clever. When activated, a touch-sensitive ioScreen shoots out of the diode. The screen can be resized and repositioned at will, though I generally keep it set to float above my forearm.

Using my fingers like virtual suction cups, I move my ioScreen beside Lucita's interface. Within seconds, I've initiated an upload for a new partition onto Lucita's slag drives, which will keep her from alerting the bridge while I work. I don't need to announce my presence to the night crew.

I spent a week writing the partition code in secret: in the

bathroom between classes, while monitoring the ship's gravidar for Dad, or late at night, after everyone went to bed.

Once the partition loads and installs, I breathe a bit easier. Luci won't be telling on me now. I order her to shift all her Sector 41.08 responsibilities to her sister, Etel, for the next twenty minutes.

Now I'm a ghost in the machine.

I initiate a brute-force attack on the captain's chair, watching thousands of lines of code spill over my ioScreen. The text moves so quickly, it almost looks like water cascading down the ioScreen's translucent facade. Ten billion lines of code stand between me and freedom. My ioScreen can't possibly display those lines fast enough.

Since the mission's Launch Day, my body hasn't been my own. For three months, I've carried a secret, silent spy, one forced upon me by two-faced enemies who masquerade as allies of my family's. The device, known as a subjugator, is illegal in all twenty-six Panamerican torus colonies. It allows an external user to program commands into a victim's bioware, thus allowing the user a modicum of control over the victim's behaviors. A *modicum*, of course, is not synonymous with *complete*; however, the subjugator's mere presence is an insult. A terror. A danger.

I press two fingers against the strange, alien lump residing in the hollow place between my collarbones. The subjugator's shaped like a spider—one metal knot in the middle, with eight fibrous legs anchoring it in my tissue. When the Smithsons held me down and dropped the thing in my mouth, it crawled down my tongue, its little feet pricking my skin like needles. I retched

as the device entered my throat, then screamed myself hoarse as it burrowed into my flesh.

Throughout the implantation procedure, Sebastian watched. He stood by as I writhed in pain. He said nothing while his mother scolded me for coughing bright blossoms of blood on their white marble floors. He looked away when she wiped my face with the cloth she'd just used on the floor, tutting at me.

The Smithsons programmed my subjugator with three main protocols:

One, I could never tell anyone about the device, on pain of death;

Two, I was barred from attempting to harm or injure a member of the Smithson family in any way: physically, emotionally, or otherwise;

And three, I was never to speak the secrets I overheard Dr. Smithson utter on Launch Day, or tell my parents of the Smithsons' plans to undermine and discredit the Cruz family and seize the artifacts in our collection. Dr. Smithson is keen on obtaining one piece in particular—the former United States of America's Declaration of Independence. My parents have refused to part with the document on the grounds that it belongs to all of Panamerica, and not solely the Smithsonian Institution.

So I'm breaking all the Smithsons' rules and smashing through their protocols. I'm exacting retribution for the last three months of shame, torment, and horror I've endured at their hands. I will hack into the captain's chair on the *Conquistador's* bridge and use it to shut my bioware down. Then I will run straight to Mami and tell her everything I know. All the secrets. A world



of lies. I will save my family's fortunes, the terrarium of our future, and myself.

My bioware rumbles, the lines of code on the ioScreen slamming to a stop. Two long numbers blink at the end of all those lines of text—the passcodes to the captain's chair.

*Excellent!* I smile when I recognize the numbers. The first passcode's made up of my immediate family's birthdays in chronological order: Dad's, then Mami's; my older brother Gael's, my mother's so-called Golden Lion; mine, the middle child and the one to whom all the work falls, not that I mind; and my babied younger sister, Sofía. The next number—Mami's personal bioware marker—is the longitudinal number for our home on Nueva Baja. That's Mami. No matter how far she flies, family and home are never far from her heart.

Moving quietly, I wipe all traces of my presence, physical and digital, from the silocomputer. I replace Lucita's forepanel and reignite her absorption shield. If everything goes according to plan, nobody will ever know I've been here.

As I rappel down, a shadow moves along the floor below. I land on my toes between the hindrance oscillators sticking off the wall, quiet as a cat and certain I've been caught. Tucking myself between the enormous, wing-shaped machines, I hold my breath. I expect someone to shine a light up the silocomputer's flank. To call my name and say I'm under arrest for breaking twelve Panamerican laws by hacking a silo while in-flight.

*Who could have figured out my location?* Besides the Smithsons, of course—my subjugator features a tracking function. But if it were Sebastian or his mother, they would have entered the room in the most dramatic way possible, with a contingent

of their own guards, turning on the Narrows' great floodlights and ordering me down from the silo's face.

None of that happens. Instead, one of the floor-level interfaces boots up. A rectangular floatscreen throws the intruder into an EVA-suited silhouette. From this distance, the bulk of the EVA and the wearer's helmet make it impossible to ascertain anything about the figure below—age, gender, ethnicity, none of it. One thing I do know: the *Conquistador's* standard-issue EVAs aren't nearly so bulky.

If it's not a Smithson below me, it means I have more than one enemy aboard this ship.

Fury swells within me, coloring my world red. Nobody gets to hack the *Conquistador's* silocomputers but *me*. This ship belongs to *my family*. While I would never jeopardize the ship's mission or the safety of her crew, I can't say the same for everyone aboard. The ship carries almost four hundred people. While I'd like to trust all of them, I've already been betrayed by the boy I thought I loved. Now I know better than to trust the hearts of anyone who isn't family.

I shift my weight, bracing myself against an oscillator. My rope creaks. The intruder's accessing the ship's gravidar servers—I know, because I've memorized the silos' every nanoboard and microframe. After life support, gravidar's our most mission-critical tech. It measures the Big Gs, or gravitational constants, of objects in deep space, helping us find the ships an earlier age of humanity scattered all over the galaxy. It's the tech Dad uses to track Panamerica's lost ships, one that also helps us to avoid colliding with objects while in-flight.

Now someone's hacking into the gravidar, on the night my

parents located a terrarium. Everyone's on holiday. It can't be a coincidence.

It has to be an attack.

*Wedge me.* I grit my teeth, wishing I had a pair of Specs to cut down the darkness and distance. If the intruder on the ground's any sort of hacker, they might have noticed how I spoofed the secure-cams, too. We won't be able to identify them on the security footage. Once I tell Mami about my subjugator and she's dealt with the Smithsons, I might be able to pick up the intruder's trail and reverse engineer their work—but if they're good, they won't leave much of a trace. It would be better to catch them here and now, if I can.

Quietly, I crawl down Lucita's face. I put my toes to the horseshoe-shaped electromagnetic accelerometers. Then one hand to the boxy capacitance sensor, which whirs at my touch. My harness clanks and I freeze, flattening myself to Lucita as much as possible. Below me, the intruder pauses, looking around. Of course, they don't think to look *up*, because the silos' six lifts are grounded on the floor. Why should anyone be above them, in the dark?

The figure hurries now, shaking their wrist to power up their bioware's ioScreen, then hitting a few keys to upload something into the gravidar's interface. I narrow my eyes, but it's no use. I'm too high and at the wrong angle to read either of the screens.

The interface winks out. The figure ducks into the shadows. I wait until a door slams, and then I move, rappelling down Lucita's surface in enormous leaps. My stomach flips each time I

launch myself into the shadows. I reach the floor in twenty seconds. Less.

Touching down, I untie the knots in my rope, kick it under a nearby cart, and sprint after the intruder.

At this time of night, the *Conquistador's* rounded tunnels are lit to 20 percent. Blue-white light leaks from the seed lighting along the ceiling. Shadows pool in the crannies between the auto-riveted plates, gears, and valves set in the walls. Long, multicolored pipes vein the ceiling in vibrant reds, oranges, teals, and greens. The grates underfoot punch into my bare feet as I run down the hall, climbing gear clanking as I go.

I pause at the first major intersection, catching myself on a wall. Panting. Nobody's dead ahead. The right tunnel stands clear. Down the left, I catch sight of an EVA-clad form, moving some thirty-five meters uptunnel. I could try to cut them off at the Colorado bulkhead, but I don't want to let the *pendejo* out of my sight.

Resisting the urge to shout *Stop!*, I launch myself off a wall, sprinting past a sign reading NO CORRA/NO RUNNING. The man in the EVA—he's built like a man, at least, tall and broad in the shoulders—pauses and glances back, startling, as if the sight of me has electrocuted him. In better light, I realize he's wearing one of the *Conquistador's* old EVAs, one with the identifying markings rubbed out. We got rid of those suits when I was ten.

*A long-term crew member? Someone we trust? No, it's got to be a trick.*

We stare each other down for two seconds; then he scrambles into a run. I give chase. Down two tunnels and through the

Solar Quads, which lie deserted at this time of night. The intruder's quick, and not exhausted from a fifty-meter ascent up a silocomputer's face.

Adrenaline surges through my body. I pump my arms. My feet slap against the tunnel floors. I don't dare call out for the ship's guards. They'll ask questions about my climbing gear. My bare feet. The spark burns on my left hand.

I'm gaining—four seconds behind and closing—when the intruder turns a right corner. I plunge down the hall to follow him, then stop cold when I find myself staring down a dead end.

He's disappeared. Without a sound. Without a trace. Almost like he's ghosted into the ship's walls. I put my hands on my hips, lungs burning, breath exploding. Dios mío, even my insides feel like they are sweating.

"Where did you go, pendejo?" I say in a choked cough. This close to the ship's medical wings, there aren't any hidden tunnels or hatches. Having done most of my growing up on this ship, I'd play escondidas with my siblings and the other children in the ship's halls. The best places to hide were near the loading docks or mech bays, places riddled with hatches, loose grates, and big pipes. But here, near the living quarters, the walls are smooth and featureless. There's nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide.

*How did you escape? Where did you go?*

There's another hacker on this ship, one who may be a black hat looking to somehow undermine us and this new find. After all, we needed the gravidar to locate the USS *John Muir*, as well as keep our own ship within range. A malicious attack on the

gravidar is an attack on the terrarium inside the *John Muir*, which is an attack on humanity's future.

Historically, there's only one organization that wants to watch humanity burn.

"Dammit!" I say, wishing I had something or someone to punch. I hate being bested.

My bioware pings with another message from Alex. I ignore it. I need to get to the bridge, access Mami's captain's chair, and shut down the bioware. That's my first priority. After the Smithsons are locked up in the brig, I can work with my parents to find and—

"Laura?" a male voice asks.

I startle. My heart stumbles in my chest. I turn, shock sparking in my fingers and toes.

Sebastian Smithson stands behind me, pinning me with his gaze. As one of the few people authorized to bring non-mission-critical clothing aboard, he's not dressed in a flight suit like me, but in a chest-hugging V-neck and matching black pants. He's all sugar-white skin, black hair, and eyes so green, even jealousy would envy them. I spend a full second wondering if he was the hacker in the Narrows, but no. Sebastian's taller than the man I saw in the hallway. And unless he's got a way to spoof his height and weight, it wasn't him.

Even now, I feel a sort of magnetic pull toward Sebastian, as if he could use the subjugator to command my heart. But I know the symptoms of Stockholm syndrome, too. Maybe my most primal instincts respond to his square-cut jaw, muscular shoulders, and full lips, but my head knows he can't be trusted.

He's a bastard. A pendejo. A betrayer. A liar. He thinks he's *el mero mero*, but to me, he's *scum*.

"It's *Lao-ra*. Accented *au* sound," I snap. "Not your white-bread *Law-ra*, you know that." Ever since we broke up, Sebastian stopped pronouncing my name with the proper Spanish accent—the subjugator only seems to respond to the mispronunciation of my name. It's a weapon the Smithsons use to crush my confidence. To belittle me. Each time Sebastian says *Laura* wrong, it's a slap in the face. Another way to try to take away who I am, and to try to separate me from the people and culture that gave me my name.

"Would you like to explain why your GPL locator shows you at the Spiegels' apartment?" Sebastian doesn't even acknowledge that Faye's a *Peréz* first. "But strangely enough, your little . . . *device* pegged you in the Narrows?"

Sebastian doesn't say the word *subjugator* aloud. Even *he* refuses to name the ways in which he oppresses me, as if using a euphemism somehow absolves him of guilt. It makes me sad and sick and furious, all at the same time.

"I went to that bloody party to find you," he says, spreading his arms wide. "But lo and behold, you weren't there."

I don't have to reach far to find a plausible lie: "I caught a hacker in the Narrows—some jerk messing with the ship's gravitar systems. Thanks to your interruption, he's escaped." Lifting my head, I turn my back on Sebastian, heading downtunnel, trying to go somewhere, *anywhere* else. After what happened on Launch Day, I've made it a point to never be alone in a room with him. His ability to command my subjugator is in check when we're in a crowd, but alone? I'm vulnerable. My body knows it,

too, every muscle screaming at me to run. “I need to check the ship’s logs to ensure he hasn’t cokebottled anything—”

“Laura,” Sebastian says. “Stop.”

The subjugator responds, issuing orders to the nanobots in my bloodstream. Every muscle in my body locks up. Even my lungs struggle against the command.

*Ten, nine . . .*, I count aloud in my head, not even able to move my eyes while he’s locked me down. Subjugator voice commands last ten seconds. Every ten seconds, he has to reinitiate the voice commands or else they lapse.

Sebastian’s footsteps echo behind me. Sweat flushes against the small of my back. My heart quivers, but still beats. I tell myself I’m not afraid of him, knowing it’s a lie.

*Eight, seven . . .*

Having been raised by an archeologist mother and a historian father, I know a few things about pre-Exodus human history. Like about Manifest Destiny, and the so-called Divine Right of Kings, and the rise of the Nazi Third Reich, all these ideas white men propagated to secure power and turn it against people who didn’t look, think, or believe like them. I’d like to say that in the last few centuries, humanity’s grown past those compulsions in a moral sense, that we’ve become better. Nobler. Wiser.

But we haven’t.

Sebastian’s power over me is terrifying on so many levels. When I tried to tell Mami about what happened with the Smithsons on Launch Day, the subjugator closed my throat up. The sensation was like going into anaphylactic shock, as if I was allergic to the words I was about to speak. When I started to



ping Faye and Alex about the device, it forced my fingers to delete the message. I've attempted to reverse engineer the subjugator's code; ventured to tip off the ship's doctors; even considered breaking my own wrists to deactivate my bioware, if only to keep the subjugator from controlling me.

After three months of racking my brain, trying to find a solution, I gave up and made plans to break my parents' rules and hack the captain's chair. Unless I escape Sebastian now, he'll foil that plan, too.

"Now, look at me," Sebastian says, lifting my face to his with a finger. Grinning, he leans close and kisses me on the lips.

*Three, two, one . . .* My stomach clenches. I feel like the ground might be shaking under my feet. When his hold on me breaks, I shove him back. "I'd punch you if I could," I say.

"That's against the rules, now, isn't it?" he says, his gaze dropping to my lips. "You still have the softest lips of any girl I've kissed. Have I told you that?"

I'm trapped, alone, with my ex-boyfriend. My abuser. My captor.

And nobody knows.

22 MONTHS AFTER WAKING  
USS JOHN MUIR NPS-3500  
SHIP'S DEEPS, TIER TWO, SECTOR 15  
DEEPDOWN TRAM TUNNELS  
DATE: APRIL 12, 2435  
TIME: 1:35:02 A.M.

## T U C K

We are the forgotten, the fearless, and the totally fragged. Nobody knows we're out here, so nobody cares.

The dim light flickers across gristle and bone. The ship's air smells meaty. Warm. Four bodies lay broken on the tram tracks. Shredded muscle and tendon stretch between their torsos and dismembered limbs. Blood puddles in the tracks' ladder-like rungs. It looks like crude oil in the near darkness. One body's decapitated, head missing. The torsos are hollowed out like retro Halloween pumpkins. Broken ribs stick up at right angles, tenting the flesh.

One man's strung up by his own entrails. He hangs from a train platform beam, swaying gently, throwing shadows.

Fan-frickin-tastic.

Blood's splattered across the crumbling procrete platform. Gobs of gore cover one of the platform signs, which reads:

**PLATFORM 21**  
**E-CLASS QUARTERS**  
**DOMESTIC WATER PUMPS**  
**SANITATION ENGINES**

Twin tram tunnels arch overhead, riddled with rust and decay. My memory's not what it used to be, but I remember what this place looked like before it went through time's guts and got shat out the other side. Every surface used to gleam. Now the metal's weak with age. Kick one of these tracks too hard and it crumbles. The *John Muir* wasn't built to last a human lifetime, much less four hundred years. Yet here we are, struggling to keep this shite heap running for another day. Another hour. Another breath.

Sometimes I wonder why we even bother.

That's a lie.

I wonder why we bother *all the time*.

I halt on the train tracks, huffing. My temporary partner, Holly, stops beside me. We've run five clicks of the tram tunnel in the last twenty minutes. We have another five before we reach our destination.

"*Oh god*," Holly says through the coglinks, looking at the bodies. The chips implanted in our frontal lobes are useful to a group of people who rely on silence for their survival. Even a whispered word can be a death warrant out here.

Holly turns away from the bodies. Her stifled cloth cape swirls around her feet. Pulling her ebony hair away from her face, she bends over and vomits. Yellow, chalky chunks of reconstituted egg slime the tracks.

*"Keep it down, newb."* I crouch down by the bodies. Unlucky bastards, these guys. Least they've escaped this hellhole. Not sure how much pain I'd be willing to suffer to get off this ship, but the amount gets a little higher by the day. *"We don't know if whatever did this is still running these tunnels."*

*"I'm not a newb, but I've never seen, um . . . what the bodies look like, after?"* Holly spits and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. *"W-what happened here?"*

*"Looks like a griever's work."* I touch the blood and rub it between my fingers and thumb. It's cold and tacky. The victims have been dead an hour or more. I flick the stuff off my fingers. *"You see those circular wounds in their torsos? Those were created by a specific harmonic resonance a griever uses to turn your organs into bombs. If it were mourners, there'd be nothing but scraps. And none of them would be tall enough to do that—"* I gesture at the man hanging from the entrails noose.

*Or mean enough.*

Holly shudders. So I don't mention how the victims are surrounded by bullet shells, but there aren't any guns in sight. It's too weird. Or how one of the victims has an ouroboros tattoo on his jugular. You know, the snake eating its own tail? I narrow my eyes, telling my rigid heads-up display lens, or HUD, to zoom in on the guy's neck. The snake's looped around the Earth. I've seen the logo before. It hides in deep, dark places within the

*John Muir*, painted on pipes or walls, sectors other curators fear to go. My memories aren't great, but I think it's a logo I saw back on Earth a few times.

Never seen it on a person, though.

*"They're not dressed like our curators."* Holly pulls her balaclava over her mouth and nose to block the stench. She turns back to the scene.

*"That's because they aren't ours,"* I say, pulling my knife from my belt.

*"How is that possible? Nobody could survive in the deepdowns,"* she says.

*"Someone obviously is."*

*"But how could anyone live outside the park, down here . . ."*

Holly pauses. *"Tuck, what are you doing?"*

I skin the side of the man's neck with my knife, taking a ragged piece of tattooed flesh from him. I pull a sample kit from my slimpack and plaster the skin to a glass slide.

*"Tuck!"* Holly cries.

*"What?"* I ask, sticking the sample kit back into my bag. *"He doesn't need it."*

*"That's . . . that's so . . . ugh."*

*"Survival's a barbaric thing, sweetheart."*

*"You're going to carry a piece of him around with you?"*

*"That's the idea."*

*"No wonder no one wants to run tunnels with you—"*

The floor trembles. A moan crawls out of the tunnel's bowels. Holly whirls around to look behind her, checking our six. There are two directions in a tram tunnel, but the metal walls and ribs bend sound. I can't tell if the groan's coming from the

fore or the aft part of the tunnel. It rises in pitch before dropping into a lower, grittier register.

"Mourners," Holly says.

"No shit, Sherlock." I rise, scanning the flickering darkness ahead of us. Nothing moves.

She glares at me, gripping the knife at her hip. "*Sherlock? What's that mean?*" At least Holly gets that I'm mocking her, even if she's not well read enough to get the reference. Plenty of curators aren't. Or worse, they lost their sense of humor when they found themselves on the wrong side of the universe with no viable engines and zero hope of rescue.

My mom used to say hate and hope are hard to kill. She was wrong about hope, but hey, I'm doing okay living on piss and vinegar.

"*It means pay attention to our six, not my handsome face,*" I say.

She smirks, but still looks a greener shade of pale. "*Becca's right, you are a jerk.*"

"*'Jerk' is just people's default reaction to my special brand of humor, bruh.*" Or any humor out here, for that matter. *You never take anything seriously!* they say. *This isn't funny!* they say. But here's the thing *they* don't understand: When you've given up on life, everything seems like a joke.

"*'Bruh'?* Is that another one of your old-timey words?" she asks. "Well, I'm not here for your comedy show, bruh."

"*That's a damn shame. I'm funny in the deepdowns.*"

"*I'm pretty sure humanity stopped thinking that being an asshole was funny in 2016.*"

I swallow my laugh, 'cause I can't make a sound out here. Why'd it take a catastrophe to have a conversation with Holly?

The girl's got grit. Maybe it's because she's a few years younger than me. And she's right about one thing—I'm not anyone's first or last pick of partners for tunnel runs, either. The other curators think I'm cursed.

So I run solo.

It keeps me from breathing the bouquet of someone else's vomit.

Aren wouldn't let me run this job alone, though. Thirty minutes ago, our ship's maglev hub went offline. Aren asked for two curators to run the tram tunnels to the aft deck to reboot the system. We curators are jacks-of-all-trades, mechanics, engineers, and duct-tape slingers. We're the ship's last line of defense, shaken awake from stasis when she started to fall apart from the inside out. Of the original ten thousand members of the *Muir's* crew, only about a hundred and fifty of us woke up on the human side of the stasis pod. Of that number, only a few have the skills to run tunnels and make repairs to our dying ship.

Without the maglev hub, our trains won't work. Without the trains, the curators can't reach the ship's primary and auxiliary systems. Without the ship's systems, everyone's as good as dead—ship, park, and the remnants of our crew, yada, yada, yada.

But nobody runs these tram tunnels anymore. There's no need, not when the trams do all the running for us. Stretching some twenty-five kilometers across the *Muir's* outer crescent, the tram tunnels offer no cover, no protection. No places to hide. Here, the silence owns a soul-crushing gravity. The metal ceiling sheds rusty patches of skin. Aging LE-1 lights flicker.

Shadows scatter off the dead maglev rails under our bare feet. Even the smallest sound will bury us.

But the track's the fastest way to the maglev station.

I volunteered for this mission, surprising nobody. The whole crew knows I've been chasing death for months in the deep-down tunnels, triple-dog-daring the ship to gank me. I've traversed almost every centimeter of this place, with the exception of the bridge and some of the outboard stations. I've paddled across the deepdown sea. I've jumped into a defunct biomaterials processor. I've crawled through kilometers and kilometers of ducts and pipes and tunnels, just to see where they led. I've fought mourners on top of moving trams, infiltrated Sector Seven to shut down the malfunctioning chlorophyll generators, and nearly been electrocuted by a griever in the power rooms.

Nobody knows this ship better than me. Not Aren. Not the other curators.

Maybe not even Mom.

Aren says risk taking's my way of dealing with grief. If that's true, my five stages of grief weren't so much stages but sewers. I've slogged through them all and made peace with my Maker. When the end comes, I'll be ready.

When I get to the pearly gates, I'm going to punch that angel right in his shiny face.

Even the gods have abandoned us out here.

The other curators drew straws for the second spot for this trip. Nobody wants to tunnel run with the guy with the half-baked death wish. Everyone blames Mom for getting us deep-sixed, for not stopping the hacker who jettisoned us. I know better. Of all the things I remember from before—not much, to



be honest—I remember my mother’s work ethic best. And all she ever wanted was to save the world.

All I ever wanted to do, though, was *live* in it. Make some movies about it, maybe. See, heroism on the silver screen’s a different sort of thing than it is in real life. When you’re watching a movie, someone else is dragging their partner’s corpse to a safe room, hoping the monsters don’t find them first. When you’re watching a movie, someone else gets hit in the face with the arterial spray of the curator who didn’t duck behind the tunnel rib quick enough. When you’re watching a movie, you’re not the one wresting the bloody knife out of the hand of the girl who just flayed her own leg, confused from listening to too much mourner-song.

In fact, being a hero is a shite job, which is why I stopped running the tunnels with other people.

Then Holly Ayakawa pulled the short straw.

Aren made me promise I wouldn’t do anything stupid on this run. Translation? Not to do anything that’ll get Holly killed. Let’s get one thing straight: I might have a death wish, but I’m not taking anyone with me. Especially not Holly. She’s fifteen. A violinist, I think? Or maybe she plays guitar, I don’t know. Something with strings. Plus, she’s the only curator left on the ship who speaks fluent Japanese. A lot of the engineers left their logs in Japanese hiragana. I don’t trust Dejah to translate them.

And postscript? I’m not an asshole.

Edit that: Not a *complete* asshole, at least.

Not all the time.

A red light blinks on my HUD in the upper-right periphery of my vision. “*Here we go*,” I say. That tiny light blinks whenever

our coglink chips pick up the mourners' subsonic calls. It's a mod I engineered to keep our curators safer in the tunnels.

"Dejah?" Holly asks, checking in with the ship's AI. "*You there?*"

"*Changing channels to the t-Two floor now,*" Dejah says. Her voice pitches and falls in all the right places, but not even Mom could make Dejah's AI sound fully human. "*How can I help you, Holly?*"

"*Do you have a visual on any mourners near our position?*" Holly asks.

"*I'll scan the tunnels. One moment, please,*" Dejah says. We wait for ten seconds. Twenty. Why does anyone say *one moment* when they really mean *shush*? Then: "*There's a large mourner pod half a kilometer aft of your position, moving steadily toward you.*"

Dejah uploads her live video feed onto my HUD. The mourners stalk through the tunnel. Blind, except for their echolocation. Once human, their locomotion has now evolved to support their top-heavy rib cages. They walk on their knuckles like apes, their clothing in tatters, skin bleached pale. In the vidfeed's low resolution, I can't tell how many of them are out there. The tunnel walls look like they're made of writhing white flesh.

"*Have they heard us?*" Holly whips back, facing my side of the tunnel. She pulls her hood over her head. It shadows her face. Her skin's pale as bone. I could reach out and trace the blue veins in her cheeks, if I didn't have a strict no-touching-people policy. Touching makes you care. Touching fills up the emptiness. And that empty air in my chest is all I have left to burn.

"*I am 95.75 percent sure they have,*" Dejah replies. "*The pod is in the process of changing direction.*"

*"Thanks for the warning,"* I snap.

*"I detect a tone of sarcasm,"* Dejah says. *"You know Dr. Morgan did not program me—"*

*"To read and respond to sarcasm,"* I finish for her. *"Blah, blah, blah. I know, Dejah."* I tug my balaclava mask over my mouth and nose. Our garments are made of black anechoic platelets—stiflecloth. Our clothing deflects the mourners' searching trills, but not their killing blows. The trills function like echolocation, drawing our shapes for their blind eyes. The best defenses against them are stillness, silence, luck . . .

And in a pinch, a well-aimed knife.

A howl unfurls, a shredded, tortured sort of song. The crew calls them *mourners* because their shrieks sound like someone sobbing at a funeral. Even at this distance, their cries grate against my exposed forehead like sandpaper.

*"Guess that's an affirmative,"* I say to the girls. *"Let's move."*

*"There's a tram station less than a kilometer ahead of you,"* Dejah says, her calm, nonchalant tone jarring against my rising panic. *"I have a visual on a weeper. Get out of the tunnel."*

*"Ooh, a weeper,"* I say to them. *"Things are getting interesting."*

*"Shut up, Tuck!"* Holly snaps.

We leave the dead bodies for the mourners and sprint for the station.

Curators run barefoot to keep our footsteps whisper quiet. We've been trained to underpronate each step, so the fleshy outsides of our feet hit the ground first. Over time, the impact will shred the cartilage in our knees and ankles. I've got huge calluses on the soles of my feet. But rough skin, bum knees, and bad hips are better than being flayed alive.

Holly's stifled cloth cape streaks out behind her as she runs. The girl's good, fast, and silent. I'm not as quick. For one, I'm bigger. Two, I tore my right ACL playing center halfback on Earth. That's soccer, for the uninformed. I remember scraps of playing sports, of getting injured. My leg's never been the same since. Anytime I run, there's always a twinge of pain under the kneecap.

The injury feels like it happened hundreds of years ago. Four hundred-ish, to be more or less exact. And when the *Muir* got deep-sixed and shoved in a random corner of space, the whole crew chose hyperstasis. We woke up centuries later for no apparent reason. One percent of us exited stasis with raging headaches—most of the kids, teens, and younger adults. The other ninety-nine percent came out sounding like a bunch of whales gargling glass.

Stasis stole something from everyone:

It burned the memories from our heads.

It stole our stories, our humanity.

Our families, too.

In most cases, it ended our lives.

We don't know how it happened—none of the stasis engineers survived. You know, the people who could tell us what went wrong with the pods? On top of that shite heap, nobody's been able to breach the mourner nest infesting the bridge, which means we don't have access to the ship's logs, either.

Some of the curators believe that an alien substance contaminated our stasis tubes, creating the mourners. Others think it was an act of God. Aren, however, once told me it wasn't aliens or God or any paranormal shit like that.

It was *us*.

Long story short, when humanity tried to restore Earth's failing atmosphere, the plans backfired. *Royally*. We poisoned the planet's air, thus accelerating the rapid deterioration of the ozone layer. People lived under big domes while scientists like Mom scrambled to find a way to save our stupid-ass species, but the domes took time to build. People breathed that poisoned air for months, sucking it straight into their blood and bones and brains. They died by the hundreds of millions.

One evening—after Aren and I had returned from a repair job on the *Muir* that almost killed us both—we sat on the lodge's deck and watched the ship's solar rings set. He handed me one of his home-brewed beers, his knuckles all scraped to hell, a cut still scabbing over one eye, and said, *There's something you should know about them*.

*About who?* I asked.

*The mourners*. Aren glanced over his shoulder, making sure no one else was in earshot. *Dr. Knowles . . . told me something today. Said she'd connected the mourners' mutated DNA back to the contaminants in the Earth's atmosphere. They're not aliens or zombies, just our own mistake*.

Well, that was one hell of a mistake.

Then again, human beings did find a way to kill an entire planet.

Halfway to the tram station, Holly stumbles. Screams. The pure, crisp note echoes through the tunnels, along with a metal crack!

*Ah crap—*

Holly crumples to the ground, clutching her right foot. A

rusted spike impales her flesh, broken off the track. The blackened sole of her foot dimples around the metal. The puncture's clean through.

*One.*

"Omigod . . . omigod . . .," she sobs aloud.

*Two.*

On instinct, I fall over her and cover us both with my cape. I clap a hand over her mouth. *"Shut up, shut up, shut up! It's okay, you're okay, I've got you. Breathe."*

*Three.*

A tornado of shrieking rips up the tunnel. I swear I feel my eardrums flex against the sound. FYI, that doesn't feel good.

Holly bites down on my hand, screaming into the flesh. The pain's sharp. Blood gushes from my skin. Sweat scales my forehead. *We're screwed now.*

I keep us pressed against the ground. At this distance, the stifled cloth blocks us from taking additional damage. The procrete tunnel floor's chilly and rough. We're lying on a bed of junk, on broken glass and rusted bolts and screws. *Where'd all this crap come from? Why haven't the cleaning bots swept it away?*

*"The pod is a kilometer away,"* Dejah says in my head. *"Leave the girl."*

*"What?"* I snap. *"When did Holly become 'the girl'?"*

*"You know protocol, Tuck,"* Dejah says. In my head, the words *A lame curator is a dead curator* echo in Aren's voice.

*"No, no, no,"* Holly says. *"P-p-please no, don't leave me, I'll be good. I don't want to end up like those dead people back there. I'll be quiet—"*

*"C'mon, Holly. I might be a jerk, but I'm not that much of a jerk."*

I toss the cape off my head and tap the corner of my HUD eye twice. It switches the viewing mode over to infrared. The dim tunnel light disappears. In the distance, small red-and-green shapes lope toward us. Some of the mourners run up the walls, using tiny suckers on their palms to attach themselves to vertical spaces. Farther back, green infrared light rings the whole tunnel.

Damn, the whole place's lousy with the bastards.

"It's the *alpha pod*," I think. The big one, made up of some two thousand individuals. In a pod that large, mourners aren't our only problem. Do the math—for every hundred mourners there's a weeper. For every five hundred, a griever. These bastards take advantage of the *Muir's* extra-dense air and weaponize it via their shrieks and screams.

You see—and I'm not going to get too scientific here, because in case you haven't noticed, I'm about to die—sound moves through all matter in waves. Mourners pitch their voices to sharpen those sound waves, which turns the air around you into a weapon, so that when the waves hit the human body, they cut. They flay. They blast out your organs, or make your eyeballs explode like zits under pressure. Mourners can use their voices to cause blunt-force trauma. Some have voices that travel through walls and make people hallucinate and harm themselves.

Lovely, right?

Mourners make up the bulk of every pod. They're quadrupeds and awkward as hell, running about half as quickly as your average curator. Imagine a hairless, skinny-ass gorilla with the ballooning throat of a frog, and you've got the right idea.

Remnants of their humanity cling to their bodies—tattered flight suits, jewelry sometimes. Their voices have a max trajectory of around twenty meters, depending on the individual.

Weepers are their bigger, badder cousins, ones with ropy muscle, a fifty-meter scream radius, and claws. Neither is very smart. I've seen both types disembowel grown men, lop off heads, and tear organs from still-living bodies.

Then there's the griefers.

Griefers are invulnerable, powerful, and smart. Bipedal, too, making them as fast as most curators. Armored with thick, fingernail-like platelets all over their bodies, they can't be harmed by blunt weapons. Our ion saws require close combat. Those are out. Nobody wants to be in arm's—or tentacle's—reach of those bastards. Griefers use a full spectrum of vocalizations, capable of cutting off a limb or bursting an organ in your gut. Humans are their toys. They live to hear us scream.

Even healthy, I wouldn't try to outrun a pod this large.

Well, maybe if I was alone, dammit.

What a rush.

I switch my HUD's function to a ship schematic by tapping my tear duct instead of the outer corner of my eye. The HUD edges every element of the tunnel in green. Machinery and ductwork hidden in the walls appear in blue. Malfunctioning equipment is highlighted in red, making the maglev tracks look like the crimson highway to hell. The electric wiring looks spotty, too, which explains the flickering lights. Our HUD lenses are hooked up to the AI and allow curators to identify problems with the ship in real time. We lifted this tech from the ship's original maintenance crew.



Desperation rising, I scan the nearby tunnel until I spot something: a derailed, unarmored tram. The massive carriage lies in the black shadows, smashed against one of the walls. *Well, that's where all the garbage on the ground came from.* The dead guys uptunnel must've been using it to get around, because the tram's not one of our armored ones.

*"The pod is now a quarter kilometer away,"* Dejah says. *"Leave the girl, or die with her."*

I throw my stifled cloth cape off Holly. Scooping her into my arms, I rise. *"I'm not leaving her behind, Dejah."*

*"I think that means you are a fool,"* Dejah says.

*"Better a fool than a puss-out,"* I say. *"Someone left me behind when I was little. Swore I'd never do the same."* I ease past a field of shattered glass. The tracks shake underfoot, the mourners' calls growing closer. Holly presses her face into my neck, her eyes hot with tears. Least she's quiet, least she's light. One more whimper could end us. So could one shard of glass.

In the deepdowns, our lives depend on such small things.

I approach the derailed tram, inching around its shattered windshield. Most of the windows are intact. If we can make it inside, we might be able to huddle under the seats, wrapped in our cloaks. Maybe the mourners will pass us by.

I'm not afraid to die, but with my track record, I'm afraid Holly *will*. Maybe that's why I'm nervous. Or why my hands are so slick with sweat.

*"Fifty meters,"* Dejah says. The monsters' feet and fists pound the ground. The shattered glass tinkles, dancing across the floor. In seconds, the mourners will be close enough to sense our heartbeats. Close enough to kill.

We need to hide.

The light weakens near the tram. One lone bulb hangs loose from the ceiling about ten meters away, sparking. Dying. Holly's breathing ratchets tighter. She touches the outer corner of her eye twice, watching over my shoulder. "*Vanguard's here,*" she says.

"*Get inside and wrap up in your cloak,*" I say. "*Keep it quiet.*"

I place a bioluminescent flare inside the tram's windshield, then duck past the toothy, busted-out glass. Inside, I ease Holly into the aisle. She crawls into the tram, favoring her impaled foot. I follow her, helping her hide behind the last seat.

"*Don't move,*" I say, draping her cloak over her head. "*Do your chi breathing exercises to handle the pain, got it?*"

"*Okay.*"

I can tell she's trying hard not to cry. Wish I could get her out of here.

Glass crunches behind me. I freeze, balanced against the side of a seat. My heart slams up against my ribs. Fear curdles between my teeth.

Carefully, I turn my head.

If my bones creak, that's it. Player One down.

A mourner stands in the broken glass outside. My flare casts its white skin in sick green light. Pale flesh bubbles over its eye sockets, blinding it. Ropy, powerful muscle rustles under its dry, flaky shoulders. A black, fleshy sac sags against its throat.

Relief burns through me. It's not Mom. Every mourner I see, I have this moment of panic in which I expect to see my mother's face on a monster. But this time, it's not her. One day it might be, but not here. Not now.

The mourner's throat swells up like a frog's, its mouth cracking open, ready to scream.

*One.*

"Nice try, Tuck," Dejah says. "*I suppose now you die.*"

*Two.*

But Holly won't survive without me.

To my own surprise, I reply, "*Not today.*"

*Three.*

The creature screams.