

Europa Rises

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Chapter 1

“Kill all men! Kill all men!”

The chants drowned out almost everything else. Carrie watched the crowd with the sort of vigilant indifference that came about only with experience. It wasn't the first June Movement protest she had been guarding. Inevitably there would be scuffles, clashes with the security forces trying to keep it from happening. So far it had been peaceful. The women shouting and chanting had been content with making noise and waving their signs and banners. There had been attempts of provocation aimed at the male officers, but they had failed.

“You're a traitor to your gender!”

Carrie ignored the woman shouting at her despite her getting very close to her. She could swear some of her spit landed on the visor of her riot helmet.

“Keep your cool,” said Thomas from next to her. The line of officers standing in front of the protesters was tight so it wasn't that hard to talk to the person next to you.

“I know,” said Carrie and shut out the continued abusive words being thrown at her now that the rest of the crowd had learned she was a woman. It shouldn't have been hard to miss despite all the protective gear she was wearing. She was of significantly more slender build than the men surrounding her on either side.

The woman that had been shouting at her shoved her.

“Back! Get back!” Carrie shouted immediately and shoved her back before she could embolden the crowd enough for a concentrated push against the line of officers separating them from their target. It wasn't much of a target, in Carrie's opinion. A community centre that was holding a talk for several somewhat famous internet personalities. Somehow the June Movement had decided those people were horrible woman haters and deserved no sympathy. Then again, they were shouting death to all men so maybe it wasn't that surprising.

Then the building behind Carrie exploded.

She felt the push against her back and then the earth rumbling explosion.

She looked over her shoulder. Windows had blown out and flames licked out of many of them. A part of the building had collapsed. She was thankful the protesters had been cornered off on the other side of the square. Had the explosion happened closer to them there would have been casualties.

She turned back towards the crowd. There were shocked looks and silence. Then they burst out in cheers.

“Protest is over,” came the voice of her captain through the radio. “Disperse the crowd. We need to let the fire department and ambulances in close and we need the entire square for all that. There's going to be a lot of dead and injured in that pile of rubble.”

“All right. Protest is over. Get back!” Carrie started herding the crowd along with the rest of the officers. The moment she got hit with a sign she knew it wasn't going to go down easily. The protesters pushed against the line of officers. Fists, signs, loose rocks, what ever the protesters could get a hold of, was flung at them. It turned into an all out brawl.

Carrie used her baton as sparingly as she could. The electric jolt it sent through the victim when touching skin was debilitating. It might leave a scorch mark, but at least it wasn't lethal. She didn't see the hit coming from the side. It knocked her to the ground despite the helmet. She barely had time to curl up before the crowd around her started to stomp on her. Her protective gear was meant to stop weapon fire, but it padded her against hits and kicks too. She couldn't tell how long it went on, but when the crowd was finally dispersed her helmet was gone. Blood trickled down the side of her face and she could tell there would be large bruises all around her body the next day.

“You all right?” asked Thomas as he knelt down next to her. Around him officers were beating back the protesters. Carrie could see blood flowing from wounds some of the protesters had suffered. Two officers had just handcuffed one of them and were dragging her away from the mass of angry shouts.

Carrie shook her head and tried to focus. It was hard with the pain starting to throb in her head. “I think I'm done for the night.”

“Let's get you out of here then,” said Thomas and put one of her arms over his shoulders before hoisting her up. She took wobbly steps supported by him. A

bottle smashed to the ground not too far from them. Shouts followed, but at least it hadn't been filled with anything flammable. The fire-trucks and ambulances had arrived and they were fighting the blaze consuming the bombed building. Another portion of it had crumbled down while the mob had been assaulting Carrie. It looked hopeless.

“Need some help here!” Thomas shouted and got a couple of paramedics to rush over. They quickly led her to one of the ambulances and had her lay down on the stretcher at the back of it. They started stripping away her protective gear to get a better look at the damage done.

“We've got her,” said one of the ambulance crew and started to shoo Thomas away. He gave Carrie a smile before pulling down the visor of his helmet and turning back towards the unruly mob.

The ambulance doors were closed and the vehicle lurched forward. The sirens started to blare.

“Am I that bad off?” she asked while they worked on stopping the blood flow from her head wound.

“You've been hit on the head pretty bad. Who knows what internal damage has been done. Best we get you to a hospital quickly to check everything out.”

Carrie nodded and laid back on the stretcher. She trusted the professionals to know what they were doing.

Twelve hours later she was out of the hospital and back at the precinct locker room. They'd closed the wound on her head, did some scans to ensure nothing had gone wrong with her insides and then given her some pain medication because of the sores and bruises that were forming.

Nothing serious then.

She opened her locker and stared into the mirror in the door. She had to admit she looked horrible. Black sacks under her eyes from staying up so long, an uncomfortable expression from the pain and blood loss, and long black hair that looked like someone had thrown glue into it, ruffled it around and then let it dry. She grimaced at the thought of untangling it all.

She took out her communication pad and turned it on. It took a moment for the thing to boot up and then load messages. She put it back in the locker to let

it do its thing and grabbed a towel. She stripped naked and walked into the showers. Normally she'd have been out in five minutes, but it had been a rough twelve hours. The warm water was relaxing. Soaking her hair made it easier to comb through it with her finger and untangle the worst of it.

She walked out with a towel wrapped around herself.

Thomas was sitting next to her locker, his own open right next to it. He was still in his riot gear. The helmet sat on the bench next to him.

"Hey," said Carrie with a smile. She was happy to see the man had come through uninjured. They had been partners for a year now. Enough time to grow a bond of comradely. She sat down on the bench next to him.

"Hey you too," said Thomas and gave her a look over. He grimaced at the sight of the bruises on her otherwise light brown skin. "Looks nasty."

"Looks worse than it is," said Carrie. "What happened after I was taken away?"

Thomas sighed. "We managed to calm down the crowd. Arrested maybe twenty of the worst ones."

"What about the community centre?"

"Twenty dead last I heard. Including a kid. Luckily the talkers weren't much of a crowd draw. Had this happened tomorrow there would have been a few hundred more people in there."

"How many were in there tonight?" asked Carrie and stood up. The air was starting to feel chilly with just a towel wrapped around her.

"There was the panel talk. Maybe seventy people. Twenty more on top of that for a cooking class. I doubt they'll dig out anyone alive from the rubble," Thomas said and buried his head in his hands for a moment. Carrie used the opportunity to slip from the towel and put on a shirt and panties.

"I just can't understand why someone would do something like that. They were just ordinary people. Opinionated people, sure, but still. And those that were in there for the cooking class? People who were just looking to learn a new skill. There shouldn't have been anything controversial about it." Thomas shook his head. He was a year into the job. Some things still got to him.

"Extremists rarely make sense to ordinary people," said Carrie and dug out a

pair of trousers. She slipped into them while Thomas watched. She was used to the mixed locker rooms, but the way he was looking still made her a bit uncomfortable. Maybe it was the tired look in his eyes or the fact she could tell the real struggle he was having with dealing what had happened.

“Look, the June Movement has been riling up ever since cloning from scratch started to seem viable. They think men are obsolete and must go. They're nutters, plain and simple. Probably started as a joke, but as time went on some people took it seriously and started to actually believe it. People like that don't need a rational reason for their actions. Just what their warped minds tell them.” Carrie grabbed her communication pad and sat down on the bench. The indicator light was flashing, telling of the new messages it had downloaded while she had been in the shower.

“Doesn't make it any less abhorrent,” said Thomas and started to take off his protective gear.

“No, it doesn't.” Carrie turned her attention to the messages she had received. There was the usual junk mail, special offers from various stores she frequented and a few messages from her friends that were worried about her. They'd known where she would be and no doubt the news had blasted everything about injured officers and people getting killed and arrested. She took the time to reply to them to let them know she was all right. The most interesting messages were the last ones. They were from the security headquarters. She opened up the first of the messages. It took a moment for her to take in what was said. Then she couldn't help but let out a chuckle of disbelief.

“I passed,” she said and looked up at Thomas. He was now shirtless.

“You what?” he asked and turned to look at her.

“I passed. I made detective.”

“Really? Congratulations,” said Thomas and smiled. “You studied hard enough for it. You've earned it.”

Carrie shook her head and skipped to the next message. “I still didn't think I'd make it.” She read the message. It was her re-assignment. She had expected it. The security headquarters sent people where they were needed. It was part of the job that you could be working on Earth one day and be shipped off to Mars

the next. It was almost like being in the army in that regard. Still, when she read where she was being assigned she couldn't help but feel slight disappointment.

"They're re-assigning me," she said and looked up at Thomas.

"I take it it's not to your liking?" Thomas stared at her look of disbelief.

Carrie shook her head. "They're sending me to Minerva."

Thomas whistled. "Jupiter, eh? Who did you piss off?"

"No one," said Carrie. She chuckled. It wasn't what she had hoped for, but it would give her some much needed experience. Working at a space station could be valuable experience that opened up doors to places serving on Earth would not. But she'd be far away from everything familiar to her. Her friends would be gone and talking to them would have to happen through pre-recorded messages.

"They don't send new detectives to Jupiter for no reason," said Thomas.

"I haven't pissed off anyone," Carrie insisted and pocketed the comm pad. She grabbed her jacket from the locker and closed it. The lock shut automatically.

"Well, you certainly don't have fans high up if they're sending you to Jupiter," said Thomas and took off the last of his clothes.

Carrie shrugged. "I go where they tell me to go, but right now I'm going home. I could use a good drink, hot bath and some rest."

"I'll see you before you leave for good, right?" asked Thomas.

"I won't leave until a week from now," said Carrie before leaving the locker room and giving the man a wave. She didn't get past the lobby before hearing her name called.

"Apalkov!"

It was the captain.

She turned to regard the man. He was in the usual blue uniform with his captains stripes clearly visible on his collar. His hair was starting to grey up and wrinkles change the way his face looked, but he still had a healthy stomach from all the beer and doughnuts he enjoyed.

"Captain Dahan."

"Good to see you made it out without any major injuries," said the man and stopped in front of her. The lobby was relatively silent for the time of day. A few

on duty officers were manning the reception desks, a few clerks were meeting customer over various permit issues and a few people were waiting in handcuffs to be processed into hold up.

“Just a few bruises, sir,” replied Carrie and shrugged. “Mobs can be hard to predict.”

“What a mess that was,” said Dahan and shook his head. His voice had a depth to it that made you think he was talking from inside a barrel. “I’ve seen a lot in my decades of service, but these June Movement types are taking things to an extreme I haven’t seen in a long time. Not since the food riots.” He gave Carrie a look over. “I hear you will be leaving us.”

Hearing what happened compared to the food riots made Carrie think the captain was exaggerating. The food riots had been global and bad enough to topple governments. All it had taken was a severe drought in most of North-America and Europe along with a new fungus that destroyed rice crops in Asia and the world had found itself short on grain of all sorts. Government rationing had not made people happy and governments had failed in all sort of ways that made the entire thing worse.

Millions of people had starved to death. Those that had the energy had rioted.

It had been a giant clusterfuck.

Carrie pushed past the comparison and nodded. “Just read the messages. I made detective and as a reward they’re shipping me off to Minerva.”

“I know what people think about Jupiter,” said Dahan. “They think it’s a punishment. It’s not. You don’t send incompetent people to space, much less across half the solar system. When something goes wrong you don’t want an incompetent buffoon dealing with it just because they pissed someone off. You want the best on the scene and that’s why you’re going to Minerva. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Carrie felt the words spark a warmth in her that was rarely fanned by Dahan. He was a good captain, fair, but it was rare to hear such high praise from him on anyone. “Thank you, captain.”

Dahan put a hand on her shoulder. “You’ve been a fine officer here. You will

do well no matter where you are sent. And once you're done at Minerva doors will open for you that would have otherwise been closed. Make the most of it.”

“I will, captain,” said Carrie and smiled.

“Now go home and rest. You've still got a weeks worth of work for me and I expect you back in twenty-four hours!”

“Yes, sir,” said Carrie and saluted the man. Dahan took his hand to his brow in return before Carrie turned around and walked outside. The breeze coming down the street felt refreshing. She pulled out her compad and ordered herself a ride. Walking to the side of the street she had time to go through a few new messages. Replies from her friends, glad to hear she was ok.

It didn't take long for the ride to arrive. It was a standard five seat car that drove around guided by an elaborate program that balanced demand with maintenance. The door popped open as soon as Carrie got close to it with her compad.

The syringe on the seat made her sigh. Taking a peek inside she saw more signs of illegal use. There were empty food containers, a couple of empty beer cans and what looked to be an used condom. She didn't even want to know what the puddle on the back seat was.

“Someone's had a party,” she muttered to herself and straightened up. It wasn't unusual for the shared rides to have problems like that. Usually the cars were in good shape and clean, but sometimes one got through the checkups with the previous users deeds still out in the open. Carrie took out her compad and placed a call to report the car. A friendly customer service agent apologized for the inconvenience and the car was quickly on its way to be cleaned up. Five minutes later she had her ride.

This time a clean one.

She turned on the news to pass the time. The monitor in front of her started showing footage of the very scene she had been to before. A solemn looking news anchor was recounting the events. A graphic ran at the bottom of the screen, counting up the dead and injured. Forty-seven dead. Thirteen injured. And they were still digging through the rubble.

Carrie shook her head as the footage moved on to show the protest of the

June Movement. It showed the moment of the explosion and the chaos that had ensued. She could spot herself being carried away from the angry mob.

She shut off the news and looked out the window.

Seeing the city pass by it would have been hard to tell something horrific had taken place that day. People were walking about. She spotted groups of laughing youngsters headed for a night out. The tall buildings blocked the sun in many places. The glass sides of other buildings reflected the light and lit the area.

Her compad rang.

She accepted the call and routed it to the cars monitor.

Her mother appeared on the screen. Black hair neatly arranged. Dressed in her favourite sari. Dressed up as she was it was obvious she was going out to some party. The only occasions she brought out anything related to her native culture was for parties and other special events. She and Carrie's father had chosen to model themselves as world citizens instead of clinging to their home countries and cultures. It was something a lot of people their age had done.

She smiled at the sight of her daughter. "Carrie. I saw the news. It happened in your district so I worried you might have been caught up in it."

Carrie smiled briefly. There was no joy in it. "I was. Got banged up a bit, but nothing serious. I'm on my way home now."

The relief on her mother was obvious. "Good. I really was worried."

"You look like you're headed for a party," Carrie said, hoping the conversation would move from the dangers of her job. It was a topic her mother brought up too often.

"We are," her mother admitted. "It's one of those things your fathers work set up. You know how they go. Lot's of people dressed up, holding their pinkies up when they sip champagne while talking about things of no consequence."

"Mom, they don't hold their pinkies up for champagne," Carrie pointed out with a brief smile.

"I'm sure some do."

Carrie laughed. "I have some good news too."

"Oh?"

"I passed the detective exam."

Her mother seemed genuinely happy for her. “Oh, dear, that’s wonderful.”

“Because of it I’m getting re-assigned. To Minerva.”

Her mother’s happiness for the promotion seemed to die then and there.

“Jupiter? Why are they sending you there? Did you anger someone?”

“That was my first thought too, but I spoke with my captain. He changed my mind. It’ll be good experience that will open doors for me other places wouldn’t.”

“How long will you be there? When are you leaving? We have to meet in person before you go.”

“I won’t have to go immediately so I’m sure we can arrange to meet. I would love that. It’ll be so long before we can do that again.” Carrie smiled, hoping it would reassure her mother that everything would be fine. She saw her mother start to open her mouth, then glance back as a voice called for her. She turned back to face her again and looked both worried and proud.

“That’s your father. We’re going to be late. I have to go now, but we’ll call again, right?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow and we can talk more,” Carrie assured her. “Go now. Have fun with father.”

Her mother smiled and cut off the call. Carrie didn’t realize she had tensed up until the call was over. She rubbed her shoulders a bit as the car continued its journey towards her home. She let out a sigh and leaned against the door and put her jaw in her hand as she watched the buildings go by.

Then it hit her. She was going to have to leave it all behind her. Her parents, her friends, all the familiar places, and take a step into the unknown. Despite being a relatively safe trip there were still plenty of ways to die along the way. Plenty of ways to die where she was going. And she’d be by herself in all of it.

It felt daunting, but at the same time she felt excited at the challenge it would pose. It would push her skills, push her mental durability. It was the sort of thing she enjoyed.

“It’ll be fine,” she said to herself in an attempt to silence the tiny voices of doubt in her mind.

The streets were buzzing with life. It was no surprise. The area had lots of restaurants, clubs and theatres. It was a part of the city that never slept. It made

apartment rent cheap so that was where Carrie had her place. The car came to a halt in front of a tall building. The bottom two floors were taken up by a club. For ten floors above it there were offices and for twenty floors above that there were the apartments. Carrie made her way to the residence entrance and stepped into the elevator. It took a while to get to the twenty-first floor.

Carrie couldn't help but feel a bit of relief as she opened her apartment door and closed it behind herself. She turned on the light and peeled off her jacket and threw it on the couch. It wasn't a big apartment. A single room with a small alcove for the kitchen and a separate bathroom. Two windows offered a view of the building next door.

She continue taking off her clothes and headed for the bathroom. It was the sort of day that demanded a long bath to get through. She remembered there were a couple of cans of beer in the fridge as well.

Those would help too.

Chapter 2

The airlock hissed. A green light turned on before the door popped open to reveal the blackness of space beyond it.

“I fucking hate these things,” Jonathan Grawer muttered to himself and took a cumbersome step forward in his space suit. He had always felt they were like small cages and every step he took felt like someone had chained a ball of iron on both his legs. He reached up above the airlock and grabbed hold of a handle. He pulled himself up away from the airlock and onto the outside surface of the station.

The airlock door automatically closed.

Jonathan took a moment to look around. The swirling gas clouds of Jupiter spread out in front of him. Above him were the heat sinks and solar panels that spread out for kilometres to keep the station cooled and powered. Looking up he traced the row of handles that led up to the communication array that sat on top of the station. It was several hundred metres of moving, but he had no choice. There was nowhere inside the station he could trust to hide the information he had.

He grabbed a handle and started pulling himself towards the destination. Everything was painted white for high visibility. His breathing grew heavy. He wasn't a professional space walker. He wasn't one of the welders and maintenance people that spent much of their time on the outside. Those people could move about as naturally as they could walk even if there was no gravity. All Jonathan had to help him was the basic survival course everyone on the station got. It was his first time outside in a suit since the training.

A scientist was not expected to do anything but his work in the labs.

Even though the suit was cooled he was soon sweating. He stopped from time to time to catch his breath and look out for anyone following him. All he saw was the white surface of the station. There was no one else outside besides him, at least not at this end of the structure. He couldn't see the other end of the station because of its bulging shape.

He continued moving and soon arrived at the base of the communication array. Large dishes pointed every which way with long antennae and other equipment. A tall tower that rose above everything had a red light blinking at the end of it to act as a beacon and warning for any approaching vessel. Jonathan pulled himself off to the side and along the outer rim of the array. Once he was on the other side of the cluster he lowered himself down a few panels before stopping. He hooked his safety line on a hook before looking around. It should have been a safe location. No vital equipment, just panels keeping the hull safe. No important wires running through. He grabbed a tool from his belt and started unscrewing screws that held the panel in place. He made certain to stash each of the metal pieces in a bag so they wouldn't drift away. If he lost even one, someone would notice it missing and come investigate.

The panel lifted off easily after the screws were removed. He hooked it up to himself to keep it safe. It revealed a compartment with a few wires running through it along with insulation and support beams. Jonathan reached into a slot on his belt and pulled out a small memory chip. It was inside a protective casing that would keep it intact even if radiation bombarded it constantly for the next few months. He tucked it under the insulation hoping it would buy him some more time. He made sure nothing seemed out of place before putting the cover back on and screwing it in place.

His hand automatically went to wipe sweat off his face, but the gloved hand bumped uselessly against his visor.

“Damn it.”

A deep breath and Jonathan started making his way back towards the airlock. He hoped the hiding place was good enough. Only two weeks and he'd be able to come back and grab the chip. Then he'd be off on the transport and safely away from danger.

He stopped back beneath the communication array to look around. There were two figures making their way up towards him. Their suits had the maintenance staff markings on them. There was no scheduled maintenance on the array, Jonathan had checked for that before heading out. And he'd done it on a colleagues user name and workstation. No one should have been able to tie the

lookup to him. There had to have been some malfunction that had forced a maintenance crew. Or they were out there because of him. Either way they had seen him. There was no running from them. If he ran then he'd get security after him and that wasn't something he wanted. He could explain why he was outside. Something to do with his job.

He waited for the two figures to reach him. It would be safer near the array for everyone involved. More places to hold on to.

A notice popped up on his visor as soon as the two maintenance workers got close enough. Jonathan accepted the notice with an eye movement and a short range channel was opened between him and the two workers. It needed line of sight, but kept the radio chatter from cluttering the main channels reserved for official traffic.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” came a female voice. It wasn't a voice he recognized.

“I'm doctor Jonathan Grawer. I work for the Guang Guo corporation. I was conducting an experiment.”

“You didn't mess with the com array, did you? It's acting up and if it's because of you you can be damn sure you'll end up on report for it and kicked off the station.” The woman sounded angry. The maintenance workers could be possessive of the station and various parts of it.

Jonathan couldn't see through her visor. She had the sun shade down which turned the otherwise see through visor all black for anyone looking from the outside. “I didn't do the experiment here. I just came for the view. It's rare for me to get outside the station. Got to make the most of it when the chance is given.”

The woman snorted. “We'll see. What kind of an experiment do you have to do out here anyway?”

“We've been testing a new material for space suits. Much lighter yet offers more protection from radiation and all the other things you guys have to worry about. I was testing a piece of it to see how well it did out in the real world.” It wasn't exactly a lie. The Guang Guo scientists were working on a new material. It just wasn't anything he actually worked on.

The woman's partner floated past him. The visor was down as well so it was

impossible to tell whether it was a man or a woman. Jonathan started to feel uncomfortable stuck between the two.

“All right. Enough of this bullshit. Where's the data chip, doctor Grawer?”

Jonathan was startled by the sudden change in her tone as well as the question. “I don't know what you're talking about.” He tried to push himself onward, past the woman and away from his partner, but hands grabbed him from behind. He felt a yank on his belt. He'd been attached to the handles protruding from the station. He wasn't going anywhere.

“Oh, I'm certain you do,” said the woman and floated over to him. He couldn't struggle enough to make a difference. She started going through the holsters on his belt and other places where he could have hidden things.

“Stop it! Let go of me!”

“Stop struggling or my friend there will disconnect your air supply.” The firm voice of the woman settled down Jonathan. He knew the pack on his back held his air supply as well as emergency thrusters so someone who got blown off what ever they were working on still had a chance to at least stop if not return back where they were flung off from. He knew full well the person behind him could end his life with a single motion. Had there been no tether attached to him the emergency thrusters might have offered him an escape route.

“It's not here. Where is it?” the woman demanded. She'd gone through all the places on the outside of the suit.

“Like I said, I don't know what you're talking about.” Jonathan tried to remain calm. But he knew what was coming. Even if they didn't find the data, they would kill him none the less.

“You hid it somewhere, didn't you? That's what you're doing out here.”

“I was here doing an experiment,” said Jonathan even though he knew it wouldn't do any good.

“Yeah, and I'm here to really fix the com array,” said the woman. “Stop playing games. One more chance to tell the truth. If you don't you'll be getting a real close look at the clouds of Jupiter.”

Jonathan sighed. He had know death was a likely outcome for knowing what he had found. He had tried to be careful. It had not been enough. But there was

no way the information could be handed back. Someone would find it and make use of it. Someone had to. "I have nothing to say to you."

The woman sighed. "I'm disappointed. I really hoped you would see the light, doctor." The communication line went silent. A red notice popped up on Jonathan's visor. The woman went to his wrist computer and started inputting commands. He tried to fight back, but it was futile. Command windows popped up in his field of view. She was locking him out of the computer and inputting a course for the emergency thrusters. He didn't need to do the math to guess where he would be going. He felt the tether being taken off. The person behind him let go. The woman put in the last command before ripping off the wrist computer.

No way to change anything that had been put in.

The thrusters kicked in.

All Jonathan saw after that were the clouds of Jupiter coming closer and closer.

Chapter 3

It wasn't like her to miss work. Marcel picked up his compad again and tried to call her. The message was the same as before. Unable to contact the requested number. It could be she had turned off her compad and was sleeping, but that wasn't like her at all.

The bad feeling Marcel had in his stomach grew stronger.

Minerva wasn't a place where a security officer just went dark without a trace. Some had mental breakdowns and locked themselves in their quarters, but Susana had not displayed any of those signs. She had been on the station for several years now so a mental break was unlikely in that regard as well. If she'd caught a flu or some other sickness she would have notified her partner, Marcel, about it. They had several investigations going on and she wasn't the sort to leave a co-worker in trouble.

The security office around him was buzzing with activity. It wasn't crime that kept most of the people there busy, but the mundane bureaucratic stuff. There was a line of people at the front desk looking to file in applications, request background checks and report in for interviews. Many of the interview rooms at the back were in use as officers tried to ensure they were handing papers to the right people and to ensure there was nothing fishy in their history.

Most of the work was being done for corporations and their employees. The corporations wanted to ensure they were not handing high level access to people who had a sorted history. Of course, their own security made their own assessment of the person, but they didn't have access to all the databases official station security had.

Then there were the few people who wanted to report an actual crime. Most of it was petty shoplifting, but there was the occasional battered spouse that had gathered up enough courage to leave the abusive relationship as well as people being brought in by security patrols for causing public disturbances. Most of those were people who had gotten too drunk to make it to their rooms to sleep it off.

Marcel sighed and ignored most of what was going on and tried to look through the cases he had on his desk. Unable to push past the worry he had for his partner, he grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and pulled it on. He made certain he had his weapon on him and started to head out of the security offices.

It was a bit of walk to the nearest transport station. A couple turns in the corridors and plenty of people walking the opposite direction kept his mind busy even though it was a path he'd walked for many years. He always liked to look at people and make a quick assessment of them. Kept his wits about him and distracted him from the worry gnawing at him.

The transport station was busy with people waiting for their rides and every time one arrived there was a rush of people boarding and de-boarding. It was a constant churn of people. The transport pods were sleek looking, almost raindrop shaped metal structures that rode on a monorail. The rail ran through almost the entire length of the massive station. Only the docks at the front of the station cut down on its length by several hundred meters.

Marcel stepped into the next transport headed for the residential section where Susana lived. It was one of the bigger transport pods he stepped into. There were seats on all sides of it, easily accommodating a dozen people, while at the centre there were grab holds hanging from the roof that allowed six more to travel while standing.

He chose to stand up. He knew his foot would be tapping impatiently while the transport made its way. It wasn't a long ride, but it would have made him feel even more anxious. He watched as the scenery passed the windows. It wasn't much to look at. Tunnel walls and the occasional station they passed through.

It was a short walk and an elevator ride to an upper level before he arrived at Susana's apartment. Pressing the button next to the door to ring the bell he hoped she would answer. A couple of tries later he banged on the door with his hand and called out to her.

There was no response.

Marcel raked his hand through his thinning hair and cursed. He dug out his compad and made the call he had hoped to avoid. It didn't take long for his call to

go through.

“Hey, captain. Marcel here.”

Captain Janus sounded like she had just woken up. “Better be good for you to wake me up.”

“It’s Susana. I can’t reach her compad, she’s not at work and there’s no answer at her apartment. I’m getting worried here.”

“That’s not like her,” Janus said. She sounded fully alert now. Marcel could hear bed sheets rustling as she climbed out of bed and the footsteps as she walked over to a terminal. “Hang on. I’ll do a quick lookup.”

“Thanks, captain,” Marcel said and waited patiently. The captain was one of the few people who could directly locate a compad used by an officer. If she was on the station the search should find her location in seconds.

“Her compad isn’t showing up on the search,” Janus reported. Now there was worry in her voice as well.

“Could be it got smashed or something. Permission to enter her apartment. Just to make sure.”

“Granted. Let me know what you find. I’ll start tech on tracing her steps. We’ll find her.”

“Thanks, captain.” Marcel cut off the comms and punched in an override code on the door controls. For a brief moment he hesitated entering, but it didn’t last long. The door remained open behind him. It was immediately clear Susana wasn’t there. The single room was empty and a quick glance into the small bathroom told she wasn’t there either. No sign of her compad either. Not in the bed, not on the kitchen counter or anywhere else.

Where ever she had gone, she had taken it with her.

That did not bode well.

Marcel tapped a quick message to the captain, informing her that Susana was not at her home, and headed out the apartment. He made sure the door was closed and locked again so no one would disturb it. He tried to think where she might have gone. Had she gone to her usual drinking hole? If she had, she would have turned up to work or been at her apartment. Still, he decided to check. Even if the tech guys would be combing through camera footage to try and find her it

would take time. More time than it would take him to visit the bar.

So he took the elevator down and waited for a transport.

A quick ride and he was at the entertainment district. There were plenty of shops there along with restaurants, movie theatres and clubs. It wasn't hard to find Susana's favourite place. A big neon sign above its entrance called to anyone walking by. Marcel hurried his steps and walked in to the establishment. It was early morning so he didn't expect the place to be busy. Even though the station never slept, people had work schedules and day rhythms to keep to. Most still followed a day-night cycle close to that of Earth.

There were a few groups of people at the tables. Mostly looked to be dock workers getting off the night shift. Music blared in the background. Repetitive, generic dance music that Marcel loathed. He cringed and headed for the counter where the single bartender was looking at his compad with a bored expression.

"Hey," Marcel said to grab the man's attention. He flashed his security badge to cut down on the need to explain things. He then pulled a picture of Susana on his compad. "You seen this woman?"

The man frowned and looked at the picture for a bit. "Yeah, that's Susana. She comes by here quite often. Haven't seen her in a few days though."

"Is it possible she was here today, but someone else was working?" Marcel asked, grasping at the last straw of hope he had.

The bartender shook his head. "I've been here all day. Had to pull a double. Just a few minutes until my shift ends. If she was here today I would have seen her."

"Okay. Thanks." Marcel couldn't help but feel a sense of dread wash over him as he walked out. Not really having any other thing to do he started to head back towards the security office. Waiting for the tech guys seemed to be the best thing to do. Meanwhile he'd have some cases to distract himself with.

The bad feeling returned as soon as he entered the security office. He could tell the atmosphere had changed. People were giving him looks. Before he could talk to anyone, captain Janus popped out of her office and called him to come in. Marcel fought the bad feeling once again as he walked in to her office and took a seat.

Janus looked like she'd come in straight from bed. Her brown hair was a mess and there were dark pouches under her eyes. She didn't even have her uniform on. Just a t-shirt that was as wrinkled as they came and a pair of trousers.

"The tech guys found footage of her," Janus started. Her tone of voice told everything Marcel needed to know.

"She's dead?" he asked.

Not saying anything, Janus simply turned the monitor on her desk and pressed the play button on the video.

It was security camera footage from somewhere on the station. Susana was walking along a corridor. The timestamp on it was less than six hours ago. She didn't look worried at all. She had on her security force uniform. Her gun was strapped at her hip as she liked it. The camera angle changed as she walked. She stopped, pulled out her compad and took a look at it. She then went to a door and opened it.

The camera changed angles to inside the room.

It was a storage room at the docks. It was dark, briefly, but the light turned on as she entered. She started inspecting the containers in it. She was so focused on her task that she didn't see the three men enter the room until it was too late. She was surrounded. She went for her gun, but the distance was too short. The men were on her as her hand touched her gun. They easily overpowered her. She was pushed to the floor. One man straddled her and started wailing on her with his fists.

Marcel grabbed the arms of his chair as he tried to remain calm. It was hard. His knuckles grew white. He bit down hard enough that his teeth started to hurt.

Two of the men started kicking her while she was down.

Then they stopped. Even if the camera footage wasn't the best, he could see Susana spit out some blood and take in breaths of air. She was still alive. The men seemed to argue for a moment. No doubt trying to decide what to do next.

Susana was laying on the floor. She was moving, but barely so. Her hand was reaching for the gun. The beating had slid it away from her, but not far enough that she couldn't reach. One of the men noticed her moving for it. He

grabbed it and laughed. He pointed the gun at Susana and pulled the trigger.

Marcel thanked who ever had invented biometric locking on weapons.

The gun didn't fire. The man looked disappointed and his friends laughed. They then talked for a bit more before seemingly coming to an agreement on what to do. One of them crouched down and punched Susana a few more times. Two of the men grabbed her, one by the arms, the other by the legs, and they started to carry her out the room.

The video flipped to another camera.

It showed the inside of a small room. The door opened. Susana was thrown in. She landed hard on the floor. The door closed. Marcel felt a lump in his chest. He recognized what sort of room it was. A tear rolled down his cheek. He watched Susana roll herself on to her back. A red light started flashing in the room. Susana rolled back on her belly and tried to crawl for the door.

The door on the opposite side of the room opened.

It happened so quickly it seemed like some sort of magic had made her disappear, but Marcel knew all too well what it had been. An airlock opened to the void of space without the air being pumped out of the chamber.

Rapid decompression.

For a moment Marcel just stared at the video showing the empty room. He sniffled and leaned back in the chair. Janus was giving him a sympathetic look. Whether the events had shook her at all was hard to tell by her expression, but knowing her, she was just putting up a strong front. Inside she must have been just as hurt as Marcel was.

"I hoped for something better," Marcel managed to say and took in a wavering breath before coughing.

"We all did," Janus replied. "Any idea why she was investigating a storage room on her own?"

Marcel blinked and tried to gather his thoughts. It wasn't the first partner he'd lost, but it never got easy. He had hoped to work with Susana until his retirement. Only a few more months and he'd have been happy to leave knowing she was there to continue the work. "I always told her to never follow a lead alone. Told her to grab a uniform with her if I wasn't around. I don't know why

she went alone. That doesn't sound like her."

"No one is blaming you," Janus noted.

"I am," Marcel said. "When I left yesterday she said she'd stay behind and work on some of our cases. Didn't think she'd go following a clue. If I'd known I would have gone with her."

"What case might she have been working?" Janus asked again. She seemed reluctant to push Marcel too much given the situation.

Marcel took a moment to think through their cases. There weren't many options given how she had died. "A couple of weeks ago a shipment of drugs was discovered in a cargo container. The case landed on our desk. It wasn't any of the known operators so we figured it was someone new. Could be she found a clue on that. Would make the most sense given the situation."

Janus nodded. "She was looking for contraband in that storage room."

"That gang, they've got someone on the inside working for them," Marcel gave Janus a grim look. "They over rode the safeties on the airlock. Needs someone from maintenance or security to do that. Or they've somehow got access to the codes another way. Whatever the case, it's bad for the station."

Janus nodded in agreement. "Now that they've killed a security officers I'm going to push this case to the top. We'll get those bastards. Tech should be able to see who over rode the safeties on the airlock. We can move on from there. We've got their faces on camera. Should be easy enough to track them down."

"Assuming they're still on the station," Marcel said. "That was hours ago. Plenty of transport have had time to leave and if I were them and just killed a security officers I'd be on one of them."

"Good point. I'll circulate the images to customs. They'll keep an eye out if they try to leave."

"Beam the images to any transport that has left too. Just in case." Marcel took a deep breath. "I'd like to take a lead on the case," he said and gave the captain a deep stare. "I owe her that much."

"You know the rules, Marcel. I can't allow that." Janus gave him a sympathetic look. "If it's any consolation I'm going to personally watch over this case. Given the evidence we have I don't think it'll take long to get those

responsible for it.”

Marcel wanted to argue against her. It felt wrong to just walk away from it, but there was a side of him that knew it to be the best course of action. She was right. He was too close to the case. It would cloud his judgement. He'd make rash decisions. Maybe do something that would jeopardize the case against the men responsible for her death.

He swallowed his pride and nodded. “All right. I'll steer clear of the case.”

“Take a few days off,” Janus offered. “I know you worked with her for a long time. This can't be easy for you.”

Again, Marcel nodded. “I'll do that. Have you contacted her family yet?”

Janus shook her head. “I wanted to talk with you first. Hoped you might have had some answers I could give them. Going to take some time for the message to reach Earth anyway.”

At least she hadn't had kids, Marcel thought to himself. She had her parents and a brother back on Earth, but that was the extent of her family. As far as he knew she had not been even dating anyone. Work had been her husband. “Tell them I'm sorry,” he finally said aloud.

Even though Janus looked like she wanted to argue against it, she just nodded.

“Right. I'll go take my few days off then,” Marcel said and stood up.

“I'll keep you informed of the case as soon as something new happens,” Janus assured him. Marcel just nodded and walked out. He could feel everyone in the office look at him as he walked over to his desk and grabbed a few items before leaving. He half expected someone to come by and talk with him, but somehow that didn't happen. He figured he gave off the sort of vibe that told people to leave him alone. He often did that. And it was what he wanted then.

He debated himself for a moment on where to go. Part of him felt like going back to his quarters and just sitting on the couch. Another was telling him his throat was feeling dry and that a cold beer would do wonders. Maybe more than one. Maybe a dozen. Maybe some whiskey too.

Listening to his thirsty side he went back to the bar he'd gone to search Susana in. The bartender had changed as had much of the crowd. Marcel made

his way to the counter and took a seat on one of the stools. A brief sign to the bartender and a moment later he had a cold beer in one hand and a small bowl of salted peanuts in front of him. He took a long gulp of the golden liquid. He wished it was a the real stuff instead of the stuff shipped as a powder. Not that it was bad, but it lacked depth in taste.

But it would get you drunk and that was what Marcel cared about the most at that moment.

It was three pints later that he moved to the harder stuff. Whiskey. Not the real stuff, of course. That would have been far too expensive. The cubed stuff that melted into a tiny bit of water was all he could afford, but still, it offered the alcohol content and there were still hints of the peat and smokiness. Cost a fraction of the real stuff too due to ease of transport.

A drunken part of him started to bother him. Telling him he should go out, ignore the captains orders and find those men. It was what the cops in his favourite old time movies would have done. The still sober part of him reminded that this wasn't a movie. He'd lose his pension for getting involved. With so little time left it wasn't worth it. Besides, he trusted his co-workers to do a proper job. He might have been Susana's partner, but that didn't mean no one else at the security force cared about her.

He knew it to be quite the opposite. She had been well liked.

He downed the whiskey in his glass and waved for another one.

Staying out of it was the best he could do for her.

Chapter 4

Carrie let out a sigh of relief as her body came detached from the heavily cushioned seat she was strapped into. The thrust of reaching orbit was gone. She wasn't the only one letting out sighs of relief. It seemed to be a common sentiment among the passengers.

A flight attendant came floating down the pathway that cut through the four rows of seats. As she passed she suggested people stay strapped in unless they had to move. Carrie had no need to move so she did as told.

Carrie turned her attention to the monitor on the wall next to her. A camera feed from the outside was on it. It wasn't much of a view. Just the blackness of space. The Earth and the Moon were not in the field of view of that particular camera at the angle the transport was ascending to its intended orbit.

Carrie smiled as she remembered the worry her mother had expressed when they'd met for the last time. She had watched a documentary about space debris and now she worried some loose nut would strike the transport and kill her daughter.

It wasn't an unfounded fear. There had been incidents and death from such events, but it was too rare to really worry about. The often used transport routes were especially frequently and thoroughly scanned to ensure there were no objects to cause damage. The transports themselves were designed to mitigate any damage. In the early days there had been actual windows on the transports, but the modern ones had removed that weak point and moved on to displays and cameras. While not enough to stop everything, it would mitigate damage and often completely prevent any serious disaster and deaths.

Carrie had told her mother the statistics of going to orbit. As safe as flying, more likely to slip in the bath and die, getting hit by lightning, she'd listed all sorts of things more likely to kill her, but a mother worried.

A gentle thrust pushed her back into her chair. It wasn't a hard burn, just some moving manoeuvres. It would take a good forty minutes for the transport to reach its destination, an orbital station called Haleon. She'd spend a week there

for training. The security forces wouldn't just send you off to a distant station without giving you some training. There was the required orientation to space walks and using the space suits. A lecture on gun use and the difference to using one on Earth would take up a day. It was something she was actually looking forward to. The spacewalk training had her feeling more nervous than excited. Then there would be all sort of other lectures going through routines, how to keep sane and many other things people wouldn't think of when going to space for a long time.

Carrie killed her time switching through the camera feeds on offer. A couple of them showed Earth in all its glory, but it wasn't that different from seeing it on a news broadcast. It didn't quite feel real. Another camera showed the station they were headed for. It slowly grew bigger and bigger, it's grey-white outer hull offering a stark contrast to the darkness around it. It was a big station since it was one of the main hubs between the gravity well and the solar system beyond it. Transports from the Moon and from further away would dock there and the rest of the way would be taken care of by similar transports Carrie was on.

As they got closer Carrie could see other vessels in the distance. There were some bright plumes in the distance as some vessels were breaking hard as they arrived from Mars or even further away. She watched in awe as one of the cameras offered a view of one of the few military vessels in space. Being black it was hard to discern its shape. It had its red light beacons on that were the most visible parts of it. It was on its way away from the station, no doubt just having filled its supplies and given the crew some shore leave. Now it was headed who knew where.

Carrie knew most of the military vessels stuck near Earth, scanning the vastness of space for anything that might disrupt the delicate operations around its orbit. They were the early warning system for a rogue asteroid or piece of debris from the outer systems.

She switched the camera back towards the station and watched the docking operation commence. From approach to actually hitting the dock it took a good twenty minutes. The huge doors of the hangar opened and let them in. The transport passed through a corridor wide enough for two of the vessels to go side

by side, before another huge door led them into the dock proper.

From watching a few documentaries Carrie knew the actual dock area had air in it. It made life a lot easier for maintenance crews if any repairs were needed. It also meant they could just walk around without wearing cumbersome suits to perform visual checks. Those always happened before the vessels would depart again. It was entirely possible some small object might have struck the vessel and caused damage that had gone unnoticed.

The transport moved on to the main dock where it was locked down by docking clamps and pulled in so the doors lined up with the extendable pathways that sealed right up against them. As soon as the docking clamps wrapped around the vessel, the gravity of the station kicked in.

It wasn't as strong as Earth, but enough that Carrie could stand up from her seat and walk around relatively normally. Her steps felt a bit lighter, but other than that it was all normal. She and the other passengers gathered up their carry-on belongings and exited the vessel as soon as the doors opened. The flight crew was there to thank them and wish them all a pleasant stay.

Carrie went along with the rest of the passengers to collect her luggage as it was unloaded from the transport. Getting through customs was easy enough with her papers. Soon she was standing in the lobby where arriving and departing passengers gathered to wait for their rides. There were shops there along with restaurants and cafes. Plenty of seating ensured no one had to stand even if the area was crowded.

Not wanting to waste any time Carrie headed out towards the nearest hotel. With only a week to stay it didn't make sense to reserve an apartment. So she had booked a room at one of the hotels near the docks. It was what most people did when staying just a short amount of time.

The short walk gave her time to get accustomed to the gravity. She knew it was made by spinning the station and a part of her expected to feel the motion of it, but try as she did, she didn't notice anything. It was a testament to the engineers who had designed it and created an environment humans could live in comfortably, even though they were far from home and surrounded by a void that would kill them. A more inhospitable surrounding was hard to imagine.

The same could not be said for her hotel.

The lobby welcomed her with some soothing music playing and a smiling receptionist. A brief bout of paperwork later she had a key to her room and instructions on how to get there. She was pleasantly surprised again when she got to her room. While it was small, just barely room for the bed and a small desk and a combined toilet and shower cubicle, it was clean and the mattress felt comfortable when she laid back on it to catch her breath. She looked down the bed, towards the end wall, opposite to the door. There was a large display there. She found the remote and turned it on.

It showed a picture of a green hill with a clear blue sky and plenty of sunlight. It looked almost real. She assumed it was meant to give some comfort to anyone leaving Earth for the first time. Looking at it, she could appreciate it. She wouldn't be seeing a scene like that in real life for a long time.

Carrie pulled out her compad and took a look at the time and her schedule. Her first lecture would be in eight hours. After that the program would be intensive with just a few hours of sleep and small breaks peppered in between lectures and courses.

The timing of her arrival had not been the best and since she had woken up only just before her flight she wasn't feeling particularly sleepy. She had not eaten since having breakfast so she figured that would be a good place to start. Maybe it would make her tired enough to have some sleep after.

She put away her luggage, shut down the wall monitor and checked she had everything needed with her. She then left her room and locked the door. The hotel itself did not offer any food service apart from a few vending machines so she headed down a corridor in search of a restaurant.

Even as she walked around there was no shaking the feeling that something was wrong. She was so used to Earth and the open sky above her that it felt almost unbearably restricting to know the only thing keeping her from certain death was the metal structure around her. Stepping outside of it would be death without the proper equipment.

She walked past several restaurants. Many of them were full and some simply didn't fancy her tastes. Italian, Mexican, Japanese, Indian, almost every

region and culture was represented in the offerings. It soon became a problem of having too many choices.

Not able to decide, Carrie kept walking and explored the station. She didn't venture too far from the docks and the open areas it offered. Deeper in the station there were restricted areas for employees only as well as residential areas. She figured those wouldn't be that interesting. Just corridors and doors of which she was already seeing plenty of. It was one of those stations where everything went functionality first and aesthetics a distant last.

That was her thinking until she came upon the sight seeing deck.

It was an open area with benches and chairs where people could sit and look out the huge window that made up the wall. As she walked in the sight caught her breath. The Earth was smack in the middle of the huge window. White clouds floated over the blue of the oceans and Africa with its desert north and green jungle cut through the middle of it. It was fast moving out of view due to the station rotating, but remained in view for long enough for the sight to steal her heart.

She had to wipe a tear from the corner of her eye and find a seat to calm down for a moment.

"It really strikes you, doesn't it?"

Carrie turned to the voice from next to her. It was an old man with greying hair and a cane leaning next to his seat. She nodded. "It does. Didn't think it would be this emotional."

"Hits everyone in some manner," the old man said. "I've seen people fall to their knees and sob like their mother died and some just stop for a moment to watch and move on, but even those have a changed expression on them."

"Puts things into perspective," Carrie said and took in a deep breath.

"And people need that from time to time," said the old man.

Carrie glanced at him again. He looked more frail than his age would have led you to expect. Though given his frail nature it was hard to tell how old he really was. "Have you been on the station for long?" she finally asked, hoping to quench her curiosity about the man.

The man chuckled. "Ever since it was built. Even before then. I'm one of the

people who built it.”

“Really?” Carrie couldn’t hide her surprise as well as delight. Getting to talk with someone like that wasn’t every day for her and she suspected it was the case for many others as well.

“Worked as a space welder,” the man said and kept looking out the huge window. He pointed to the frames of it. “Helped weld that thing in place.”

“That must have been hard work.” Carrie could barely imagine taking a brief walk outside in a space suit. Working there for eight or twelve hours straight, doing hard work, sounded like it would suck the juices out of you. Not to mention the high risk for death if even something tiny went wrong.

The man nodded. “It was. Always felt good getting out of the suit and climbing into bed. Always slept good back then. Not so much now. Got to wake up to take a piss a few times a night.”

For a moment Carrie was silent. “Any tips for someone taking their first space walk training?”

The man turned to look at her. He grinned. “Don’t take off the helmet.”

It was such an absurd tip that Carrie couldn’t help but smile. “Wasn’t planning to.”

The man slumped back into his chair. “The best advice I ever got was to keep calm. No matter what happens, try to remain calm. Panicking will only make things worse. You’ll run out of air quicker. You’ll make rushed decisions. Those are the sort of things that get you killed.”

“Easy advice to give, harder to follow,” Carrie noted. She knew from her past training that some situations simply took the better of even well trained people. Panic and quick decisions followed.

“Good advice rarely is easy,” the man noted.

“Mostly true,” Carrie agreed.

“It’s much safer these days, you know,” the man continued. “You’ve got those rails going around the station you can hook up to. Rarely need to go without a safety line attached. The suits are less cumbersome and more durable. The station has sensors to keep track of you so if you do start to drift away there’s a good chance you’ll be rescued. Back in my day, if you drifted off, that

was mostly it. You'd drift away and suffocate to death. Happened more than once during the construction of this place."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Carrie said. She had known the construction of the station had cost lives. Many stations ended up that way. Minerva had led to over fifty deaths, from what Carrie could remember. It was to be expected. As much as there was focus on safety, when you scaled things up enough, it was a statistical fact someone would die. It happened on Earth when constructing tall buildings and it happened in space. The fact the environment was far more hostile led to more deaths.

"It's what makes us who we are," the old man said. "Just because something costs lives doesn't mean it's not worth doing."

"As long as you do your best to minimize the risks and deaths," Carrie agreed.

The man nodded. "There's no excuse for cutting corners on safety."

"Some corporate executives would likely disagree with you."

The man chuckled. It turned into a cough that took him a bit to recover from. "True enough, young lady. You keep that in mind and don't let them get away with it."

"I work security so that's sort of my job," Carrie replied with a brief smile. Not that she expected to be busting any executives for cutting corners. Not on Minerva, which operated largely at the mercy of the corporations there.

"Where you headed?" the man asked.

"What makes you think I'm not staying here?" Carrie asked.

"Rare to get any permanent stayers here," the man explained. "Most are just passing through, taking some training, before heading further out."

"Well, you are right. I'm headed for Minerva." Carrie was uncertain why she was opening up to the old man so much. She had enjoyed the conversation so far so maybe he'd managed to chip away at her usual reservations.

"Far away that place. And big." The man glanced at her again. The Earth had moved out of view from the large window. It would be a while before it would return.

"My first time in space," Carrie said with a bit of apprehension in her voice.

She was still struggling with the fact Earth would soon be nothing more than a tiny spot of light in the darkness when she looked out the window. Now that she had seen it in its glory from relatively close she couldn't help but feel like she'd be losing something important by going further from it.

"You'll get used to it," the man said and adjusted his position. It looked like he'd be there until the Earth came to view again.

"I hope so," Carrie managed to say. Her stomach growled. She remembered why she'd been walking around for. "Sorry. You wouldn't happen to know a good place to grab something to eat?"

The man grinned. "June's Grill. Not the fanciest stuff on the station, but filling. Tell her I sent you and she'll treat you good. You go through that doorway there and walk until the first intersection and take a left. Can't miss the sign after that." The man pointed to one of the doorways leading into the room.

"Thanks. I didn't catch your name before," Carrie said as she stood up.

"Ned. Ned Jawoski."

"Well, thank you Ned. For everything. It was nice talking to you."

"It was my pleasure," Ned replied. "Ain't many young women talking to me these days." He grinned.

Carrie gave the man a smile as she walked away. She followed the instructions given and walked out through the pointed doorway. She couldn't help but smile a few times as she walked and remembered the conversation. Talking to someone like Ned, who had seen and done things she had never experienced, was always enlightening. Even in their short conversation she'd picked up on some new things. Gained from the experience of another. Those were the sort of conversation that made life interesting.

The directions she'd gotten had been clear enough and she soon found herself in front of June's Grill. It wasn't a big place. More a hole in the wall with a long counter and stools for the diners to sit on. There was a good view of the kitchen and the grills searing hamburgers, eggs and sausages. There weren't many customers, but since it had been recommended, she took the chance.

In the end she left with her stomach full and with a smile on her face. The service had been good, the hamburger perfectly cooked with some bits of bacon

and hot peppers in it. The side of fries had been crispy and well seasoned.

With a good feeling, she headed back to her hotel for a bit of rest before the first lecture.

Chapter 5

“And that’s how you die.” Will gave everyone in the room a stern look as the film stopped playing on the large display besides him. “We have talked about all these things and everyone leaving here will have gotten the same information, but there’s always someone who forgets or thinks they know better. And then that happens. A tiny mistake. A momentary lapse in judgement. And then you’re dead.”

Carrie glanced around the room. There were some nervous shifts in seats as others in the class digested what they had just seen. It was one thing to hear in the news someone had died on a space walk. It was entirely different to see a video of them drifting off to space and hearing the radio traffic of their distress. It was perhaps the most haunting thing she had ever seen and heard.

She was certain it would stick in peoples minds for a long time.

“All right. We’ve gone through all the theory stuff. We’ve practised a bit with the suits. It’s time for the real deal. A real space walk outside the station.” Will again let his gaze sweep over the dozen or so people in the room.

Carrie listened as the instructor laid out the time table for everything. There’d be three groups and she was pleased to be in the first one. It would give her some more free time. It was the last of her lessons on the station. In a day she’d be headed to Minerva. She had to admit she was happy with the way her brief training had gone. The instructors had been highly proficient at their fields with plenty of real life experience to draw on.

She’d learnt how to use guns safely on a station. It wasn’t as care free as it was on Earth. One hole in the wrong place and things could go bad for everyone on the station. The low velocity rounds brought with them some challenges you needed to compensate for, such as the lower amount of penetrating force. Made it that much easier to protect against them so you needed to aim more carefully.

There had been the talks of mental health. She had been surprised by how many came to suffer from such issues on long stays. Though now that she had spent almost a week on a relatively large station near Earth she could imagine

how it could eat at you knowing home was so far away.

It was something that seemed to connect everyone no matter their background. Everyone born on Earth was bound to it in some deeper way that went beyond conscious acknowledgement. Maybe it was just the gravity that you were used to or the open sky you were used to above you.

“Figures we’re first,” said the person sitting next to her.

Carrie smiled briefly. “Good for me. More free time before I leave.” She glanced at Valerie. She was a short woman with red hair. Not only was she short, but she was lightly built as well. It made it that much more difficult for her to do anything in a space suit. Consequently, she had hated every bit of that training so far.

“I’m not looking forward to it,” Valerie said. “They don’t even have a suit that properly fits me.”

“I don’t think any station will have a suit that properly fits you,” Carrie countered. It had been almost comical to watch her try on one of the bigger suits. Her head had been somewhere around the neck of the suit with zero visibility outside of it. She was at the awkward intersection where a kids suit was too small for her and the adult ones too large.

Valerie sighed. “You’re probably right. Good thing an office rat doesn’t need to go out that much.”

“True enough,” Carrie admitted. Valerie was going to the Moon. A colony there required her accounting services. It was only a year long assignment, but long enough that she needed to go through the training. Once she got on the Moon she’d go through some extra stuff, but the space walking was required even there.

The instructor continued to talk and the two women went silent to listen in on the last pieces of advice he was giving. Soon they were told to take a short lunch break and then meet the instructor at the training airlock.

“June’s Grill?” Valerie asked as the students started to get up and leave.

“Where else?” Carrie asked as she stood up. Valerie barely reached her chin in height and Carrie was far from the tallest of women. The two had gotten pretty familiar during the courses and lectures. Of course, Valerie had not gone to the

weapons training, but she had been there for the mental health and other things. There had been group assignments that they'd worked on together. Lunch had become a thing they enjoyed together on the first day they'd met and June's Grill had become their regular place.

"I'm going to be a few kilos heavier after all this," Valerie complained as the pair entered the corridor and started heading for the grill.

"The food is good," Carrie agreed.

"It's the oven baked bananas and ice cream that's going to get me," Valerie said.

"You could always not order it," Carrie suggested.

Valerie gave her a shocked look. "That would be criminal!"

Carrie chuckled. She found herself enjoying Valerie's company more and more.

"I really should take it easy today though," Valerie continued. "Wouldn't want to throw up inside the suit once we go out."

"That would be bad," Carrie agreed. "Makes me wonder why they let us go for lunch right before."

"They probably want someone to throw up," Valerie said as they approached their destination.

"I don't think they'd be that cruel," Carrie said. "They've been really nice and professional with us. To be honest I was expecting the training to be low quality. The sort of mandatory bullshit a lot of workers have to deal with because a manager thought it would be a good idea. I've been pleasantly surprised."

"I'm glad someone's enjoying this," Valerie said. "I'd enjoy it more if they had a space suit that fit me."

The pair arrived at the grill and continued the conversation as they ate. Carrie went for a small serving of waffles along with hash browns and some fried sausages, onion and mushrooms. Valerie got herself a hamburger with a side of fries as well as the oven baked banana and ice cream. Both were a filling serving for a grown man, but the two women had plenty of room for it. They'd been burning calories for the entire week and the coming space walk would certainly sap its fair share of them.

Having finished their meals they headed for the training airlock. Located in the inner parts of the station it took them a while to get there. They had to pass through several secure doors. Their student badges let them through. While it wasn't an especially sensitive area of the station, it wasn't open to the general public.

No airlock was.

The pair wasn't the first to arrive. The two others of their small group were already there along with the instructor. Carrie frowned. It bothered her that she couldn't even remember the names of the two other students. They had not been on any of her other lessons so it made sense in that regard. Not much time to get to know them.

The room they were in had several lockers in it. It was where they'd change into the undergarment of the space suits before advancing to the next chamber where the actual suits were. Beyond that was the airlock.

"All right. You all know the drill. At least you should," Will started. "Belongings in lockers and undergarments on."

Everyone did as told. Carrie opened a locker and put in her jacket and trousers. All she left on were her panties and tank top. On top of that she pulled the undergarment for the space suits. It was made of soft fabric and hugged her body tightly. It was stretchy so the one size fit most everyone.

Except Valerie. It was loose on her in many places due to her small size.

Cool pieces of metal stuck to her skin along her arms and legs. They were sensors that would feed her vitals to the suit and allow it to warn if her heart rate jumped too high or something else went wrong. She smoothed out some wrinkles in the garment and ensured all the metal bits stuck to her skin. There was a coating on them that was sticky to ensure they stayed in place.

Having done that Carrie glanced over at Valerie. The undergarment was too big for her which made it bunch up at her ankles and wrists, but that wasn't such a problem. It only meant she had to go through each metal piece one by one to ensure they were attached at the right spot. It took more time, but didn't impede the function of the garment in any way.

Just one of the many little frustrations her small size provided her with.

“All done, Valerie?” Will asked after a bit of time. Everyone else was waiting for her.

Valerie looked up, flustered. “Ready.” The instructor had been understanding of her because they didn’t have the proper size equipment for her, but still expected her to fulfil all the requirements of the course.

“All right. Let’s move to the next chamber and get into the suits.” Will led the way and the group followed him into the next chamber. Carrie was the last one through so she closed and locked the door behind them. It was a round room with eight suits in it. They were propped up in their stands, the bottom parts so that they were easy to climb into and the top halves lifted up so they’d be relatively easy to lower down and attach at the waist to make an entire suit. The helmets rested on the benches right next to each suit.

“Now remember. The waist lock needs to be properly secured or you’re going to have a very bad day. Before we leave I will personally check every one of you, but in a real situation you might have to do it yourself. If I find anyone with a loose lock you will fail this course.” Will gave everyone a stern look. There were things you did not half ass. Getting the suit on right was one of them. It had been drilled into them many times during training. “Now, get in your suits.”

Carrie made her way to the nearest suit that was close to her size. Generally, there were three sizes available just about anywhere. Well, four if you counted the rare one meant for children, but those were practically unheard of. There was the small one that fit most women, the standard that fit most men and the larger women, and the large one that could hold a man who was a bit taller than two meters.

Between those four sizes, nearly everyone was covered. Not always comfortably, as Valerie stood as proof of, but enough that they’d survive in an emergency.

Getting into the bottom of the space suit wasn’t that hard. Carrie could basically just step into it, although she had to bend down a bit to avoid having the top half hit her head. After that it was a simple matter of releasing the mechanist holding up the top half and lowering it into place. There was enough room inside the suit for her to wiggle her hands into the arms of the suit and

then going about securing the two halves together along the waist. There was a small rotation that needed to be done and then several latches that needed to be closed and pins put in place so they wouldn't be accidentally released.

There were more modern suits available that were more flexible and lacked the weakness at the waist, but if you knew how to get into the old style suit you knew how to get into the modern one.

Happy that her suit was secure Carrie stood up and grabbed the helmet. She wasn't going to put it on until absolutely necessary. While the suit was cumbersome it offered enough mobility to move around without too many issues. It was certainly more taxing than simply walking around in regular clothes, but not as bad as one might have expected.

Valerie seemed to have trouble with getting the top half of her suit in place. Carrie wanted to help her, but knew it wasn't allowed. She had to do it on her own. So she watched as the small woman struggled to get it done. By the time she did everyone else had been ready for some time. When she stood up the necklace of the suit rested on her shoulders. Once she'd put the helmet on she'd be peering out from the very bottom of the visor. Her visibility wasn't going to be the best.

"Seems everyone is ready. Helmets on and make the routine checks," Will said and waited for everyone to do so.

Carrie lifted the helmet over her head and lowered it at a slight angle. It wasn't too heavy so it was easy to adjust it so it landed right on the seal. A twist to the right so the visor came straight in front of her and the locks clicked and she was ready. She looked to her wrist and tapped at the small screen on it. The suit systems booted up. It took a while for it to get all the signal from the metal pads on her undergarment, but when they did she had all the information she wanted up on the visor. Her heart rate, oxygen levels from the suit, temperature both inside and outside the suit. Everything one might need outside the station.

Will made the rounds and ensured everyone had put their suits on properly, that the locks and seals were holding and that their suits were giving them all the information and that they had oxygen. It took a while even if there were only four of them.

Once he was done with the checks his voice rang out over the radio. "Everyone looks good. Let's go to the airlock."

Everyone followed him through the heavy duty door into the small chamber. It was crowded with five people there. Had she suffered from claustrophobia, Carrie had no doubt it would have triggered a panic attack. Will closed the door behind them and tapped at the panel. Even through the suit Carrie could hear the hiss of air being sucked out of the chamber. She knew it would take a minute or so. She kept her eye on the others. Valerie gave her a nervous smile from inside her suit. The other two looked nervous, but more collected than her friend.

"When we get out attach yourselves to the railing immediately. The walk you will take won't be long, but you are expected to spend at least twenty minutes outside. If anything happens, or anything worries you, do not hesitate to speak up." Will had a calm voice. It was the sort of voice that gave others confidence. "I'm here not only to evaluate you, but to ensure everyone goes home alive. I'll keep a close eye on all of you so do your best and remembers your training, but do not be afraid."

"What if we need to bail?" Valerie asked over the comms.

"If something happens that requires you to bail then say so over the comms. I'll come and help you to the airlock." The reply from Will came in a firm voice that seemed to indicate he had said the words many times before.

Opposite to the door they had come in from was the outer door. There was a red light on top of it, warning not to open the door while there was still air in the chamber. It was the sort of mistake that could easily have you shooting out into space at a speed that would have you too far away to be rescued in time.

The light turned green and a summer buzzed.

Will made his way to the door, tapped the panel next to it and the door opened, revealing the blackness of space for all of them to see.

"Remember, safety lines first," Will said before making his way out the door.

Carrie let the others go first. Mainly she wanted to be behind Valerie so she could grab her if something went wrong. To her relief the smaller woman made it out the airlock all right and had her safety line clipped on in no time.

Feeling a little anxious, she took the step out the door.

There was a walkway right under the door. A metal grill attached to the station. The boots of her suit clamped onto it with magnets. They gave a steady footing so she didn't float away and could do small movements without being flung around, but she could take steps with a little bit of effort.

First thing she did was grab the safety line from its compartment on her waist and attached it to the railing right by the airlock door. The thin metal cable looked frail, but she knew it to be strong enough to handle two people easily. Having done that she turned from the station wall to admire the view.

She saw Will floating a bit off from the station. His safety line was attached to the other side of the airlock door. Carrie figured he wanted to have a full view of his trainees. For an experienced person it would be a simple matter to pull themselves back to the station if something happened and if anyone got loose he'd already be in place to potentially catch them.

Behind him was the outer ring of the station.

Spots of light were here and there, illuminating the grey metal that made up much of the station. There were antennae poking up here and there. Beyond that ring was the Earth. The blue marble looked as pristine as ever. It was like human hands had not touched it. Even though it wasn't her first time seeing it it still made her chest hurt a little. Her mind still had trouble comprehending that that had been her home for her entire life and she was now looking at it from a distance her mind could barely come to terms with.

"Apalkov! Stop admiring the view and start walking."

"Yes, sir," Carrie instinctively replied to Will over the comms. Turning from the breath taking view she started walking along the walkway. She knew it went all around the airlock chamber. There was a small dip where it went under the section that connected to the rest of the station, but other than that it was an easy walk. Her safety line followed her as she started making progress, easily gliding in the railing on small bearings.

She soon caught up to Valerie. The small woman had trouble moving quickly in the suit. Carrie had no trouble following her. Still, she was soon breathing heavier. The walk seemed so short and without the suit it would have been. With the suit it felt like a marathon. The small steps leading down under the

connection to the station were hard, but even harder were the steps back up.

The comms had been open the entire time for the entire team. There had not been much talk. Most of the sounds coming through were the heavy breathing of all of them and an occasional encouraging word from Will.

“On the final stretch everyone. Keep going.”

Carrie grunted and took the last step up the stairs. All that was left was to circle back to the airlock door. Valerie had stopped in front of her so she had to stop as well.

“You all right Valerie?” Carrie asked over the comms. She knew others would hear them, but it seemed an appropriate question.

“Just need a moment,” Valerie replied between heavy breaths. “This suit really isn’t made for me.”

“Just a little bit left and it’s all flat,” Carrie encouraged her. She glanced at the readings her suit was giving her on the visor. Plenty of oxygen left, heart rate a bit high. There was no hurry. It had only been fifteen minutes since they left the airlock. Twenty minutes was the minimum time they needed to spend. Carrie figured it’d be five to ten minutes to the airlock. Maybe a bit more depending on the pace Valerie would be able to keep.

“You can go past me,” Valerie said over the radio and glanced back at her. She was right. If she pressed herself against the wall Carrie could slip past her. She’d need to undo her safety line for it though to clip it back on past her. It felt like an unnecessary risk.

“No need,” Carrie assured the woman. “Take what time you need. Could use a breather myself.”

“Makes you think these suits aren’t meant to be walked in,” Valerie said. She was beginning to sound a bit less out of breath.

“Well, they do have to protect us from all sorts of things,” Carrie reminded her. “Radiation, the void..”

“Don’t remind me of that,” Valerie quickly said. “The only way I got myself out of the airlock was shutting all that stuff out and making myself think this was just a leisurely stroll.”

“Well, it is that,” Carrie admitted. “We’re not working here.”

“But you are taking a test so get moving and stop the chatter,” Will broke the conversation with his reminder. It wasn’t said in a mean tone, but with playfulness.

“Roger that,” Carrie said. Valerie let out a groan, but started moving again.

“Stopping might have been a mistake. My legs hurt more now,” she complained to the comms. Carrie smiled briefly, but said nothing as she followed the smaller woman along the railing.

Her estimate of the time it would take them to get back to the airlock was not far off. Twelve minutes later they had the open doorway in view. Will was off floating in empty space still. The two others were waiting near the door. They seemed to be more focused on looking at the view than anything else.

“I made it,” Valerie huffed out as she reached the door.

“Congratulations to all of you,” Will said and started reeling himself in. “You’ve all passed the test and the course. You are now certified as having gone through the training and can now work on space stations and all sorts of other places that might require using these suits.”

There were some relieved sighs and congratulations to each other from the group. Carrie could see the relieved smile on Valerie and she couldn’t help but smile herself. While she hoped going out wouldn’t be a big part of her job she couldn’t deny it would be possible and the training she had gotten gave her some confidence she would be able to handle such situations.

“All right. Let’s get back inside, everyone. Then we’re done for the day.”

Will watched as the group entered the airlock. He was the last one in and closed the outer door before pushing a button to bring air back into the chamber. There was some light chatter amongst the group. Carrie could tell the tension of the test was gone. There was relief in all their voices that they had passed the course. Failing would have meant taking it again or, in the worst case, losing the job they had been hired for.

It seemed to take forever for the chamber to fill with air. Carrie filed it under the relief and knowledge of the training being over making it seem longer than it was. When the green light finally lit over the door leading into the station, Will opened the door and the group rushed out. Getting out of the suits was a lot

quicker than getting in them. Even Valerie managed it almost as quick as the others.

“You’ll have your certificate on your compads tomorrow at the latest. Probably in a few hours. If you don’t get it within two days, send me a message and I’ll sort it out.” Will gave them all a final look. He was the first one out of his suit. With his experience it was no wonder. “Enjoy the rest of your day. Get some rest. I know the walk can be taxing.”

“He’s right about that,” Valerie said to Carrie as the pair headed for the locker room. Looking at the smaller woman the strain of the walk was obvious. There was still sweat on her forehead. Hair was glued to the side of her face. “Won’t have trouble sleeping tonight.”

“It was more taxing than I expected,” Carrie admitted as she opened her locker and pulled out her clothes. She felt like having a shower, but knew that would have to wait until she was back at the hotel. She started putting on her clothes.

“Want to go out and celebrate?” Valerie asked. She was pulling on her shirt.

A part of Carrie wanted to say no. She knew she would be leaving the station in eighteen hours or so. Then again she knew there wouldn’t be much to do on the long trip. She’d get plenty of sleep so staying up and celebrating might actually be a good idea. Would help in getting that sleep. “Sure. Just let me visit the hotel for a shower and change of clothes and I’ll meet you.. where?”

“The diner?” Valerie asked. “I’d like to get a shower as well.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Carrie agreed. She put on the rest of her clothes and left the locker room. She hurried back to the hotel.

She really wanted to enjoy that shower.

Chapter 6

It was still the same, cheap, not-really-whiskey-whiskey, but Marcel had grown to like it. With so many days off he hadn't really spent much time away from the bar. He'd been sitting at the counter from dusk 'till dawn, downing beer, whiskey and whatever else the bar had on offer. He'd found some nice drinks that got you drunk really quick and good, but he still always found himself starting with the whiskey.

Captain Janus had held her promise and kept him up to date on the investigation. A week had passed and the investigators had done a good job. Sadly, the men responsible had left the station. Their names and descriptions had been sent out to every part of the solar system. The transport they had boarded had been contacted, but the men had not been found. Somehow they had transferred to another vessel, be it at the docks or sometime during the journey.

They were in the wind and finding them seemed unlikely.

Marcel took a sip of his whiskey and sighed. A part of him was thinking of the cases piled up on his desk. There were people waiting for justice. He felt some guilt for taking time off. Another sip of whiskey and the guilt lessened. What didn't go away was the guilt he was feeling over Susana's death. Every time he went to bed a voice in his head was telling him he should have been there. He'd have been able to prevent her death. He'd left his partner alone.

It wasn't a rational thought. Awake, Marcel kept telling that to himself. How was he supposed to have known Susana would go investigate something on her own? He'd told her several times to call him if she ever had to do that. She had not done so. It had been her actions that had put her in danger.

Blaming her never felt right.

His guilt remained.

Marcel finished his whiskey and ordered a new drink. He glanced around the bar. It was early in the day. Not many people around. The music was playing in the background. It wasn't music to his taste. Some forgettable trance or disco

song with a beat that was featured in thousands of other songs that melded together into a background noise that didn't stand out too much.

Marcel grunted a thanks as the bartender put a tall glass in front of him, filled with a grey liquid and a few pieces of ice. Taking a big gulp of it made him smile. The fizzy mix of grapefruit and gin was refreshing. He doubted either flavour came from anything resembling the real ingredients, but it was still very good.

"This seat taken?"

Marcel turned to regard her. In her full uniform captain Janus was an impressive sight. In a disciplined way. Any general would have given her a pass on inspection. Her hair was neatly tied behind her head in a ponytail. Her uniform was spotless and the seams sharp. Her collars had her rank on them and framed her head in a way that was surprisingly flattering to her features.

"Shouldn't drink while on duty," Marcel replied, but nodded to her sit down anyway.

Janus smiled briefly as she sat down. "Not here to drink."

"Come to check up on me?" Marcel asked and sipped his grey drink.

"You could say that," Janus replied. She turned to regard him. "How are you doing?"

Marcel shrugged. "I'm all right. Pissed the bastards seem to have gotten away, but not much I can do about that."

"Can't say I'm happy about that either," Janus said. There was an observable tension to her voice, as if she was holding herself back. "How they slipped past us. I'm certain the captain of that transport knew them and worked with them."

"Someone on that vessel did," Marcel agreed. "Too bad they're almost on Mars by now and you know how the security there loathes getting into things that took place elsewhere."

"I've tried to call in some favours so that the crew gets questioned," Janus said.

"You don't sound too sure that has worked," Marcel noted and sipped his drink again. The song playing in the background changed. The beat of the base

grew more frequent.

“Only so much people can do,” Janus said. “All we can give it is our best effort. I’ve done that. Hopefully it does the trick.”

Marcel sipped his drink. He didn’t have anything to add to her words.

Janus waived the bartender away as he came by to ask if she wanted anything. “Anyway, I came to see you. I need you back at work on the third.”

“Could have just sent me a message,” Marcel said. He counted the days in his head. A hundred and eight days until his retirement at that point. He’d been sort of hoping he’d get to be on leave until then.

“I could have, but I wanted to see you in person.” Janus gave him a look from head to toe and focused on the drink in front of him. “People are worried. You come here early and start drinking and leave late.”

“People need to learn to mind their own fucking business,” Marcel muttered.

“Look. You’re a good detective. We’ve got new blood coming in and I need you to give them your hundred days. You’ve been at this for a long time so there’s a lot you can give a new one. I’m not going to let you drink that away. Not until you’re officially retired.”

“You’re sticking me with a newbie?” Marcel asked and gulped down what remained of the grey liquid. He waved the empty glass to order another one.

“Yeah. Show them the ropes. Figured it would be easy enough for your path to retirement. Besides, I’m down two detectives right now and I need you back working cases. We’ve got a missing scientist and the corp is breathing down my neck on that.”

“Corps are always breathing down your neck,” Marcel said. He had heard her say that more times than he could recall. Any time there was a crime that involved someone working for one of the corporations she would be breathing on the neck of who ever landed the case. Whether the corps actually breathed down her neck was suspect at best. Marcel wagered she was just making it up most of the time.

The corporation usually didn’t give a fuck about their employees unless it hit their bottom line.

“I mean it this time,” Janus said. “They’ve called me twice now. Apparently

he was pretty important to them.”

The bartender brought Marcel his refill. He immediately took a sip of the grey liquid. The bitter-sweet taste of it engulfed his mouth. “All right. I’ll be back to work on the third.”

“Sober,” Janus added and gave the words some weight by giving Marcel’s shoulder a squeeze.

“On the job, always,” Marcel assured her. He didn’t mention what he’d be doing with his free time. He knew it would involve more than one glass of the grey drink he was enjoying now.

“Good. I’ll mark you up on the roster. Now, I’ve got places to be and people to bother.” With that Janus stood up and left. Marcel didn’t bother saying goodbye to her. Instead he continued sipping his drink.

He found himself feeling disappointed. Mostly because the people who had killed his partner seemed to be getting away with it. He’d worked Mars for a few years. He knew how the natives there could be about outside investigations. The colony was insular and didn’t really make much noise of itself. Over the years the people had turned the same way. They didn’t want the outside world bothering them and didn’t want to bother it.

Another sip of his drink and he tried to remember if he had any contacts there. If the captain wasn’t successful then maybe something more low level could get things done.

All he came up with were dead names.

“Fucking shit,” he muttered to himself and gulped down what remained of his drink. Another one was ordered quickly. Time passed by slowly as he drank more. At some point the room started to sway. Then it felt like the entire station was swaying. At that point Marcel decided he’d had enough for the night and paid off his tab. With staggering steps he walked away.

People passed him in the corridors. Some heading home from work while others started their shift. Seeking support from near by walls and doing his best to focus his vision, he somehow made his way to his own room. It was a familiar route by now and even though he figured he’d remember nothing of how he got back in the morning, it was comforting to know that even in such a state he

wasn't the kind to get into fights.

It took him a few tries to hit the right button to open the door, but eventually he managed it. The light lit up automatically as he stepped in. It was just a standard room for someone working on the station. A small area for a couch and wall display, a bed tucked behind a divider, a small kitchen alcove and a separate wet bathroom.

The door closed behind Marcel as he stumbled into the bathroom. Looking in the mirror he couldn't help but grin. His short curly hair didn't require much maintenance, but still, somehow, it managed to look out of sort. He opened up the cabinet door that acted as a mirror and grabbed a bottle of pills from it. He gulped one down and bent down to drink some water from the tap to wash it down.

"Guess I'm old enough to be one of those who need to keep tabs on their fucking pills," Marcel muttered to himself and chuckled. He closed the cabinet and staggered over to his bed. Not bothering to even strip down, he fell on the soft mattress face first and closed his eyes. It wasn't long before he was out cold.

Chapter 7

The long journey had given Carrie plenty of time to go through the introduction package she had received just before departure. But none of it truly prepared her for the sight of seeing the station come closer and closer as the transport started its deceleration and approach. The cylindrical and bumpy shape of the station made her think of a sex toy she had left behind at home. On the one end a vast array of solar panels spread out like an umbrella to catch all the sunlight before it could hit the station. On the other end an equally vast complex of heat-sinks spread out to dissipate all the heat the quarter of a million people living on the station produced along with the heat from the power stations that provided the scientist with all the power they needed for their experiments and tests..

Carrie had read that the solar power was there to mainly power non-scientific equipment and the nuclear ones were isolated from the main grid to protect it from any surges an experiment might cause. It seemed like a good idea to her.

The central part of the station rotated to provide gravity. The dock was at the bottom part of the station and it was where her transport headed. The approach was shown on monitors inside the transport so the passengers could see their destination and have something to look at while waiting for their arrival. There were several other vessels moving in and many more coming out. Most of them looked like cargo haulers, but there were other transports as well.

It was hard to grasp the scale of things. Carrie knew the transport she was in was big enough that you could fit in several hundred people, but it was swallowed by the space station dock like it was nothing. Much larger cargo transports disappeared inside just as easily.

Getting off the transport took longer than she had thought. The move from no-gravity to the spinning gravity of the station was hard on some of the passengers and that created some bottlenecks here and there where a lot of people had to wait for one to make the transition. For Carrie it was no problem.

She found the sensation interesting and her brief training had made her more comfortable with it. Before the journey she had been warned that some people could get sick with no gravity, but to her it had been a moment of wonderment and joy. Still, the realization that she was there, orbiting Jupiter, made her feel surreal.

The security let her through quickly when they saw her badge. They even gave her directions on where to report for duty. Other passengers went through a much more thorough scrutiny, many of them having to open their luggage for inspection.

Carrie grabbed her suitcase and pulled it behind her. One of the wheels squeaked annoyingly, but it was drowned out by the people in the terminal. There were people getting ready to depart, others waiting for a loved one to arrive on one of the transports. and business men rushing to their meetings. There were queues at the various gates while the whole opposite side of the terminal was filled with small shops and restaurants. There were the same burger places as there were on Earth, but whether they served actual beef or something that simply resembled it was something Carrie hoped to find out some time.

Now, she rushed out of the busy place and sought the nearest transport that would take her to the main security office so she could report for duty. Taking her luggage to her quarters crossed her mind, but then she realized the security office was along the way so there was no point making two trips just because of it. The thing had wheels after all so dragging it behind her wasn't a big strain.

She wound up taking a large train like transport that took her laterally towards the core of the station. The thing was filled to the brim with new arrivals heading to where ever their destination was. Most likely many were going to the various hotels that made up a large section of the centre of the station along with a shopping district and recreational facilities. There was also a large garden that served to clean some of the air and provide extra oxygen as well as giving people a place to enjoy a slice of the home planet.

After departing the transport she had to make her way to an elevator that brought her up to the level where security was. The doors opened to what could have been the lobby of any police precinct. There was the usual counter where

officers were ready to take in any complaints. There were seats where people could wait for their turn and behind the counter she could see rows of desks with people sitting at them, filling out reports and what ever else a case required.

There weren't many people there at that moment. No one was looking to file a report. Only one man was sitting at a bench and he looked more the sort who was waiting to be locked up.

Carrie walked up to the counter and greeted the young man who was on duty.

"How can I help you?" asked the man. His brown hair was cut short and there was a large mole on the left side of his chin that made you wish he'd have it removed for everyone's sake.

"I'm Carrie Apalkov. I've been assigned here as of tomorrow. Figured I'd report in anyway."

"So you're the new detective?" said the man and brightened up. Not having to take in a report always lightened the mood of any officer. No one likes paperwork and it mean one less crime.

"Yeah. That's me," said Carrie and smiled.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Greg Valaces." He extended a hand over the counter and Carrie shook it. Greg stood up and started to walk towards a door that would let him let her in. Carrie walked along him.

"You're in luck. The chief is in. She'll be happy to see you."

"Great." Carrie waited for a moment by the door before Greg managed to open it. She followed him deeper into what was essentially a full police station. She saw the door leading to the holding cells. There were the desks where detectives and regular officers filled their paper work, there were the interrogation rooms on one wall. She even spotted a locker room and the armoury.

"Good thing you're here," said Greg while navigating through the sea of desks. "We've been short handed for too long. Lots of cases waiting to be solved."

"Do you get a lot of problems here?" Carrie thought the station was relatively safe and peaceful, nothing major to deal with. Murders and such were a rarity. At least, that was the image she had gotten.

"It's pretty peaceful," said Greg. "Most of the time anyway. Lately, not so

much. Lots of public disturbances and small fights that need investigating. A few more major things that tie our attention. And we had two detectives retire without getting replacements. Been like that for half a year now.”

“Sounds like I'll have my work cut out.” Carrie couldn't help but think Greg wasn't telling her the full truth. The way he said retire made her think there was something odd about it.

“Don't expect to spend much time at your desk,” said Greg and stopped by a door. “Wait a sec and I'll ask if the boss wants to see you.”

Carrie nodded and watched the man push a button by the door. A green light lit on the panel and the door slid open. Greg entered and a moment later emerged again and motioned for her to enter. “I'll see you on the way out.”

“Thanks,” said Carrie and entered the office. It was a bigger room than she had expected. Space was at a premium on a space station and dedicating a lot of it to something as trivial as a police captain's office was as wasteful as you could get, but none the less the room had plenty of space for the desk and chair any captain needed. There was also room for three chairs in front of it with shelves on all the walls. No nice view out or even a screen besides the small one used for calls.

“Carrie, was it?” The honey laden voice seemed out of place with the hard looking woman that sat behind the desk. She had a nose that could have been straight out of a classic era statue. The brown hair was tied in a bun on top of her head and the pale skin made it seem like she had never seen the sun. Wrinkles formed around her green eyes telling of her age. If Carrie had to guess she'd have put her around fifty though it was hard to tell sometimes.

“Yes. And you're captain Janus?”

“Indeed I am. Have a seat.” She held a tablet in her hand and made flicks with his finger, bringing up new pages. “I must admit I am relieved to finally get someone to replace some of the people I've lost recently. We've been understaffed for months now.”

“Greg told me about it,” said Carrie. The seat had a soft filling and moulded itself to her body, offering the perfect support. It felt like she could have sat in it for hours. “A bit unusual for command not to fill out positions, isn't it?”

Janus snorted. “They make a big fuss about Jupiter and its importance, but when it comes time to do something they drag their feet like they're in a wheelchair.”

Carrie said nothing. She didn't know the captain well enough to know what her reaction would be if she agreed and started to criticize the command. It was best not to get on the wrong foot with your new boss over something that you had little control over.

Janus continued without giving her much of a chance to say anything anyway. “We've had a busy last few months. Usually all we get are drunken fights and robberies. Nothing too serious. But right now we have three missing people, one confirmed homicide, possibly a second homicide, though that's looking to be a suicide, along with a large number of assaults. It's like the station has suddenly gone mad and I don't have the detectives to handle it all.”

“Well, I'm here to help,” said Carrie. She couldn't smile after hearing the situation. It sounded like she'd have her work cut out. It wouldn't have been such a bad thing were it not for the fact people usually suffered when there was a lot of work for the police.

“Good. I've read through your file. I expect great things from you.” Janus looked up from her tablet with a feint smile. “I'll pair you up with one of my older detectives. He'll show you the ropes and bring you up to speed with your cases.”

“You'll get a hundred percent from me,” Carrie assured her.

“Good. Good.” Janus nodded and turned her attention back to the tablet. “I'm sending you a case file. Get to know it. It's a priority case. You two should focus on solving that. A missing scientist. The corporation is pushing hard on it. Solve it quick and get them off my back. I've got enough shit flowing my way without being harped on over some scientist that's probably sitting at a bar getting drunk.”

Carrie felt her communicator vibrate in her pocket as it received the file. It looked like unpacking was going to have to wait. Not that there was much of it to do. There wasn't much room on a space station for anything but your clothes. Everything else was already there on behalf of the station. “Well, I look forward to meeting my partner. I'll look over the file once I've gotten settled in.”

“Welcome to Minerva,” said Janus and gave her a quick look with a feint smile.

Carrie nodded and left the room. It had not been the sort of welcome she had expected, but it could have gone worse. The captain seemed like a straight to business sort of person. She would be easy enough to get along with as long as the cases got solved and the hours got put in.

She walked through the office space and out the door Greg had shown her. The young man was sitting by the counter where he had originally been.

“So, how was the captain?” he asked with a smile.

“Straight to business,” said Carrie and grabbed her suitcase.

“That's her,” said Greg with a smile. “Don't worry. Do your job and she'll treat you right and have your back.”

“That's good to know,” said Carrie and glanced around. “Well, I'll see you tomorrow. Got to go unpack and get some rest.”

Greg nodded. “I'll see you around.”

Carrie turned around and started walking. A few transports later she was standing in front of the door to her new home. The door slid open with a swipe of the key card she'd picked up from the apartment management office. The lights turned on automatically when she entered. The door slid shut behind her.

It wasn't much. There was a small kitchen to the left of the door with all the basics. To the right was the bathroom, such as it was, with the toilet seat and shower cramped together into a single cubicle along with the sink. There was a table with two chairs opposite to the door with a display mounted on the wall beyond it. The bed was cramped up next to the little seating arrangement on the right side. Enough space for a single person to live in relative comfort.

Carrie lugged her suitcase next to the bed and lifted the mattress up, revealing the storage underneath it. She started putting her clothes in there along with all the rest of her belongings. When she was done with that she sat down on one of the chairs and pulled out her compad and started to wade through the file the captain had sent her.

Chapter 8

Marcel groaned and turned on his side. Without opening his eyes he reached for the bottle of pills on the night stand. He fumbled the lid open and shook a pill in his palm. It went down easily even without water. The throbbing pain in his leg started to die down ten minutes later. He finally opened his eyes and put the pills back where he'd gotten them.

His mouth felt dry.

The alarm clock started to ring.

"Off. Off!" he quickly shouted to save his ears from the piercing sound.

The sound died and Marcel groaned. He knew he had to get up, but the drinks he'd had at the bar last night were telling him otherwise. And his leg was acting up. The pill had taken off the worst edge, but when he sat up there was a jolt of pain that ran up his leg and all the way to his left shoulder.

His blurry eyes focused on his compad that rested on the night stand. The clock on it made him realize he needed to be at work in fifteen minutes.

"God fucking dammit," he muttered and stood up. A quick stretch while fighting the pain his body so loved to inflict on him in the morning and a quick scratch to his balls had him on his way to getting dressed. He didn't bother finding a fresh set of clothes and instead put on the same set he'd worn yesterday and the day before that. A white collar shirt, small jacket and straight trousers that matched the brown colour of his jacket. Having dressed he stumbled over into the small bathroom. He leaned against the wall with both his hands and stared into the mirror. Bloodshot eyes looked back at him from a face that was more wrinkles than anything else.

"A hundred days," Marcel muttered to himself and shook his head. "Then I retire and put all this shit behind me." He unzipped and let loose the yellow stream of urine into the toilet bowl. He missed some because of shaky hands, but it didn't bother him. It was a shower stall, after all. Easy enough to rinse.

Having finished his business Marcel stumbled out of the bathroom and gave his apartment a once over. It was the standard accommodation for any low

ranking station personnel. He was pleased to note nothing had been broken. It wouldn't have been the first time he woke up to an apartment that looked like someone had searched through it. Odd things could happen when he got drunk enough and stumbled home.

With a satisfied grunt he left the apartment and headed for the office. The bright lighting hurt his eyes so he pulled out a pair of glasses from an inner jacket pocket and put them on. Strictly speaking they were meant for the observation deck so the sun didn't blind you, but they worked just as well to lessen the toll of heavy drinking.

It didn't take long for him to arrive at the office. The pain in his body had been dulled by the pill and the lights were less bright than in the corridors and transports.

"Hey, Marcel. You look like shit."

"Shut up Greg," he muttered and headed for the door that would let him get to the office.

"Hey, don't be so grumpy. You've got a new partner to show the ropes to."

That made him stop. "What? I wasn't told of a new partner." A memory popped. The captain had come to the bar and told him as much. He'd just forgotten.

The young man chuckled. "You're in for a treat then. She dropped by yesterday. The captain made the assignment then and there."

"She?" Marcel groaned internally. Not that he had anything against women. They were the salt of life, but too much salt could have some bad effects on a body. His past three partners had been women and he'd hoped his last one would be a man. There were things he didn't feel comfortable talking about with female partners. It was only natural. Some things were easier discussed with those of your own gender.

"Don't worry. She seemed nice enough," said Greg with a smile. It was early in the day so there weren't that many people waiting in line for what ever documents they had come to claim. Most people entering the security office weren't there to report a crime, but to satisfy some documentary need of their corporate bureaucracy. "I showed her to your desk. She's there waiting for you."

"Fine. Thanks." Marcel walked off to the door and swiped his card to get in. "I'm really not in the mood for this today." He spoke softly enough no one could hear him. He nodded to the few people that were sitting by their desks. They nodded back. Marcel knew most of them could tell he was not having a day where talking was appreciated. Quite a few still walked on eggs around him because of what had happened to his last partner. The only one that didn't seem to get that was the woman sitting at his former partner's desk. As soon as he got close enough she stood up with a sincere smile and extended a hand to greet him.

"Hello, you must be my new partner. I'm Carrie Apalkov."

Marcel eyed her from head to toe before taking her hand and shaking it. It was hard to tell what sort of mix she was, but if he had to guess it would go somewhere between Russian and Indian. "I'm Marcel Wolfe." He sat down at his desk. There wasn't anything on it besides the workstation display and keyboard and mouse. He kept his eyes on his new partner as he took off his glasses.

"So..." Carrie sat down on the desk corner opposite to Marcel's. The thickness of her hair and the slender shape of her face and body lent her an exotic look that had an inherent appeal to it. "What happened to your old partner? The captain said there have been some losses as of late."

"She was spaced," said Marcel and turned on his display.

"As in.. thrown out an airlock?"

"Yup. Went to follow a lead, never heard of her again. Had to comb through surveillance footage to find out what happened to her. Poor Susana."

"Did you get the ones responsible for it?" The curiosity in her voice was mixed in with sympathy for the loss.

Marcel rubbed one temple before responding. "No, we haven't got them. All we know it was smugglers. Rare to get them, but when we do they're usually the worst of the lot. They'll kill you if given the chance. So, lesson one, don't go investigating anything alone, not even the most innocent of clues. Take a uniform with you if nothing else. I don't want to watch another coffin floated onto a transport."

"I'll keep that in mind." Carrie stood up from the desk corner and went to her own seat behind the desk. The chair was more comfortable than the hard

table corner. It was the sort of chair that had been made to be sat in for hours on end with plenty of adjustments to make it comfortable for anyone. Carrie had spent a good deal of her early morning tweaking it to her liking. "I came to see the captain yesterday. She handed me a case and told me that should be our priority. Said she's getting heat from the corps for it."

"What case?" asked Marcel and went through his messages. A couple of informants were sending tips on some drug traffic that was already under investigation so he just forwarded the information to the detectives in charge of it.

"The missing scientist," said Carrie and opened up the file on her display. "Jonathan Grawer."

"Ah, that." Marcel frowned. "Not much to go on there. All the regular checks turned up nothing. His bank account hasn't been touched, no activity on any of his cards – bank or access ones. No one has seen him. I'd wager he's at some bar getting drunk or high on something or he left the station entirely."

"If his finances haven't been touched it's unlikely he's drinking at a bar," Carrie noted. Marcel grunted in response.

"Any logs to support that he left the station?" asked Carrie.

"He's not on any passenger manifesto," said Marcel. "But it wouldn't be the first time someone used a false name or hid among cargo."

"Why would he do that? He has a good job here and there isn't any record of him being in debt or even having a family that he'd miss back home."

"Who can say why people do something?" Marcel stared at his screen. With his headache and the on-going conversation it was difficult to focus on reading the messages he'd gotten. One was a lab report on another case that he had been waiting for for a while.

"Have you checked his apartment?" It was a reasonable question to ask, but Carrie still felt silly asking it. Of course someone like Marcel had done that. He hadn't been a detective longer than she had been alive for no reason.

"Of course. All his belongings seem to still be there. No sign of packing things."

"Doesn't that suggest he's still on the station?" asked Carrie. If you were going to leave, you wouldn't do it without grabbing at least some of your

belongings. A fresh set of clothes at the very least.

“Or he left in a hurry.”

“Or someone spaced him,” said Carrie, just arriving at the last remaining option. If he didn't leave of his own accord, someone forced him.

“Now why would someone do that?” Marcel turned his attention from the screen to her. He stared at her intently enough that she averted her gaze.

“Maybe it was work related,” said Carrie while her eyes wandered around the office. She caught herself staring at the ass of a female officer that walked past.

Marcel didn't miss her stare. He filed away the fact she seemed to like women. “As far as I know he wasn't involved in anything that would be worth killing for. Basic research.”

“Maybe he just stumbled on something. Something illegal the corporation was into and they wanted to keep secret.”

Marcel shook his head. “That's pretty far fetched.”

“So we're stuck with nothing,” said Carrie. It didn't make her feel good knowing the first case she was working on was in a dead end with no solution in sight. It wouldn't look good with the captain if the case lingered with no progress.

The office was starting to get noisy. Marcel knew it would get worse soon. He needed to get out into more quiet surroundings. “Why don't we go through his apartment one more time and talk to his employer? Maybe a fresh set of eyes will notice something I missed.”

“I don't have my weapon yet,” said Carrie, though she couldn't hide her desire to do as the man had suggested. But without a weapon she was not going anywhere. That would have been breaking regulations.

Marcel stood up and grabbed his jacket. “We'll grab it on the way out.”

“Let's do it then,” said Carrie and stood up as well. She pulled on her short coat that had been hanging on the back of her chair. It was department issue and served more than one purpose. It was woven with all sorts of different fabrics and materials that lent it a resistance to a number of things, many of them which could be lethal to the person wearing it.

They made it out of the office area and Marcel led the way to the equipment and evidence handling.

“Hey, Jack. My new partner needs her weapon.” Marcel greeted the man behind the glass that separated him from the outside. There was a small slot through which items could be passed through. It was especially important on a space station that equipment that could cause serious damage did not fall into the wrong hands.

“Sure thing, Marcel. Let's see her ID.” Jack was a man with greying hair and a moustache that looked out of place. Carrie pressed her finger on the pad next to the slot and waited for the machine to do its job. A combination of her fingerprint and DNA were processed in a matter of seconds and soon her picture was on the small display above the pad along with her service information and clearances.

“Carrie Apalkov. Nice to meet you,” said Jack and gave her a smile. “Just give me a moment and I'll get your things.”

“Nice to meet you too,” said Carrie and watched the man turn around and disappear amongst the shelves and lockers that filled the room behind him. It didn't take long for him to return with a small black suitcase and a holster for a weapon. He put both through the small slot.

Carrie grabbed the suitcase and opened it on the small amount of counter space that was available. Inside she found a standard issue gun that everyone in the force used. She took it out and wrapped her hand around the grip. A finger on the trigger started the process of tying the weapon to her fingerprint and DNA. It wouldn't prevent a determined person from making the weapon work, but at least no one would be able to wrangle it out of her hand and use it against her. From the handle the gun extended in a black, hexagon shaped barrel. The bullets it fired were low velocity and less lethal than ones from a regular gun.

Still, it could break a window.

“Remember, you're not on Earth any more. You're on a space station.” Marcel gave her a stern look. “Don't go shooting that thing unless you're certain you'll hit what you're aiming at. And never, NEVER, fire it in a place with an observation window. Doesn't matter if you're going to get your tongue cut out because of it. Shoot that thing and break the window and you just might kill everyone in the room. Rapid decompression is a bitch.”

“I read the brief and went through the training,” said Carrie. It had used less

dramatic words, but delivered the same message. “Why don't they give us less lethal weapons? Ones that won't break windows?”

Marcel snorted. “Then they wouldn't work on some of the stuff we have to deal with. You're not the only one with a jacket like that.”

Carrie put the holster around her waist and stashed the gun in it. She noticed it was standard issue as well and made the effort of pulling out the weapon a couple of times just to ensure she remembered the small motions it took to get the gun out. In a tight spot it would not do to be unable to pull out the gun because you forgot the safety measures that prevented others from pulling out the weapon. She was satisfied with it and slipped the small case back to Jack.

“Thanks.” She gave the man a smile as he went to stash the empty case somewhere amongst the shelves.

“All right. Let's go,” said Marcel and put on his glasses once more. He led the way and Carrie followed. A transport ride, an elevator ride down a couple of levels and the pair started walking the corridors of one of the apartment levels. There were other people walking around, some going to work, others getting home from their late shifts and then there were the home makers going for shopping with their little kids in carriages. Some of the older ones were held by hand as they walked next to their parents.

“So, how long have you been working here?” Carrie broke the silence.

“Too fucking long,” replied Marcel. He glanced at her and then decided to answer properly. “Twenty five years.”

“And prior to that?”

“Earth, the Moon, Mars. I've been everywhere. Not as long as here though. This place is home. As much as I hate it.”

“That's contradicting.”

Marcel chuckled. “That's me. Get used to it.”

“This is my first assignment off Earth. First time I'm off the surface,” Carrie admitted.

“No need to be nervous,” said Marcel as they rounded a corner to where the doctor's apartment was. “Doesn't matter if it's Earth, Mars or this station.

Assholes are assholes and criminals are criminals. That's as much a constant as the speed of light.”

Carrie smiled. “I know how to handle those.”

Marcel swiped his card on the pad next to the door and it opened with smooth hiss. “Here we are,” he said and stepped inside. Carrie followed.

It was a bigger room than either of them had. It was still only a single room, but the kitchen was bigger and there was room for an actual dining table. There was a clearly separate living room space with a comfortable couch in front of a display and beyond that there was the double bed. Obviously made for a couple.

“That doctor wasn't married, was he?” asked Carrie as she stepped deeper into the room. It was clean and everything looked organized, save for a few items obviously out of place because Marcel had gone through the place.

“No,” replied Marcel. “That's what I thought too when I first walked in. They're very strict about how they allocate rooms. Single people supposed to get the small ones. The corporation must be paying out its nose so the doctor could have this room.”

“What was it? Guang Guo that he worked for?” Carrie walked into the kitchen area. A counter separated it from the rest of the room and made for a convenient place to eat a quick breakfast at or set up servings for a meal. She opened the fridge and found very little in it, save for some milk that was past its due date. It wasn't fresh milk, just reconstituted powder.

“Yeh, that's the place.” Marcel had made his way to the living room and was looking around with his hands in his pockets. He'd stashed his glasses in his jacket pocket.

“Why would they be paying for a bigger room for someone who's just doing basic science?” Carrie wondered and closed the fridge. Looking around the kitchen she didn't spot anything of note. The counters were empty save for a coffee maker.

“Worth going to ask that question,” Marcel noted. “I haven't really gotten to talk with the corporation yet. Just some basic background info. Haven't pushed them.”

“Haven't talked to co-workers yet?” Carrie made her way out of the kitchen

and walked over to the bed and rummaged through what little there was on the night stand and its drawers.

"I've been a bit busy with other cases," Marcel admitted. "People go missing all the time here and most of the time they're just drunk and sitting at a bar because they had a fight with their significant other or something like that. So they're not a high priority. Not like there's a lot of places to get off to here."

"Plenty of space outside," Carrie noted. "I'd imagine it would be hard to spot a body floating on down to Jupiter."

Marcel grunted. "Depends on where you're spaced from. There's lots of antennae and other things that could snag you before you're free of the station. There are sensors that are supposed to warn if they detect something living floating off too far. Still, can't deny I've got a stack of cases from the two decades I've been here that have gone unsolved and I'm fairly certain the victim is somewhere on Jupiter."

"So if someone wanted to send someone on a one way trip to Jupiter they'd have to do it at the right place and have the sensors malfunction so no one noticed?" Carrie put her hands on her hips and gave the room a look. As far as she could tell it had been thoroughly searched and it was unlikely she'd spot something a veteran like Marcel might have missed.

"The sensors aren't perfect," said Marcel. "They miss things, there are blind spots. But yeah, you'd need more than one to pull it off reliably."

"Not a likely scenario then?"

Marcel shrugged. "People do things if you give them enough credits. Smugglers bribe plenty of people operating the various scanners and sensors. It happens."

Carrie sighed. "Doesn't look like we'll find anything here. How about we go harass the corporate people?"

"Sure. They might not like us dropping by unannounced, but fuck their feelings." Marcel walked out the room and locked the door behind Carrie. They walked the corridors once more. They all looked the same with rows of doors and the occasional plastic plant here and there along with benches to sit down on. The flow of people had lessened from the morning rush and there were only a few

going about their business.

“How you liking the station so far?” asked Marcel to pass the time as they walked and took different transports to get to the corporate levels.

“It's all right,” replied Carrie. “Odd not being able to go outside and feel the wind. The air feels stuffy at times. Just glad I'm not claustrophobic.”

“Left anyone behind?”

Carrie shook her head. “Just some friends.”

“Parents?”

“Mother and father. That was the hardest part. They're getting old.”

Marcel gave her a look. “You don't look that old.”

A small smile passed her lips. “I'm a late star.”

“Seems to be pretty common these days,” Marcel noted. “It might be rough adjusting to life on a station. Like you said, you already miss the wind and other nice things Earth has. If you get any anxiety go talk to the councillor. They're there to help. I don't want my partner on edge because they miss the feel of grass under their feet. Fuck, talk to me if you need to. I'd rather listen to you than have to worry whether you're fit for duty and have my back.”

“Don't worry. I'm pretty good at adapting.” Carrie tried to sound confident, but she could not deny the worries that were in the back of her mind. Her first impression of Marcel had not been one that inspired confidence, but he seemed to care about his partners. His gruff outwards appearance and to the point talk gave a cold impression and she'd worried whether she'd get along with him. So far it seemed she would.

“Just don't play a hero. I'm a hundred days from retirement and I don't want to end by losing a newbie.” The transport they'd been on came to a halt on a platform and people left while others came aboard. It was their stop so Marcel led the way and they watched as the transport nudged forward on its rails to ferry people to another part of the corporate section.

“Every corporation has their own platform?” Carrie stared at the single door leading out of the platform and the Guang Guo company logo on top of it.

“Yeah. Each one is a completely isolated compartment. Own life support, power source, pretty much everything they need to survive if the rest of the

station goes to shit. Keeps the spies at bay, or so they hope.”

“Cameras recording everyone going in and coming out,” Carrie noted as she spotted the cameras. There didn't seem to be angle they didn't cover. “Bet we can get some last footage of our missing doctor.”

Marcel grunted. “Maybe. The corp might not want us rummaging through that footage.”

“Why not?”

Marcel shrugged. “Corporate secrets, fear, take your pick.”

“You haven't asked for footage from around the station yet, have you?”

“I've got a request pending,” said Marcel and started towards the door. “There's thousands of cameras and thousands of hours of footage to go through. Even the face recognition software is going to be at it for a while.”

“Probably not the only case to work on either,” said Carrie and followed him.

“Probably,” Marcel agreed. The door slid open in front of him and they entered a lobby. Straight ahead there was a reception desk with a woman standing behind it. Either side of it there were doors with card readers. To the sides there were chairs for people to sit in and wait for the person they were going to meet. There was music playing in the background that gave the whole area a pleasant feel to it. There were even some real plants there and carpets to cut down the harsh metal of the station.

Marcel wasted no time walking to the reception desk.

“Hello. How may I help you?” the woman gave him a pleasant enough smile, but her eyes were hard as steel. They looked him over and then moved to Carrie for a quick scan. She noted her security jacket with a slight frown before returning to Marcel with the same neutral smile.

Marcel pulled out his badge and showed it to the woman. “I'm detective Wolfe and this is my partner, detective Apalkov. We're investigating the disappearance of one of your scientists. A Jonathan Grawer. We would like to talk to some of his colleagues and take a look at your security footage to see if there's anything there relating to his disappearance.”

For a moment the woman looked like she'd been caught off guard and the smile wavered for a moment. She pulled herself together. “One moment please, I

will try and contact his supervisor.”

“Thank you,” said Marcel and leaned his back against the counter. Carrie kept a close eye on the woman as she made the call. She wasn't your typical receptionist. Even with the long sleeved jacket she wore it was obvious she was fit. The way she moved and had scanned the two of them made Carrie think she was just as much security as she was reception. If anyone started trouble she'd kick them out just as easily as she'd make the call for someone's host.

Looking around the room Carrie noted the four cameras that covered the entire lobby. Judging by the people going in through the two doors, the one on the left was for scientists going to their laboratories and the right one for office workers and managers going to their desks to shuffle papers.

“Mr. Vasquez will be with you shortly,” said the receptionist as she ended the call. “If you would like to take a seat while you wait.” She motioned towards the chairs on either side of the lobby.

“Thanks.” Marcel pushed himself away from the counter and walked to the nearest chair. Carrie followed him with her hands in her jacket pockets. Instead of taking a seat she decided to stand opposite to Marcel.

“So far so good,” she said and gave the older detective a glance.

Marcel grunted. “They'll see us all right, but they might not give us what we want.”

“You think they have something to hide?”

“They always do,” replied Marcel. “They're worse than the government.”

Carrie shrugged. “Can't say I had much interaction with them on Earth. Most of my time was just dealing with civilians.”

Marcel chuckled. “Well, you're here now. You'll get to deal with them until you feel sick about it.”

“That bad, huh?”

Marcel nodded.

The silence between them grew longer until it was broken by their host.

“Detectives?”

Mr. Vasquez was a pleasant looking man with short, curly hair and brown eyes that had a warmth to them. Along with his smile and relaxed composure he

radiated a feeling of comfort. He was dressed in a simple collared shirt and light brown trousers. Not too formal, but not too informal for someone in a managing position.

“Mr. Vasquez?” Marcel stood up.

“Yes. I understand you have some question regarding our missing scientist?”

“Indeed we do. Is there somewhere we can talk in private?” Marcel looked around the lobby. While there weren't many people around the investigation wasn't something that was for them to hear.

“Of course. Please, follow me.” Vasquez led the way through the administrative side door and straight into a conference room. It was the first door after they entered and didn't give them a chance to see anything but a corridor lined with doors.

The conference room was a small one with seating for eight people around a table large enough to give everyone space to spread out papers and notes. There was also a large display at the end of the table and speakers around the room. It looked like it would make for a decent movie experience if needed.

Carrie and Marcel took seats opposite to their host.

“Now then, how can I help you?” Vasquez crossed his hands on the table in front of him and looked at both of them with sincerity.

“I'll get straight to the point. We would like to speak with Grawer's colleagues. See if they noticed anything odd about him lately that might lead us on his track.”

“I can arrange that,” Vasquez said with a nod. “Though it might not be possible today. There are some important experiments running and pulling the researchers from them would be financially too high a burden on us.”

“When ever fits their schedule,” said Marcel. “But preferably as soon as possible. In a missing person case time is important.”

“Of course,” Vasquez agreed. “Is there anything else?”

“We would like any last footage you might have of doctor Grawer on your security cameras. Nothing secret, of course. Just when he left and came to work. Maybe he left with someone. Could lead us on the right track.”

Carrie examined Vasquez as the request was made. The man readied to deny

the request before Marcel laid down the restriction of what they wanted. He still looked to struggle whether it would be possible to deliver on the footage.

"I'll see what I can do about that," said Vasquez with an apologetic smile. "I'm afraid that is not something I decide, but rather our head of security."

"I understand," said Marcel. "That's about all we're looking for right now."

"All right," said Vasquez. "Will you be interviewing the employees here?"

"No. They should come to the security station."

"That will make things a bit more tricky."

Carrie could see where things were going. Vasquez was looking for a way out of his earlier promise. He wanted the questioning to take place in corporate controlled space where they could easily hear what was being said. That was no way to get people to spill everything they know. She was confident Marcel was well aware of that fact.

"It's policy. Nothing I can do about it." The reply from Marcel left the two men staring at each other.

"Well, I'll see what I can do. It just means people will be away from their work for quite a while."

"I would imagine they would be happy to help find a missing colleague, just like I imagine your employer would be keen on finding a missing employee." Marcel's hand went to his pocket and rummaged around for something, but ended up pulling it out empty.

"Of course." The smile from Vasquez was one of annoyance of having to give up. "I think we are done here, then?"

"Seems so," said Marcel and stood up. Carrie followed his lead and Vasquez led them out to the lobby once more. The farewells were lukewarm at best and Vasquez disappeared back into the administrative section quicker than was polite.

"Well, that went cold quickly," Carrie noted as they walked to the platform to wait for a transport.

Marcel grunted. "That's what you get for sticking to the rules. The corporation wants the most out of its workers so them coming to us is not going to sit well with them. That's working hours wasted."

"And they can't hear what's being said," Carrie added.

"That too. Now they have to worry what the employees might say."

"What's so bad that they could say to us? Not like we'll be digging for corporate secrets. We just want to find a missing man."

"We know that. They don't. They don't know us. They might believe we're spies for one of their competitors. Wouldn't be the first time one of us took some extra income to leak something sensitive."

Carrie shook her head. "I don't think I could work in such a paranoid environment."

"Yet you work as a detective," said Marcel with a chuckle.

"We don't need to be paranoid. Just observant."

"Just give it a few years," said Marcel. "The cases that fall before you can put you in the middle of some nasty shit. *That* will make you paranoid."

Carrie glanced back at the corporate section. "I almost feel like I've already landed in the middle of one."

"Can't deny this one might end up that way," said Marcel. A transport arrived, headed to the right direction, so the two stepped inside. Apart from them it was empty so they got to enjoy a private ride for at least one station. Then more people boarded and by their end station it was getting crowded.

Carrie let out a sigh of relief as they stepped out onto the platform and the packed transport darted away.

"Not good with crowds?" asked Marcel. His eyes bore into her like drills. It felt like nothing would escape notice.

"Oh, no, it's not that," Carrie replied. "I just still can't believe I'm here."

"You'll get used to it soon enough," said Marcel and started towards the security offices. "I still remember my first off planet assignment. Back then it was far less common too. Mars was just getting on its feet and this station was barely a blueprint on some engineers computer. They sent me to Orbiter One."

"The one that blew up?" asked Carrie, her curiosity now fully taking over.

"Well, just a part of it."

"Still, killed a lot of people. Debris everywhere. Took a decade to clean it all up."

Marcel nodded. "Made for a safer space for everyone, though. With the clean up drones and debris prevention measures."

"Sometimes good things come out of tragedy," said Carrie.

Marcel nodded again. "Anyway, I was off station at the time. Lucky me. Visiting folks back home on vacation. Lost a lot of friends that day. Watched it on the news. The footage of those flames erupting into the void. It was terrifying, but at the same time utterly fascinating. Anyway. My first few days on the station I was antsy as hell. Nothing felt right. The gravity was a little off. The air smelled funny. No going out, no wind, surrounded by nothing but metal."

"I know that feeling." As she had earlier alluded to the confinement was having an impact. She figured it would be something she'd get used to with time, but she also knew she would never stop missing the feeling of grass under her feet or the feeling of wind on her skin or the sound of rain hitting the roof above her head.

"But I got used to it. Work helped. Fuck, those cases in front of me were what made me forget I was on a hunk of metal orbiting Earth. That's the way it works for most people. As long as they have something to keep them occupied things work out."

"And if they don't have anything to keep them busy?" asked Carrie.

"Lots of ways space will fuck you up," said Marcel. "Maybe you'll turn to gambling and drinking. Then one day you take a loan from the wrong guy and then one day you find yourself floating towards the nearest gravity well. Seen that plenty of times. Or maybe you never adjust to the life. You start popping pills the doc gives you and then some more pills to counter the side effects of the old ones. Finally you're popping so many pills you lose count and they're making you miserable as hell. Then you decide there's only one way out and find yourself floating towards the nearest gravity well."

"People sure love shoving others into space, don't they?" asked Carrie.

Marcel shrugged. "In a relatively closed environment the best way to make something disappear is to shove it outside the system."

"Starting to sound like if we don't find the doctor he's floating off towards Jupiter," Carrie noted.

“Yup.”

They walked all the way to the security offices in silence. Carrie kept glancing at Marcel from time to time. He had seemed grumpy and the silent type, but he was surprisingly talkative when it came down to it. She suspected it had something to do with the fact he'd been obviously hungover in the morning and was now starting to feel better.

“Hey, Marcel, the tech guys got the footage you wanted. Dropped it off at your desk.” Greg was the first one to greet them from behind the counter. He seemed to be in a good mood despite the line of complainers that was slithering towards his post.

“Great. Thanks.” Marcel walked on to the door that led inside.

“How's the first day going?” Greg asked Carrie as she passed by.

“Either it's going really good or I'm inching closer to the gates of hell. I'll tell you at the end of the day which way it went.”

Greg chuckled at it and took a form one of the complainer was handing to him.

Carrie followed Marcel to his desk.

“All right. Time to see what the tech guys got us.” Marcel had taken a seat and taken out a memory stick from a sealed evidence bag. He stuck it to the side of his computer monitor and started going through the files on it. Carrie stood behind him, looking over his shoulder.

The videos didn't offer much. Most of it was their missing man going to work and back home with occasional visits to shops and restaurants.

“Doesn't seem like he'd be in gambling debt or anything like that,” Carrie noted after the twentieth clip.

“Yeah, seems to be clean as a fucking whistle,” said Marcel and put on the next clip. “Work and sleep seems to be all he does.”

They watched a few more clips of the scientist walking in the hallways, taking transports, purchasing food and going back to his accommodations. With a sigh Marcel put on the next clip.

“Well well, what's the good doctor doing there?” Marcel muttered as soon as he saw the footage.

"Where is he? Doesn't look like a regular area of the station," said Carrie and watched as Grawer opened up a locker and pulled out an EVA suit.

"He's going outside," said Marcel as the man started to put on the suit. He seemed nervous, but that could have just been from going outside to the void.

"Can people just do that?" Carrie wondered.

"No. Special permissions are required, but I checked them. The professor never asked for anything like that."

"So he's breaking the law?" asked Carrie.

Marcel nodded. "But why would he do that? The company could have easily gotten him permission if he's doing some experiments."

"From the looks of things he didn't want anyone to know. See how he's looking around all nervous?" Carrie pointed to the monitor.

"Yeah. That's a man who has something to hide."

They watched him get into the suit and walk into the airlock. The clip ended when the doctor floated out into space.

"Do we have any footage from the outside?" Carrie asked.

Marcel quickly clicked through the remaining clips. They were nothing worth mentioning. None of them showed the doctor outside the station.

"Looks like we don't. Neither do we have footage of him coming back inside." Marcel leaned back in his chair, done with looking through the files.

"Possible the tech guys missed it? Maybe he came in some weird way?" Carrie wasn't liking the direction her first case was taking.

"Unlikely," Marcel sighed. "Let's face it. He's likely floating out towards Jupiter if he's not on the station. We have footage of him leaving and not coming back so.." he left the rest of the sentence in the air.

They both stared at the still video on his screen without saying anything. It was the last frame of the video and only showed the tip of his boot still visible through the open airlock.

"What area of the station is that?" Carrie asked.

Marcel grunted and leaned forward. He took the tag information from the video and put it into a different application that brought up a map of the station and pinpointed the location. "It's a maintenance airlock near the comm arrays."

“What's someone like him doing there?” Carrie wondered.

“Suicide?” Marcel suggested and shrugged.

“No indication of him being that way,” Carrie countered. “The corps are pretty strict on keeping an eye out for people like that.”

“He was nervous enough. Maybe someone was after him,” Marcel suggested. “We'll need to ask for all the footage from that airlock and the nearby ones.”

Carrie nodded. “And we need a crew to go out there and take a look around. Maybe he's still near enough that he can be found. Maybe he hid something out there.”

“What would he have to hide?” asked Marcel.

“Something that earned him a trip to Jupiter.”

Chapter 9

First day of work had Carrie feeling tired. She'd been thrown straight into the thick of things with a case that looked like it would turn into a murder investigation. Nothing was pointing to good things for the missing scientist. Sitting at the bar with a cold drink in her hand did take some of the weight off her shoulders.

It wasn't one of those places that blasted music so loud a conversation was next to impossible. There was music, but it was at background noise levels. It set the mood, but didn't overpower everything else. There weren't many people there yet, though some of the booths bathed in blue and red light were occupied. By the uniforms worn they were docks workers and other station personnel. She'd asked Marcel what a good place was and he'd directed him there. He had assured him there would be nothing but station personnel there. No annoying civilians to bother you. Made for a more relaxed atmosphere for those who worked on keeping the station running.

Carrie sipped her drink and grimaced. It was nowhere near what whiskey should have been. The only thing it did right was the burning in her throat and the inevitable drunken state that would follow. There was not even a hint of the subtle flavours real whiskey had. She sighed.

One more thing to miss from the home planet.

She glanced to her side as someone sat next to her. By the outfit it was a dock worker so she just turned back to her drink and took another sip.

"Hey. Haven't seen you here before."

Carrie turned to the person next to her. "Yeah. I'm new here. First time coming here."

"Well, welcome to Minerva," said the dock worker and extended her hand. Her brown hair was tied in a ponytail. Her overall made it hard to determine her body type, but judging by her slim wrist and narrow face she was fit. Being a dock worker that made sense. It was hard, physical work that shaped up even the laziest couch potato in the long term.

"Thanks," said Carrie and shook the extended hand.

"Oh, sorry, my name is Lorelai. I work at the docks."

"Carrie. Detective with the security forces."

Lorelai smiled. "Figured as much from your uniform." She was leaning against the counter. The bartender was mixing a drink so it looked like she had made her order. She was tall, enough so that Carrie had to look slightly up at her.

A silence passed between the two. Lorelai tapped her finger against the counter for a moment before turning back to Carrie once more. "So, how long have you been on the station?"

"This is my second day," Carrie replied.

"Ever been off gravity?" Lorelai asked.

Carrie shook her head. "A few short stays around Earth orbit, that's it."

"Well, you'll get used to it," said Lorelai with an encouraging smile. "It's not so bad. Personally, I found Mars much more challenging. It's like it's right there. Surface, but you know if you go outside you'll die. It taunts you. Here, it's just empty space. Much less to remind you of how good life on Earth is."

"It is a bit of an adjustment," Carrie admitted.

"How are you liking it so far?" asked Lorelai. The bartender came and placed her order in front of her. It was one of those frilly drinks that had umbrellas and various other stuff poking out of it.

"Not too bad. Though I wish the first case in front of me wasn't what it is."

"Oh?"

Carrie gave the woman a sideways look.

"Right, right. Can't talk about the cases." Lorelai took a sip of her drink through one of the straws that had been buried in it.

"Not really, no," Carrie agreed. "All I can say is it's starting to look like two transports trying to cram into the same slip while a third one is trying to leave."

"Ouch, that bad, huh?"

"It's why I'm here enjoying this fine serving of whiskey," Carrie raised her glass and gave Lorelai a smile before taking a sip. She couldn't hide the grimace and they both ended up chuckling over it.

“Would you like to join us? Seems like you could use some company.” Lorelai used her fancy drink to point at a booth with two other people sitting at it. They all had the same dock worker clothes she did.

Carrie hesitated for a moment. She had come to be alone, to try and relax, so joining a bunch of strangers didn't really fit in with her plans. Then again, making friends was never bad. Connections at the docks could be helpful in her job. “Sure. Never hurts to know a few people outside work.”

“I hear you,” said Lorelai as she stood up. She seemed even taller that way. She was a good heads length taller than Carrie. “Come on. I'll introduce you to everyone.”

Carrie grabbed her drink and followed her to the booth. The two sitting there gave her curious looks. One was a woman with red hair and blue eyes. Her face had a roundness to it as did her body. The overall she wore couldn't hide her chubby body.

The other one was a man with curly dark hair that matched his similarly toned skin. He'd peeled off the top half of his overall that left his wide chest in good view. The t-shirt he wore did little to hide the well defined muscles.

“Guys, this is Carrie,” said Lorelai as she zipped down her overall before taking a seat. She was as slender as she was tall. “She's new on the station. Works security as a detective. Carrie, this is Melanie and the handsome fellow there is Gareth.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Carrie and sat down next to Lorelai. She had scooted further into the booth to give her room.

“Who did you piss off to get assigned here?” asked Gareth. He asked the question with enough of a smile to make it obvious he wasn't being serious with it.

Melanie playfully punched his arm. “Don't tease the new girl.”

Gareth pretended the hit hurt him and rubbed the spot. “Sorry, dear.”

Melanie turned to Carrie with an apologetic smile. “My hubby there has a bad habit of asking inconsiderate questions.”

“That's all right,” said Carrie. She noted they were both drinking what passed for beer on the station. The white head in their pints was impressive, but

the taste left much to be desired.

“So, how are you liking Minerva so far?” asked Melanie.

“Taking some getting used to. First long term assignment on a station and all that,” Carrie replied.

“You'll be fine,” Melanie assured her.

“I said the same thing,” said Lorelai from next to her. She gently bumped against Carrie as she shifted in her seat.

“It's not a bad station to be on,” said Gareth. “Much worse places to be in. Smaller places that feel more cramped. Places that don't have as much people. Here, you don't have to know everyone.”

“And not everyone knows what's going on with you,” Melanie added.

Carrie nodded. She could understand the lack of privacy smaller stations would offer. “How's it working at the docks?” She was curious what the routine was for someone like them.

Gareth shrugged. “Busy.”

“There's a near constant flow of transports coming and heading out,” said Melanie and sipped her drink.

“Minerva is the hub of the outer solar system,” said Lorelai from next to Carrie. “Research stations, mining stations, colonies on the moons, all depend on this station for supplies.”

Carrie nodded. “Plenty of people on the station in need of things too.”

“And you're here to herd them,” said Melanie with a smile.

“At least I'm not doing it alone,” said Carrie and took a sip of her drink.

“So, how about a game of cards?” Gareth reached into the pocket of his overalls and pulled out a deck of cards.

“You always want to play with those,” Melanie chided the man.

“It's fun,” said Gareth with a shrug.

“I don't mind,” Carrie said. She'd played cards plenty of times with her friends back home. It was a pleasant enough pass time.

“Let's do it,” said Lorelai and rubbed her hands together. “I've got some paying back to do for the last game.”

The game went on for a few hours. Carrie lost count how many drinks she'd

had. More people stuffed themselves into the booths around them and by the time they were finishing their game the booths were starting to empty again. Everyone in the group was drunk, that much was obvious by the way Melanie leaned on Gareth as they stood up to leave. Gareth seemed to be leaning on her almost as much. Together they managed to stay upright and wobble out the door.

"Well, it was fun," said Carrie and stood up. She had to grab the table for support so that she didn't land on her ass on the floor.

"Ha! And you said you weren't drunk," said Lorelai and slid out the booth. She was swaying from side to side in a manner that did not instill confidence in how far she'd make it without falling down.

"I just might be," Carrie admitted and braced herself as Lorelai lurched against her. She wrapped an arm around the taller woman's waist and started to hobble towards the exit. Lorelai put a hand around her shoulders and giggled. It wasn't a sound Carrie had expected from a grown woman, but there was something endearing about it.

"Which way do you live?" asked Lorelai.

Carrie looked either way down the open area they were in. Shops lined the path on either side as far as she could see. There were restaurants, bars like the one they had just emerged from and anything in between.

"I have no idea," she finally admitted. "I had to use my compad to navigate here and even then I made a wrong turn a couple of times."

"All right. We're going this way then." Lorelai dragged Carrie along with a strength that was surprising for her slender build. Whether she was going the right way or not Carrie had no idea. She fumbled to reach for her compad to get her bearings, but a wave of nausea made her drop the whole idea and instead focus on not puking on her new found friend. The entire walk turned into a blur for her. The corridors looked the same even when sober and in her drunken state she spent more time looking down at her feet than trying to look for any clear signs where she was going.

She let Lorelai lead the way. In the back of her mind she knew it was a bad idea. She didn't know that much about her. She had not intended to get drunk. It was a weakness she was well aware of. When there was good company the drinks

just kept coming and she kept drinking them. Losing count was easy.

Carrie raised her head enough to see the door open and lights turn on. She knew it wasn't her little apartment, but that worry disappeared the moment she was guided to the bed. The soft mattress welcomed her as she fell on it. She closed her eyes. She felt like the world was spinning. It made her nauseous once more. She was too tired to care.

The smell of fresh coffee woke her. Her head throbbed and the blurry vision when she opened her eyes made her wonder for a moment where she was. She groaned and turned on her back.

"You're awake," came a familiar voice.

"Lorelai?" Carrie asked and shielded her eyes from the light with her arm. She felt the mattress give on one side.

"Yeah. Here. Have some coffee."

A warm mug was placed in her other hand. Carrie gripped it with gratitude and sat up. The first sip burned her tongue, but the rich taste that followed sent a wave of warmth through her entire body. She looked around the room. It definitely wasn't hers. "Where are we?"

"My place," said Lorelai. She sat next to her in a white tank-top and loose fitting college pants. "You didn't seem to be in any shape to be left on your own."

Carrie sighed. "My father used to say you're not drunk until you're laying on the floor still thinking you're falling down. I can say I was drunk by that definition last night."

Lorelai laughed. "You did down quite a few drinks."

"Good company does that to me," Carrie admitted and drank some more coffee. A bad feeling struck her. "What time is it?"

"Five in the morning."

Carrie let out a sigh of relief. "I'm not late for work then. Yet."

"Not a good impression to be late on your second day of work," Lorelai admitted and stood up. "I'll whip up some breakfast. You should take a shower."

"I'll do that at my place. Got to get a fresh set of clothes anyway." Carrie sat on the bed and sipped the coffee. Looking around she was surprised by the fact the apartment was bigger than hers. She figured it had to do with the fact she

was a new arrival. Lorelai had been on the station for years and had had time to line up for more room. It was still a single room with a separate bathroom, but there was more space. It would have been easy to fit in another bed and partition it off for some privacy. Instead there was a large couch and a set of comfortable looking chairs that took up the space. There was a blanket on the couch which indicated Lorelai had slept there.

"I'm sorry I kept you from your bed," said Carrie and turned towards the kitchen. Lorelai was busy cooking, her back turned to her.

"It's all right. Not the first time I've let someone sleep off their previous night." Lorelia moved to the fridge and pulled out something and moved back to the stove. Carrie admired her slim back for a moment before shaking her head.

"That happen often?" Carrie asked and sipped the last of her coffee. She kept a hold of the cup, enjoying the warmth it still radiated.

Lorelai shrugged. "Here and there. Mostly old friends. Pretty rare to make a new one." She glanced back at Carrie and smiled.

It was the sort of smile that could be taken multiple ways. With her head throbbing like someone had stomped on it Carrie couldn't bring herself to think about it that much. She figured she'd have more opportunities to get to know Lorelai and her intentions. She stood up from the bed and walked over to the little island that separated the rest of the kitchen from the living area of the room. Her clothes clung to her like she'd ran a marathon. The hangover sweats had done their job of making her feel dirty.

She set the mug down on the island and took a seat on one the tall stools. "I really shouldn't have drank so much. It's only my second day on the job."

"From what I hear it's a bit of a tradition with the security people," said Lorelai as she turned around and started spooning off egg from the frying pan onto two plates that already had something that might have passed for bacon if you were blind and didn't have a sense of smell.

"Well, my partner did come to work hungover on my first day," Carrie admitted.

Lorelia laughed. "See? You fit right in."

Carrie smiled. The plate that was pushed in front of her made her stomach

turn even though it smelled delicious. She forced herself to pick up the fork and eat. The first few bites were tough, but the more she ate the better she felt. The two women sat on opposite sides of the little island and ate in silence. Carrie glanced up at her host from time to time and looked away as soon as she glanced back at her.

“Thanks for the meal,” said Carrie as she finished the last bite and washed it down with some cold water Lorelai had offered her during the meal. She reached into her pocket and grabbed the compad.

“You're welcome,” said Lorelai and started gathering up the dishes as her guest went through her new messages.

“And thank you for last night,” said Carrie. Her new messages had not been that interesting. The clock was starting to get late enough that she'd need to hurry if she wanted to shower and get changed before heading for work.

“Any time.” Lorelai left the dishes in the sink and turned to give her a smile. “Couldn't very well leave you wandering the corridor with how drunk you were.”

Carrie felt a sting of shame that she tried to hide behind a smile. “I should get going. Got to shower and change before work.”

“Drop by the bar once you're done. I'd love to see you again. As would Gareth and Melanie, I'm sure.” Lorelai watched her get up and find her coat that had been thrown on the back of the couch.

“I will. Pretty sure I've found my regular spot,” Carrie gave her a smile and a wave as she walked out the door. She took out her compad and put in directions to her own place and started walking. It wasn't that far, to her surprise. She was in her own apartment, undressing and heading for the shower quicker than she had hoped. The warm water washing over her body made her feel refreshed and the headache started to give in. By the time she had dried her hair and gotten into a fresh set of clothes she still had plenty of time left to get to work.

As she made her way to the security offices she contemplated what had happened last night. Getting drunk like that had not been her plan and she was disappointed with herself that she'd let it happen. Lorelai had been great, but she could have taken advantage of the situation in so many ways. But she hadn't and that told volumes of her character. Then there were the glances they'd exchanged

over breakfast. They'd made her feel like fifteen. Too shy to go talk to the boy she had a crush on. She'd thought that was the past and she'd built up enough courage to face any situation, but it seemed a simple crush was enough was away all of that and turn her into an insecure fifteen year old once more.

She hated that it had happened, but at the same time she loved the feeling of having a crush on someone. Whether Lorelai swung that way still remained to be seen, but the looks she had given her gave Carrie some hope. Now the problem was finding it out without alienating a new friend.

Focus on the missing scientist, Carrie told herself and cleared her mind of her personal troubles. She marched into the security offices and headed straight for her desk. She was surprised to find Marcel already sitting at his desk.

"Good morning," said Carrie as she slid into her seat opposite to him. The monitors on their desks were arranged so that they didn't obstruct their line of sight with each other.

"Morning," Marcel muttered without looking up from his monitor until he was done reading whatever he had open on it. When he did look across the desks a slight frown appeared on him. "Rough night?"

"Went to a bar," Carrie admitted. "Met some nice people that work at the dock."

"That's good. Friends help with adjusting to living in space," said Marcel and leaned back in his chair. "Our request to have a crew sweep the outside of the station has been granted. They're doing it as we speak. We should hear from the by the end of the day. Meanwhile I've secured us a look at the airlock the good doctor was last seen at. Good chance to talk to some of the people working the area. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"That's great news." Carrie was distracted by the messages pouring in on her workstation. It always amazed her how much stuff there was to read through even for someone new like her. There were the shift logs detailing what had taken place the previous day. No matter who you were, if you worked security it was important to stay up to date on what happened around you. Even a simple pickpocketing incident could turn important for some investigation.

There were notices from other departments within the station about

scheduled maintenance and other matters that could affect the station. There was the scheduled roster of departing and arriving vessels. Various snippets from news feeds she was subscribed to. Those Carrie skipped, but she did delve a bit deeper into the security log.

It didn't really end up showing anything that interesting. A few thefts, some disturbances around bars and some domestic violence cases, but nothing that really grabbed your attention. Normal things for a normal night.

"Come on. We should get going." Marcel stood up and tossed his jacket on his shoulder.

Carrie finished reading the last message and stood up to follow him. She zipped up her jacket and ensured her weapon was safely around her waist. She had felt cold sitting at the desk, but walking soon had her feeling warm and undoing her jacket to cool off.

"Hungover?" asked Marcel as he watched her open her jacket.

Carrie gave him a grin. "A bit. I have a bad habit of drinking too much when in good company."

"You ain't going to hear shit from me about that," said Marcel. "But be careful with the chief. She might not like it."

"This isn't normal for me," Carrie assured her partner. "Though they seem to be more lax over here about that. Back home they made everyone test their alcohol levels before heading out."

Marcel snorted. "They tried that here, but it never really worked out. Too many people got caught and they were short staffed so they had to learn to be a bit lenient or they couldn't find enough people to keep things running. You need something to take the edge off once in a while out here. Scientific fact that."

"I'm sure it is." Carrie was fairly certain it wasn't, but decided not to argue the point. Wasn't worth it.

It took the pair a while to navigate through the corridors and for the transport to reach the airlock they wanted to take a look at. When they arrived a man in blue overall greeted them.

"You're the detectives I assume? My name is Jared. The boss told me to give you a tour." He was a tall man with long limbs. Some would have described him

as malnourished and underweight. Bones shone through under his skin everywhere. His sand brown hair was in a mess that seemed to say he'd gotten out of bed just a few seconds ago.

Marcel made the introductions which gave Carrie time to look around the place they were in. The blue theme continued with the area and seemed to indicate what part of the station they were in. Carrie had not yet memorized all of them, but she knew some areas were colour coded to better give people an understanding of where they were and whether they were even allowed to be there. They were standing at a junction of four different corridors. Straight onward she could see an airlock door and to either side doors that led to a control room and on the other side a locker room. Signs above the doors made it easy to tell what was where.

"I understand you're investigating a missing person?" Jared asked.

Marcel nodded. "Have you seen him?" He showed the man a picture of the doctor on his compad.

Jared shook his head. "We don't get many outside people around here. Just regular staff. This is a maintenance area, after all. Civilians that wind up here are mostly the sort that have taken a wrong turn somewhere."

"Well, this man managed to use the airlock here," said Marcel. "That means someone working here must have aided him. You need certain codes to operate the airlock, right?"

Jared nodded. "No outsider should have them." He started to look a bit ashamed. "Look, this isn't a high security area. Sometimes some of the boys make some extra credit by letting people use the airlock. Strictly speaking it's not illegal."

"But it is against station code," Carrie pointed out. "Certainly grounds for getting fired."

"Well, yeah, but you know. No one lives up to the code," said Jared with a shrug. "The shit I know other departments let slip through. The smuggling at the docks, pills going missing from medical, pirated feeds from communications, spying on the corps. There's plenty of worse shit being looked through the fingers on here than someone using an airlock to go walk outside."

Carrie exchanged looks with Marcel. She had not been aware problems in the station were so wide spread, but he simply shrugged like it was nothing.

“Look, we're not here to bust people for a few credits. We're looking for a missing person. All we want to do is find him,” said Marcel in a reconciliatory tone. “If none of your people had nothing to do with it then they're fine. We just want to take a look around, maybe have the guys work the scene and talk to the guy who was on shift when our missing person used the lock. No trouble for anyone. I promise.”

Jared gave both of them a suspicious look, but relented, finally. “All right. I'll check the logs and see who was on duty. There isn't much to show around, the air lock is there, the locker room there. Knock yourselves out.” he pointed towards the doors with the corresponding signs and pulled out his compad to start going through the work schedule as Marcel gave him the date.

Carrie didn't wait around and went for the locker room. She pulled out her compad and loaded up the surveillance footage that showed the doctor changing. She entered the room and quickly spotted the camera and the locker in front of which the doctor had put on his suit. It was a simple room with one side lined with lockers and the other side with the space suits.

“Doubt he left anything behind,” said Marcel as he entered the room and looked around. “At least on the video it seems like he doesn't make use of any locker.”

Carrie nodded. “Shame. Might have given us some clues.” she walked along the line of lockers and opened a few of them. They were empty. Some were locked and didn't open. She turned to regard the line of suits and saw several were missing.

“You'd think someone would have reported the missing suit,” Carrie noted. “Those things aren't cheap.”

“Probably they figured someone was out using it.” Marcel looked through a few of the lockers with half hearted interest. They weren't going to find anything there. “Or it was returned and we just don't have footage of it.”

“Does the surveillance system often miss footage?” asked Carrie.

“No.”

Carrie paced back and forth for a bit and examined one of the suits. "These things, they've got some distress beacons on them, don't they?"

"Sure. No reports of one going off. No way it would be missed by the station. Those things set off alarms everywhere."

"Could someone have stopped it from working?" Carrie examined the wrist computer associated with each suit. It seemed to come off easily and if it was tied to the emergency beacon in any way it would have been simple to disable.

"Sure," Marcel was giving her a look that didn't seem to like the way her thinking was headed. "Are you saying our doctor met someone outside the station and never came back inside? And that someone spaced him while disabling his distress beacon?"

"Could have happened," said Carrie, not overly enthusiastic about the idea herself.

"Could have," Marcel agreed, though he seemed even less enthusiastic about the prospect.

They both turned to the door as Jared entered the room. "I've got the name you wanted."

Marcel nodded. "Thanks. How about you guide us through the air lock and then we go talk to him?"

"All right," Jared agreed and showed them the way.

Chapter 10

“We need to go out there.”

“What? Why?” Carrie gave Marcel a surprised look.

“That talk we had just now was useless,” said Marcel. “So the doctor hired someone to let him out the airlock. Not a big deal. We'll write a report and the guy will get fired. He obviously didn't have anything to do with the doctor going missing. The only clues we might have are out there.” Marcel pointed at the airlock.

“Don't we have the search team for that?” Carrie asked. They were still standing in the lobby of the maintenance section.

“They're good at finding a missing tool or a floating corpse, but they ain't got the eye for evidence,” said Marcel. “There shouldn't be any problems. You've done the EVA training, haven't you?”

“I did the basic course in Earth orbit,” said Carrie. “Passed the test so I'm certified, but to be honest it didn't leave me with the confidence I expected.”

“We're all set then,” said Marcel and ignored her apprehensions about being ready to go out. “I've been out there plenty of times so don't worry. There's handles to grab everywhere and points where you can attach your tether. It'll be fine.”

While she was worried about safety, Carrie couldn't deny the part of her that wanted to go outside and experience it. During the training it had been uplifting to stand outside the station and look at the Earth below. She imagined looking at Jupiter would be an experience in its own league. “All right,” she finally relented.

Marcel grinned and headed to get them authorization for it. Carrie made her way to the locker room with the space suits and started to get ready. She stashed most of her clothes into one of the lockers and locked it using the key card on it. With just her underwear and a t-shirt on she started the laborious process of getting into a suit.

The model was the same she'd used in training so the process was familiar to her. The upper half of the suit was lifted off using the stand it was on. She

then climbed into the bottom part that cut off around her waist. Just as she got in Marcel came back.

“We've got the go ahead,” he said as he undressed and stashed his belongings into a locker.

“Great,” Carrie muttered and lowered the upper half of the suit onto herself. Jared entered the room just in time to help her secure the two halves together using the metal connectors. He helped with the gloves and helmet as well and ensured everything was good on the outside. He then did the same for Marcel.

Carrie got herself accustomed with the suit computer in the meanwhile. She checked her oxygen levels and logs for any warnings. All the information ran past her on the helmet visor.

“You hear me Carrie?”

“Loud and clear,” she replied to the voice of Marcel. It came in clear as day through the radio.

“Good. Keep this frequency. It should be secure.”

“All right.” Carrie followed the man to the airlock. Walking in the suit was cumbersome. The layers of fabric and metal connectors along with the oxygen tank added enough weight to strain Carrie to her limits. She knew outside it would be easier if she didn't remain standing on the station. The full weight of everything in the suit would not be pressing down on her.

The two made it to the airlock and Jared sealed them in. The green light above the outside door turned to red and air started hissing out of the chamber. It was a sound that perfectly set the mood for the transition from survivable human environment into the deadly vacuum of space. Carrie took a deep breath.

The hissing stopped. The light above the door turned green again.

Marcel made his way to the door and pulled a lever. The door popped open and he pushed it open further. Carrie watched the blackness of space beyond him and followed him out. There were grab handles on either side of the door and they used them to get above the door. It closed automatically after they'd left the chamber.

Carrie grabbed the tether on her belt and fastened it to one of the many metal loops available at the stand they were on. She activated her boots magnets

and felt the secure clamp as they attached to the metal under her feet. She took in a deep breath and looked around.

The top of the station stretched both ways. To the left she could see the docks and the vessels going in and out. To the right there was the huge solar arrays and heat dissipaters. In front of her was Jupiter.

The swirling clouds were mesmerizing to look at. The sheer size of it all made her feel small and insignificant. Seeing it from the transport when she arrived had been one thing. Standing on the station with nothing but her flimsy visor between her and the deadly vacuum made the view all the more spectacular. She felt like she could reach out with her hand and scoop up the clouds between her fingers.

“Quite a sight, isn't it?” Marcel was standing not far from her, but his attention was on the station structures near him instead of Jupiter.

“Sure is,” Carrie agreed. She had to will herself to take her eyes off the view. “What are we looking for?”

“Anything out of place,” said Marcel. He stopped for a moment and looked around. In the thick suit his motions were slow and deliberate. “Let's head there.” He pointed towards the array of antennas and other equipment.

“About the only interesting thing close by,” Carrie agreed. She untethered herself from the station and started towards the array. Her boots stuck to the station hard enough for her not to worry about floating away. Each step required a bit of extra strength to pull the boot away from the metal. She kept herself aware of the surroundings; noted where there were handholds to grab on, places to attach the tether, places where her boots might not get all the grip they needed. It was exhausting in every way possible and made the short distance to the array feel like a marathon.

Marcel seemed to have no trouble with it. Carrie couldn't help but think how bad it would have been for Valerie. Just thinking about her complaining brought a brief smile to her lips.

“Sometimes I wish I'd become a maintenance engineer instead of a cop,” Marcel said over the radio sounding wistful. “The messes they have to clean up are a lot nicer to look at.”

Carrie chuckled. "They also tend to die of cancer."

"I'll take that over liver failure," Marcel replied and took the final few steps to the array.

It was a sad fact. Cops tended to drink themselves to the grave. Carrie had been to more than a few such funerals during her career. While she drank at times those funerals had made her decide to watch out for letting it get out of control. She reached the collection of antennae and round dishes. Her tether quickly found a fastening point and made her heart beat a little easier.

"What do you think we'll find here?" asked Carrie and looked around. There wasn't much there. Everything was hidden behind closed panels. The support structures for the dishes and antennae were clean of any outside pieces of equipment. Nothing looked out of place at a glance.

"The good doctor had a reason to come out here," said Marcel and crouched down to one of the panels. He spent a moment closely examining it. "Either he came out here to meet someone or he came to hide something."

"Or he just wanted to take in the view," Carrie added with a doubtful voice.

"He'd been on the station long enough to lose interest in it," said Marcel and moved onto the next panel.

"I think there are people who'd never get tired of it." Carrie glanced up at Jupiter. She counted herself as one of those people.

Marcel ignored her counter arguments. "I think he hid something out here. Something that got him killed out here as well."

"Wouldn't the people that killed him have found it then?" Carrie walked past him and crouched down to inspect one of the panels. It was in pristine condition. Not even a scratch on the paint.

"Perhaps," Marcel admitted. "But I've learned that the sort of people that kill others aren't the types that stick around for very long after the fact. The doctor was unlikely to tell them if he'd hidden something. No matter who you are, if you send someone off to Jupiter, you can't stick around on the outside of the station for too long. There are too frequent maintenance crews to take such a risk."

"Unless the people who killed him were a maintenance crew," said Carrie and moved onto the next panel.

“Well, yeah, there's that,” Marcel admitted, but did not sound convinced that was the case. “Remote as the chance for that is.”

Carrie loosened up the panel and carefully removed it. She wedged it in place so it wouldn't float away and peered into the mess of wires that had been exposed. What they all did she had no idea so she did her best not to break anything as she rummaged around the compartment. Something caught her eye.

“I think I've got something here,” she said and moved aside some of the aluminium foil like covering.

“What is it?” asked Marcel as he floated behind her and peered over her shoulder.

Carrie struggled to grab the tiny thing with her gloved hand. Finally she managed to clench it between two fingers. She pulled it out carefully and tried not to use too much force to press on it for fear of damaging it. She brought it close to her visor so she could better examine it. “Looks like a memory chip,” she finally noted.

“Not part of the standard installation I'd presume,” said Marcel with a hint of glee in his voice. He had been right. Something had been hidden and now it had been found.

“No, definitely not,” Carrie agreed and carefully placed the chip in one of the small pouches around her waist. “Will be interesting to see what's on it.”

“Anything else in there?”

Carrie took a quick look at the compartment and shook her head before realizing Marcel wasn't going to see it. “Nothing. I doubt we'll find anything more out here. A miracle we even found this.”

“You're probably right. I'll get some grunts to sweep this area just to be sure. We should go and see what's on that chip.”

Carrie fastened the panel back in place and stood up. “Well, I'm glad we came out here. Another clue and I got to see the most awesome view.”

Marcel chuckled. “Glad you enjoyed it.”

The two headed back towards the airlock in a significantly lighter mood than they had been in before.

Chapter 11

“Watch it!” Lorelai shouted to be heard above all the noise in the dock. A forklift carrying a bunch of containers had just nearly crashed into another one. The driver gave her an apologetic wave and continued on. She shook her head and turned her attention to her compad. It had the manifest of the vessel they were currently unloading. Cargo from the base on Europa to one of the corporations. Nothing marked as dangerous, nothing biological. Research samples it said, so Lorelai figured it was mostly ice samples. Not much else there to take samples of.

The large hall echoed with noises as dock workers and maintenance crews rushed to finish their tasks. The outside of the cargo vessel was inspected. Quick repairs and clean up were done. Forklifts whisked around carrying containers. The gravity was a bit lower than Earth standard which made things a bit easier, though it took some getting used to. Lorelai had a good view of it all from her position on the ramp of the cargo vessel. Everything that happened was going on in front of her.

“Boss, control is asking how much longer? They've got a hell of a line up waiting.” The voice in her ear came from Gareth. She'd delegated him to the job of talking with flight control. They always nagged and nagged about going quicker and how they had a long line of vessels waiting. She wasn't in the mood to deal with that shit today.

“Two more loads to take out. Then we start filling her up,” she replied to the man who acknowledged it. She didn't need to tell him how long it would take. He'd been working long enough to know that himself. It was a regular line between Minerva and the base. It always went back filled with supplies.

A big crash pulled her attention away from her compad. The forklift driver she'd reprimanded on his way out had crashed into someone on his way back. Lorelai ran off the ramp and towards the crash. There were containers strewn across the dock floor. In her mind she cursed. She hoped no one had been injured. At the same time she knew she'd get shit on by the company whose cargo

had been damaged.

One of the forklifts had toppled over. The driver was climbing out with the help of some other workers.

“Anyone hurt?” Lorelai shouted as soon as she got close enough.

“I’m fine,” said the forklift driver that had climbed out of the toppled one.

Lorelai turned her attention to the one she’d reprimanded. The driver was standing next to his still upright forklift, looking ashamed. “What the hell happened?” she demanded of the man.

“I don’t know,” said the man. He sounded shaken which was understandable. “He came out of nowhere and I couldn’t avoid him.”

“Were you paying attention? Back there it looked like you were off in your own world.” Lorelai took a step closer to the man as she made her questions. She took a careful look at the man’s eyes. He did his best to avoid looking at her, but she saw enough. “You’re on drugs, aren’t you?”

“No!” the nervousness with which the denial came out, along with the fidgeting of the man, made it obvious she had hit the right nerve.

“I see your eyes. Might as well be staring at a black hole. You’ve really fucked up, you know that? I can’t just brush this aside. The company is going to demand a report on why their goods were damaged. I’ll have to report you to security. You’re done working the docks. I hope the high was worth it.” Shaking her head Lorelai turned her back to the now devastated looking forklift driver and focused on assessing the damage done to the cargo. She hoped it would be limited to a few dents on the containers and that what ever was inside them had been properly packaged.

“Hey boss. One of the containers cracked open!”

Lorelai cursed out loud. More paperwork and more shit on her neck. As far as she could tell there had been four containers on the forklift. Each container was thirty feet long, eight feet high and wide. The sheer scale of them made it hard to believe no one had been injured as the two beastly forklifts collided. She walked over to where the shout had come from and saw the damage done to the container. One corner of it had bent right where the doors were and that had popped open one of them.

“Fuck,” Lorelai could already feel the shit running down the collar of her overall.

“There's some weird stuff inside,” one of the dock workers said. He'd been peering through the open doorway with a flash-light.

“Of course there is,” said Lorelai. “It's a corp container. They ship weird stuff all the time. Don't go poking around. I'll just get more shit on me for that.”

“Don't need to go poking around. It's melting and coming out,” said the man and jumped away as a trickle of water made its way past the broken door and onto the dock floor. He shook his leg as some of it got on his trousers. “Fall must have damaged the cooling.”

“Great. More trouble. If those are scientific samples they're going to be pissed off,” said Lorelai and pulled out her compad and scanned the barcode that was glued to the container. It told her who owned the cargo and what was in it according to the official manifest. It made her raise her eyebrow. It claimed there were recyclable materials inside. Plastics and other stuff they couldn't handle down on the base, but Minerva had the facilities for. Rare to ship stuff like that around, but not unheard of.

But the melting water made her doubt whether that was the full story.

“All right, everyone, step back!” Lorelai shouted loud enough for everyone to hear her. Meanwhile she tapped a number on her compad that was associated with the container. It was the contact number for the corporation in case there was any trouble with the shipment. The current situation definitely fell under that.

“Guang Guo Corporation, shipment monitoring for Minerva. How can I help you?” The female voice that spoke was pleasant enough, though there was a distinct tone of boredom to be heard in it.

“Yeah, hi, I'm Lorelai, foreman at the docks. We've had an accident with a couple of your containers. One of them was damaged and there's some liquid leaking out. We need to know if it's anything dangerous since the manifest doesn't seem to be truthful about what's in the container.” She spoke calmly even though she felt like screaming at the woman for the fact they had lied about the contents. It put everyone in danger, not to mention it was illegal.

“May I have the container ID?” the woman asked. She did not sound at all concerned.

“EUR47890.” Lorelai read out the letters and numbers from her compad. She could imagine the woman on the other end typing them in and seeing what was really in the shipment. She'd be surprised, but then play it out like nothing out of the ordinary was going on.

“One moment please,” said the woman and the line went silent.

Lorelai sighed. At least they had not bumped her into a queue. She hated the waiting music they played. It wasn't the first damaged container on her watch and it probably wouldn't be the last. She expected the silence to continue for a while. The woman on the other end was probably talking with her supervisor about what to do.

The alarms started blaring.

“Everyone out!” Lorelai shouted and started running towards the nearest exit from the big hall. It had been drilled enough times that when the ear piercing noise started and the red evacuation lights started flashing everyone was already running for the nearest exit without having to be told.

In two minutes the entire hall was empty of any living being.

Ten minutes later Lorelai breathed heavily as she watched the empty dock through a window that safely separated her and the rest of the station from the area. There was a double airlock in the way. Everyone leaving had gone through a decontamination procedure. What ever had triggered the alarm should have been safely contained.

“What the hell happened?” asked the man who had been peering in the container. He looked shaken up. Not much reason to blame him. He had been closest to the broken container.

“Probably a false alarm,” Lorelai assured the man. “You know how those things can be. Remember that time a container full of flour got toppled over. That fine dust got everywhere and triggered all sorts of alarms.”

“But it's just a bit of water on the floor,” said the man and shook his head.

Lorelai started to say something, but the line to the corporation came alive again and the woman started talking. “We have a crew heading over. Stay put

and do not let anyone leave. Stay away from the container.”

“What the hell is inside that thing?” she demanded.

“Nothing you need to worry about. Our team will handle it. This is a direct order from the governor and the security offices. You are free to verify that.”

“Thanks. Thanks a lot,” Lorelai said in a less than pleased voice before cutting off the line.

“Not good news?” asked the man next to her. He was looking through the window as well at the empty hangar.

“Corporation is taking over,” said Lorelai and turned her attention to the empty hangar. At least the mess was out of her hands now, but she bet the shit would still find its way on her neck.

“That's not good,” said the man even more nervous now. Other workers were starting to gather around the two as words spread. Lorelai looked around at the faces surrounding her. Familiar faces she had worked with for years. There was fear on many of them. Before she could start trying to assure everyone there was nothing to worry about, the door to the room opened and people in hazmat suits started pouring in and ordering everyone to follow them to assigned places where they could be thoroughly checked. As she was being led out the room she caught a last glimpse of the hangar. There were people in similar suits swarming the place. A large container was being brought in from an adjacent hangar, no doubt to carry the broken one in.

Lorelai grumbled as she was forced to undress and go through another decontamination process under the watchful eye of corporate security. They had weapons too which made it all the more harrowing of an experience. Once out and back in a clean set of clothes she got from her locker she was brought into a small room with a desk and two chairs. There was a blond haired woman sitting in one of the chairs and the guards escorting Lorelai directed her to the empty seat.

She gave the blonde woman a once over. The thick, black rims on her glasses suited her well enough. She was the stereotypical pencil pusher a corporation would send to clean up messes.

“So, there was an accident,” said the woman and looked up from her

compad. "And you're Lorelai Soto, the person in charge of the crew?"

"Yeah, that's me," said Lorelai.

"What happened?" asked the woman.

"Why don't you tell me your name first and why you're questioning me," said Lorelai. "If you work for the Guan Guo corporation then I'm under no obligation to talk with you. What happened will be in a report and you'll get to read it all from there. Including the fact that the manifest for the container was forged."

"I assure you there is no mistake in the cargo manifest," said the blonde woman in a decidedly more reserved tone. "But as you have asked, my name is Claudia Logan and I indeed work for the corporation you mentioned."

"Then we're done here," said Lorelai. "I have nothing to say to you."

"I would advice you to rethink your position," said Claudia. "You saw how quickly we got all the permissions needed to come in and clean up. We can make your life very easy or very hard. The choice is up to you."

The threat wasn't very subtle. She said it with a less than certain tone that told of her inexperience. "You should really work on your intimidation." Lorelai gave the woman a brief smile. "This isn't the first time one of you corporate dogs comes barking at the dock workers. You always forget who really has the leverage here. Everything that comes to this station runs past us. We unload it from the transports, we make sure it gets to you guys in perfect condition and on time."

Lorelai could tell Claudia was starting to feel uncomfortable so she continued to push.

"We're a tight knit bunch. Same union and all. So if you come here threatening one of us you end up threatening all of us. Maybe that doesn't sound so bad to you now, but when no shipment gets through to your corporation then you'll start to feel the heat. You'll lose money. You'll lose clients. You'll lose employees. Maybe your whole little office here will need to shut down because you can't get any shipments in or out. Think about that."

Claudia stared at her for a moment with her green eyes trying to measure how serious she was being. Lorelai met her gaze without a blink.

"I think we're done here. You're free to go." Claudia turned her attention back to her compad.

Lorelia smiled at her and stood up. She let the guards guide her out and when they returned her compad she quickly went through the messages. Some of her crew was waiting out in the hall. They rushed her with questions and she had to raise her hands to quiet them down.

“All right. The corporation is cleaning up the mess. No, I don't know more than that. They're directing traffic away from this dock and into the others. They're going to be short handed over there and working long hours. We're going to help. I'm going to start giving out jobs for you guys. I'll call when we get our own dock back. Now, Santos..”

* * *

“What a fucking day.” Lorelai grabbed her shot and downed it in one gulp. She grimaced as the liquid burned her throat, but felt her muscles relax when the warm feeling rushed all over her body. She chased it down with a sip of her beer.

“A real mess,” Gareth agreed and sipped his drink.

“Can you believe the corporate dog tried to threaten me? Must have really had something in that container,” Lorelai looked around their usual hangout. It was relatively empty, but she did spot a familiar figure entering the place. She gave her a wave to get her attention.

“Hey,” said Carrie as soon as she got to their booth. She gave Lorelai a warmer smile than she did to Gareth. Not that she was unfriendly to him, not at all.

“Want a drink?” Lorelai asked as she scooted over to give Carrie room to sit.

“Um, I'd better not. Still feeling last night,” said Carrie with a sigh.

“Try their cranberry soda. It's pretty good,” Gareth suggested. “No alcohol.”

“Oh. Yeah. I'll give one a go,” said Carrie with a smile and went off to the counter to get it.

Lorelai watched her go for a moment before returning to the topic at hand. “Anyway. The boss is going to have a talk with me tomorrow. I expect he'll try to put some blame on me.”

“How is it your fault? It's that forklift driver who's at fault.” Gareth took a sip

from his drink and frowned. "And it's just a container. Those get damaged all the time."

"Yeah, but this one had something special in it," said Lorelai. "The way those corporate goons swarmed the place you'd think it was some state secret that spilled over the dock floor."

"State secret?" Carrie sat down next to Lorelai with a tall glass filled with a bubbly red liquid.

"Bad day at work," said Lorelai.

"Oh, what happened?" Carrie took a sip of her drink. It was slightly bitter, but she could enjoy it no problem.

"A container fell over. Cracked open and spilled something. The corporation it was going to swarmed the place. Tried to intimidate Lorelai too," said Gareth.

"Really?" Carrie turned to the woman next to her. Looking at her she could see the strain the day had put on her. She put on a brave smile, but it was obvious there were things bothering her about the incident.

"Yeah, well, things like that happen. Don't you two worry. It'll all be fine. The boss will yell at me and then we'll shake hands and forget all about it. He just has to show something to appease the corps." Lorelai took a sip of her own drink. The white head of the beer had flattened down, but she was closing on the bottom of her pint anyway.

"Which corp was it anyway?" Carrie asked. Not that it was any of her business, but when someone reacted strongly to something it never hurt to know them. Might save trouble down the road.

"Guan Guo," said Gareth before Lorelai could even open her mouth. She seemed less enthused about sharing the name.

"I seem to run into that name a lot," said Carrie. She was sure the incident at the docks had no relation to what she was investigating, but it did make her want to get back to shifting through the memory chip they'd found. The chief had sent them on another assignment so they'd had to drop the matter until the next day.

"How so?" asked Lorelai.

"The missing person I'm looking for worked for them," Carrie replied. It

wasn't sensitive information. There were missing person posters displayed on many of the stations public monitors and they mentioned where he worked. It wasn't something that could be kept hidden in a closed environment like the station anyway. Too few people and too many of them knew someone who knew someone close to the case.

"They're having a rough time of things then," said Gareth and finished his drink. "Missing worker, ruined shipment. Some poor manager is probably going bald right now."

Lorelia grinned. "I'll drink to that." She raised her beer and finished it in a couple of gulps. Carrie smiled and joined her, though she only managed to get half way through her drink before the carbonation was too much.

"Well, I think I'm done." Gareth stood up.

"So soon?" Lorelai asked and gave the man a surprised look.

Gareth gave her the wink of an eye and walked away without saying anything.

"What was that about?" asked Carrie. The wink had not gone unnoticed by her.

"Him being too clever for his own good," Lorelai replied and gave her empty tankard a look. "You sticking around?"

Carrie nodded. "My cabin isn't exactly irresistible."

"I'll grab another beer then." Lorelai headed for the bar counter.

Carrie kept an eye on her. She couldn't deny it. There was a certain enticing quality to Lorelai. But she had to remind herself it was only a few days that she had known her. She wasn't sure she'd be interested in women. Finding out could prove awkward and end the budding friendship they had. She pushed the thoughts out of her mind when Lorelai returned and took a seat next to her. She could have gone opposite to her, but for some reason she chose the more intimate spot. Her shoulder rubbed against Carrie's when she sat down.

"I never asked. How did you end up all the way over here?" Carrie glanced at Lorelai.

"I sort of drifted this way," said Lorelai and took a sip of her beer. "Mars was my first stop after Earth. Those domes were real marvels of engineering, but I

never really felt comfortable there. So I went up in orbit. Worked the docks at Regulus station.”

“I went through there on my way here,” said Carrie. “It looked pretty rundown.”

“It’s the third station to be built around Mars,” said Lorelai. “Plenty of years under it. I suppose they’ll be decommissioning it. All the ones built prior to it have been.”

“And they’re building that new one. What’s it called?”

“Logan,” said Lorelai and a brief smile passed her lips. “Do you know what they named it after?”

“Wasn’t it some scientist?” Carrie swore she’d seen a news report on it, but she couldn’t bring the details in mind no matter how she tried.

Lorelai nodded. “Logan Hunzer. The man who designed the first domes on Mars.”

“Of course. Hunzer domes.” Carrie felt stupid for not remembering such a prominent name.

“So it goes. Nothing lasts forever in space,” said Lorelai. There was a hint of sadness in her voice, but after a sip of beer it was gone when she continued. “Anyway, spent some time on Regulus station. Wasn’t really to my liking that place. So I hopped onto a transport and moved on. Wound up here around Jupiter. I’ve been all around the system. On Europa, some of the smaller stations, but finally wound up here.”

“I take it you like it here?” asked Carrie and sipped her juice.

“It’s all right. Enough people around and moving through. Enough space so it’s not all cramped up. Plenty of worse places to be in.”

“Well, let’s hope your boss doesn’t make it unbearable,” said Carrie and smiled behind her drink as she took a sip.

Lorelai glanced at her before chuckling. “Don’t you start worrying about that. Ain’t no big deal.”

For a moment the two sat in silence enjoying their drinks. The music being played didn’t really fit their mood. The upbeat techno was more for wild dancing than for silent contemplation.

“Want to get out of here?” asked Lorelai as she finished her beer.
Carrie glanced at her, but nodded. “Sure.”
The two left the bar together.

Chapter 12

“Morning.” Carrie tossed her jacket on the back of her office chair and headed straight for where Marcel was sitting.

“Morning,” said Marcel without looking up from his monitor.

“Ready to dig into that memory chip?” asked Carrie as she peered over his shoulder at what he was doing.

“Already on it,” said Marcel and typed away at his keyboard. “It’s a simple encryption that our investigative software can crack. I’m a bit surprised the doctor didn’t use something tougher.”

“Maybe he figured who ever found it would need to crack it,” said Carrie and focused on the text running across the screen. She had never been very good at the technical stuff. “Didn’t know you were good at stuff like this.”

Marcel shrugged. “Do this as long as I have and you pick things up. Besides, it was simple enough. Working on a copy of the memory chip the tech guys gave me. They said they were busy with other stuff so I figured I’d give it a go. Otherwise we’d have to wait days.”

“So how’s it looking? Got long to go?”

“Should be done in a few minutes,” said Marcel and finally gave her a glance. She seemed awfully cheerful for some reason. It was like she was fighting hard not to smile all the time. “Something good happen? ‘cause you look like the cat that caught the mouse.”

“Maybe,” said Carrie in an evasive tone that told she didn’t want to reveal any more. Her smile was enough to confirm something good had indeed happened.

“Well, as long as you’re not high on any drugs,” said Marcel and turned his attention back to tearing down the encryptions on the memory chip.

“Nothing like that,” Carrie assured him with a small smile.

“Ah, there we go.” Marcel started to enthusiastically tap away at his keyboard. “We’re in.”

“Looks like documents,” said Carrie as she followed the information

appearing on Marcel's display.

"Lots of them," said Marcel as he scrolled through pages worth of file listings. "Going to take a while to go through them."

"Give that one a try," said Carrie and pointed at a file called Phoenix.

"Why that one?" asked Marcel, but started to open it anyway.

"Just based on the name. Sounds like it might be interesting." Carrie focused on reading the text over Marcel's shoulder.

They both went silent and read the document. It was written like a scientific paper so it wasn't the easiest to understand, but together they managed to get to the bottom of it. At least they hoped so.

"So they've found life on Europa, big deal. Bacterial life has been found many times there." Marcel leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands behind his head. "Certainly not something worth killing a scientist over."

"It's not bacteria, it's amoeba like life," said Carrie. "Almost big enough to be seen by the naked eye, according to that paper, but that's not what worries me. It's the words they're using to describe its behaviour. Aggressive, mutating, contagious, rapid breeding. That thing sounds like a biological weapon. Just look at this part here. They're saying the protective suits the scientists used proved to be unable to keep it out if long term exposure was allowed."

"So they found something dangerous. Doesn't mean it's what got our professor killed."

"Perhaps, but it does make me wonder about something else," said Carrie. "A friend of mine works at the dock. They had a container drop yesterday. Got broken pretty bad. Five minutes later and all sorts of alarms go off. Five more minutes later and the place is swarming with Guang Guo personnel in hazmat suits. Makes me wonder if they've smuggled that thing here without going through proper quarantine procedures."

"Not our problem, kid." Marcel gave her a stern look. "Customs stuff is for the customs people. If a container broke I'm certain they followed protocol and inspected it properly. Look, I get that it's a bit worrying, but we can't go around putting our nose in the corporations business any more than we already have."

"So we're going to do nothing?" asked Carrie. She couldn't hide her

disappointment.

“We’re going to go through the rest of the documents on that memory chip and see if we can’t find something more. Something that ties in with our case. Something that might have gotten the good professor killed.”

“Well, they do all look like internal company papers. Maybe he was peddling them to a competitor, the corp found out and decided to deal with the problem.”

“Certainly possible,” Marcel admitted. “They can be hard on people selling secrets. All too happy to buy same sort of information on their competitors.”

“I still think we should look into that incident at the docks,” said Carrie. “It bugs me. They’re up to something shady.”

Marcel sighed. “Look, officially we can’t do anything. It’s the custom authority’s job and they don’t like us stomping on their territory. Officially, best we can do is send them a tip. Unofficially, I can’t stop your from talking to people.”

“Right.” Carrie bit down on her lower lip in frustration, but at least she had gotten permission to ask around. She knew she’d have been doing that anyway. When something nested itself in the back of her mind she often did what was necessary to drag it out in the open.

“Now, officially, start going through the documents I just sent you. I’ll look through the other half. See if we can’t find something that’s worth killing over.”

Carrie nodded and went to her own desk.

Reading documents all day was hard enough, but when they were of things you had little to no interest or direct understanding of, it was an exercise in frustration. Carrie went through hundreds of pages worth of financial information, managerial reports on people’s performance at work, status reports on various projects and technical specification. Nothing seemed like it would be worth disappearing someone over. At most something you’d fire someone over.

By the end of shift her eyes hurt and her neck was jammed up from the poor position she often found herself in while browsing the documents.

“All right, I’m done for the day,” she said and stood up to grab her jacket off the back of her chair.

“Found anything interesting?” Marcel didn’t even look up from his monitor.

He'd sat there all through lunch and coffee breaks. His sandwich still sat on the desk, half eaten. Carrie had fetched food for the both of them. She had needed the break.

"Nothing worth mentioning," said Carrie as she pulled on her jacket. "You?"

"Nothing concrete," said Marcel and leaned back in his chair. "Could be it's not a single thing, but a combination of the documents here. Who knows what all this pieced together can tell someone."

"Well, that's not something we can really figure out on our own," Carrie pointed out. "I have a hard time just making sense of the financial figures in some of the docs."

"I hate to admit it, but you're probably right," said Marcel with a frown. "Maybe we should go to the company and tell them we have the files."

"They'll make us turn them in and we'll never get to the bottom of this," said Carrie.

"Maybe, but that might be a risk we need to take."

"Don't we have someone here who understands this sort of stuff?" asked Carrie.

Marcel shook his head. "This isn't a unit that investigates financial crimes. The tech guys might make sense of the research stuff, but they're too busy to spend days going through documents. The fact is we're not equipped to handle in-depth, large investigations. We're here to collect drunks and make sure the occasional murderer ends up in jail."

"I suppose it makes sense. Not like we can just walk outside and recruit more people or ask for extra staff from another precinct," said Carrie and chuckled. "Look at me. Here only a few days and already forgotten we're not on Earth where things can be easily arranged."

Marcel smiled briefly. "The closest re-enforcement we have are on Europa and that place has a total of five guys working there. Not like they can spare any for us."

"Guess we'll have to make do with the two of us," said Carrie and waved a hand. "See you tomorrow."

"Stay out of trouble," said Marcel and returned to going through the

documents.

Carrie knew straight where to go. Though finding the direction to it was more tricky than she had anticipated. Still, after a few mistaken turns she found herself at the docks. More precisely, in front of the dock masters office.

Entering through the door she found herself in a small office with a desk opposite to the door, two chairs in front of it and bare walls all around. The man sitting behind the desk raised his head from the monitor he'd been looking at and frowned at her security uniform.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"If you're the dock master, you might be," Carrie replied.

"Wouldn't be sitting here if I wasn't. Arnold McLane. And you are?"

"Carrie Apalkov," she took a seat in one of the chairs as the man generously pointed her to one. "I have some questions about an incident that happened at the docks yesterday."

"You have questions or the security department has questions?" asked Arnold and gave her a stern look. He had the sort of eyes that felt like they bore to your soul when they focused on you.

Carrie remembered the warning from Marcel. She knew the captain would chew her a new one if a complaint was made. "I'm just following a hunch," Carrie admitted to the man. "Something came up in our investigation into a missing person that may or may not have something to do with that incident you had. Nothing official, just me trying to get a nagging feeling out of my mind. You know how annoying those can be."

"I do, but I'm not sure I can just go handing out information to anyone who walks in with a hunch," said Arnold. His bald head had a sheen to it that made Carrie think he had polished it with something.

"I'm not asking for much. Just want to know what was in those containers. Maybe what else you're willing to share about it. The company did sweep in awful quick when things went south."

Arnold seemed to think it over for a moment. Finally, he sighed. "There wasn't anything special in those containers. Just some ice samples and things headed for recycling."

“Then why the hazmat suits when it came time to clean up? Doesn’t that suggest something more dangerous?”

Arnold shrugged. “It’s the dock. All sorts of dangerous material used by transport vessels there. The container could have ruptured a pipe or some other storage unit with dangerous material inside. I’d say it was a prudent measure just in case.”

“What about the fact they tried to pressure one of the dock workers after the fact?” Carrie kept a close eye on the man for any signs her questions raised any strong emotions.

“Stuff got damaged. The company wanted someone to blame for it. Happens all the time,” said Arnold with a shrug that nailed home the point how common it was. “The dock workers union is more than capable of handling stuff like that.”

Carrie felt slightly disappointed. The answers she was getting made sense and seemed to deflate all the conspiracy theories that had been milling around her head. Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling of something being off. It seemed Arnold wasn’t the way to put her mind at ease. “All right. Thank you for answering my questions. I know you didn’t have to.”

Arnold gave her a pleasant enough smile. “Always happy to help the security folks.”

Carrie returned the smile as she stood up and left the small office. She let out a sigh as soon as the door closed behind her. It had not gone at all how she would have liked it to. She started down the corridor back towards the transport station. She figured the only way to get to the bottom of it would be to talk to the people who had been there. The company folk were unlikely to talk, but maybe someone working the docks had seen something or heard a conversation they were not supposed to.

And she knew just the right person to ask.

She took the transport to the habitat area and navigated the maze of corridors to the right cabin. A press of a button and a moment later the door opened.

“Hey.” Lorelai stood up from the couch and smiled. The two gave each other a quick hug before parting. Lorelai guided her to the couch.

"I was hoping you'd stop by," said Lorelai as they sat down.

"Oh? Why's that?" asked Carrie.

"Just to talk," replied Lorelai and leaned against the back of the couch while facing her. "So, what brings you here?"

"I was hoping there would be something you could help me with," said Carrie and pulled one leg under herself while she faced Lorelai.

"Really? What is it?" Lorelai sounded more interested than seemed appropriate for something so vague.

"That incident at the docks. Do you suppose I could talk to some of the people who were there?"

"I don't see why not, but why are you interested in it? The whole thing is squared away. The boss didn't even chew me out as bad as I had expected."

"Just a feeling I got," Carrie replied. "Been looking through corporate papers all day and something there caught my eye. Figured maybe one of the dock workers saw or heard something that might put my mind at ease."

"I can introduce you to a few, but it'll have to wait until tomorrow after work."

"That's fine," said Carrie and rubbed her neck with one hand. "It's just my curiosity that's looking to be soothed."

"And maybe your neck?" asked Lorelai.

Carrie smiled. "That's what I get for bad posture and a day of sitting and reading."

"All right. On the floor with you." Lorelai straightened herself out and pointed towards the floor. Carrie didn't protest as she slipped down from the couch and made her way between Lorelai's legs. She rested her back against the couch and let her hands get to work. She wasn't the best masseuse Carrie had ever been to, but she wasn't about to complain for the kind gesture. And it was helping with the pain even if she used a bit too much strength at times.

"Thanks. This is really what I needed," said Carrie with a satisfied sigh. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the moment.

"While you're enjoying yourself why don't you tell me about yourself?" Lorelai squeezed her shoulders a bit roughly, but soon returned to the appropriate level

of force.

“You told me your story yesterday. I suppose it’s only fair,” said Carrie and closed her eyes. “My mother is Indian. My father is Russian. Neither of them much cared for their roots. They were part of the Earth movement.”

“Those people that try to build an identity around Earth rather than the old countries?” Lorelai asked.

Carrie nodded. “So that’s the way I was raised. As an Earthling rather than Russian or Indian. My parents were big supporters of any interest I showed towards space, Mars and the various space stations around the Solar system. They wanted me to become a scientist or an engineer who’d go out in space to benefit humanity.”

“That’s a lot to put on a kids shoulders,” said Lorelai and moved her hands to work more on Carrie’s neck rather than shoulders.

“Probably why I rebelled and joined up with the security forces,” said Carrie. “Ironically it probably put me here quicker than any engineering or science degree would have. Pure chance that the security forces assigned me here.”

“Are you unhappy that they did?” asked Lorelai.

“I was at first. Getting shipped off to Jupiter felt like a punishment, but now that I’ve been here for a few days I’m starting to think it’s a good thing. Place like this gives experience unlike any other. That’ll be useful down the line.”

“Do you plan on staying long?” asked Lorelai and stopped massaging her neck.

“Not really up to me,” said Carrie. She couldn’t deny that it made her slightly annoyed. “I go where the security forces assign me. So far I’ve enjoyed being here. Having made some friends help a lot.”

“Friends do help make a home,” said Lorelai. She had leaned in close to Carrie. She could feel her breath on her neck. Just a little bit more and her lips could have brushed against her neck. She found herself readying for it, her body preparing for the shock it would send through her entire body. She could feel her breath becoming more quick and shallow.

“How about something to drink?” asked Lorelai and pulled back from her.

Carrie had to bite down on her lower lip not to let out a disappointed sigh.

“Sure,” she said doing her best to hide her disappointment as Lorelai stood up and headed for the kitchen. She reached out for the remote and turned on the monitor to try and distract herself from what was milling around inside her. A newscast was on much to her relief. A safe and easy distraction.

“The security forces today raided the headquarters of the June Movement,” said the newscaster woman on the monitor. The image cut away from her to a scene of security forces streaming into a building. It then cut away from that and to the security forces carrying out boxes full of stuff. “The raid is in connection to the community centre bombing that happened last month.”

“About time,” said Lorelai and took a seat next to Carrie. She handed her a bottle of strawberry juice. She had opted for apple herself.

“I was there when the bomb went off,” said Carrie and opened her juice.

“Really?” Lorelai turned to her, surprised.

Carrie nodded. “It got pretty bad. Got hit on the head and had to go to the hospital. The bomb went off and those protestors didn’t seem phased at all. Someone knew it was going to happen.”

“Sounds rough. Makes me glad I didn’t go into security. I’d have lost it and probably done something that would have gotten me fired. I don’t care what you believe. The moment you start using violence and killing innocent people you have no leg to stand on. You’re out of the discussion.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” said Carrie and raised her bottle of juice in a toast. Lorelai clanged her own plastic bottle against hers and the two continued to watch the news. There was something about politics and the mandatory feel good report of the day.

“Want to watch a movie?” asked Lorelai after the news was done. “I have some old comedies you might enjoy.”

Carrie hesitated. It was starting to get late. But the moment was too good to cut it short. “Sure, but we’ve got an early morning, right? Trying to meet up with some of those people.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I won’t hold you against your will,” she gave Carrie a sly smile as she grabbed the remote and start to flip through her catalogue of movies.

“I hope not,” said Carrie and returned the smile. She pulled herself up to the couch and sought a comfortable position to enjoy the movie.

Chapter 13

“Now I’m worried.”

“Why’s that?” Carrie stood next to Lorelai at the transport station. She was going through her compad while they waited for the transport to arrive.

“The first guy I wanted you to meet hasn’t been to work since the incident. He’s missed two shifts and that’s not like him.”

“Good thing we’re going to check up on him then,” said Carrie and yawned. It had been late when she’d left Lorelais’ quarters for her own. Truthfully she had not wanted to leave. She suspected she could have stayed the night, but a fresh set of clothes and a quick shower were the sort of thing she needed to make it through the day after not sleeping that much.

“Let’s hope he’s just on a binge or something,” said Lorelai and put away her pad. The transport arrived just as she did so and the two walked into it. It wasn’t crowded yet. It was too early for most peoples shift to start and for others to end. It was the in between of the morning hours.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Carrie assured her. “Despite everything this station is very safe. Bad things tend to happen to people who are already involved in shady stuff.”

“Who knows what he’s into,” said Lorelai and grabbed a handle to help keep herself upright. There were seats available, but they weren’t going to be on the transport that long. “Once he’s off the docks your guess is as good as mine when it comes to his time spending.”

“Well, we’ll soon see if he’s all right,” said Carrie not having any other words to counter her.

The transport came to a halt on two station before arriving at the third. Carrie and Lorelai departed there and entered the residential area. A few turns on the empty corridors and they arrived at the residence they were looking. The sign next to the door identified it as the residence of one Harold Levesque.

Lorelai pressed the buzzer and they waited for a response. A couple of presses later it was becoming obvious there would be no invitation to enter.

Lorelai banged on the door itself and called for the man, but it didn't change anything. She gave Carrie a questioning look. "What now?"

"I could open the door with my security override," Carrie replied.

"Is that something you're allowed to do?"

"Only in an emergency, but we have enough reason for a welfare check. The guy has been missing shifts and isn't opening the door at a time when he should be at home. Shouldn't be any trouble."

"Let's do that then," said Lorelai and stepped aside to let her do her thing.

Carrie stepped up to the control pad and flashed her security ID before inputting the requested verification code. The door slid open with the reassuring swish that came with using air to move it.

"Mr. Levesque. Security. Are you in there? Do you need assistance?" Carrie peered into the dark room while calling out to the man. There was no response. The light from the corridor did little to illuminate the quarters. Most of the furnished areas remained in the dark and only vague shapes could be made out.

"Doesn't seem like he's in there," said Lorelai from behind Carrie as she tried to peer in.

"Let's make sure," said Carrie and stepped in. "Lights."

The room lit up and revealed the mess that had been hidden in the darkness. Clothes were strewn across the floor. Furniture looked like it had been thrown around in a tornado. The monitor on the wall opposite to the small kitchen corner had been smashed. Judging by the chair underneath it someone had thrown it at it.

"Someone sure tore up the place," said Lorelai as she peered inside from the door.

"Yeah," said Carrie and stepped further inside. There was a divider that separated the bed from the rest of the room. It had a misty glass to it and she could see a shadow in it. It looked like it could be a person. "Mr. Levesque, are you here?"

She took care in not to step on anything as she made her way around the divider. She found what she assumed was Mr. Levesque.

He was sat upright in his bed, back resting against the wall behind it. His

clothes were in tatters, but judging by his hands he was the one who had done the tearing and not someone else. What skin was exposed was no longer healthy looking. It had a bluish tint to it and in places there were moist looking growths that seemed to pulsate along with the man's heartbeat.

He was still alive. His chest rose with each silent and shallow breath.

His hair had gotten a greenish tint to it and hung over his face. His head was tilted down towards his chest.

"Mr. Levesque?" Carrie asked carefully after swallowing hard. There was no response from him. Carrie started to back away towards the door.

"What is it?" asked Lorelai from the door. She had not dared to venture in further.

"We need to get out of here," said Carrie as she rushed back to the door.

"Why? What did you find?"

Carrie took a deep breath after she'd gotten out the door and closed it. She had not even realized she'd been holding her breath. "Found Mr. Levesque. He's alive, but something is very wrong with him. It's like he's started to mould. Fuck. This is not good. I have to call this in."

"Mould?" Lorelai asked with a weak voice.

Carrie ignored her and pulled out her compad and started to make the calls. First to his captain, then to crime scene investigation, then to the hazmat unit. In ten minutes the whole section was under quarantine and doors were locked to prevent anyone from leaving or entering without a proper decontamination or protective suit.

Men in hazmat suits came for the two of them and directed them into a decontamination chamber.

"It's all right. Just do what they told us." Carrie gave Lorelai a reassuring smile and started to strip and pile her clothes into a container. She couldn't help but glance at Lorelai as she removed her own clothes. She tried to be discreet about it, but she suspected she'd been caught getting an eyeful.

"Not exactly the setting I had hoped for to see you naked for the first time," said Lorelai suddenly.

Carrie laughed it off. "I'm sure there will be better times." She didn't turn to

look at her, but instead pulled off her panties and shoved them in the plastic container. It was the last bit of clothing she had.

“Should we be worried?” asked Lorelai as she walked over next to her. She hugged herself with both hands. She looked around nervously at the containment chamber they were in. Most of it was yellow plastic that covered even the floor. It made a crunching sound when walked on.

A part of Carrie wanted to tell her no, but she couldn't bring herself to lie. She was worried herself. “We don't know what happened. That's always reason to worry, especially when you're forced to go through decontamination.”

“Is this because of what happened at the docks?” Lorelai asked and followed Carrie to the door leading to the next chamber that had been set up. The door closed behind them and as soon as it had been sealed warm water started to spray at them from all directions.

“Could be,” said Carrie and hoped she was wrong, but her mind was telling her she wasn't. The melting water must have contained samples of the amoeba creature they'd found. Somehow it had gotten on Mr. Levesque and turned him into that moulding shell she'd found. The reports she'd read through made no mention of the thing being able to do that, but then the scientist had been careful to avoid human contamination. What worried her the most were the many occasions the scientists wrote in amazement at the resilience of the thing and how hard it was to kill.

She hoped the decontamination process would be enough if she'd gotten one of them on her.

They both rinsed themselves thoroughly in the warm water. After the water they were sprayed with a foam that covered every inch of their bodies. It was left there for a few minutes for effect before being rinsed off with another blast of warm water.

“Free showers are nice, but this is a bit much,” said Lorelai after the water died down.

“Better be thorough in these situations,” said Carrie and squeezed off some water in her hair. The air quickly started to feel cold and the more water she wiped off herself the more cold it got. Then the warm air kicked in. It blew from

all over the small chamber that had been set up and took only moments to dry off both the women.

After a short moment a door opened and they proceeded to the last chamber where they got a fresh set of clothes that had been fetched from their quarters. A few minutes later they were out of the chamber and Carrie stood face to face with Marcel and her captain. Neither one looked happy with the situation.

“Well, Ms. Apalkov, quite the mess you’ve landed in my lap,” said the captain.

“It was just a routine welfare check, captain,” Carrie responded and glanced at Lorelai. “My friend here works at the docks. A co-worker of hers had missed two shifts so we went to make sure everything was all right. He didn’t respond when we knocked on the door so I used the security overrides to get in. That’s when we found him in the condition he was in.”

“Any idea what caused it?” the captain asked and gave her a stern look that told she was expecting a yes for an answer.

Carrie glanced at Marcel who looked as uncomfortable as she had ever seen him. She suspected the captain had already questioned him on what the two had been investigating to stumble upon something as hazardous as they’d discovered. “A few days ago there was an accident at the docks,” Carrie started to reply. “A container fell and broke. It spilled some water. The corporation it belonged to swept in with hazmat equipment and took care of it. I would surmise it is likely that’s where to dock worker caught what ever turned him into his current state.”

“We also discovered some internal reports from said company that suggest they have found some sort of an life form on Europa. It is possible they were illegally smuggling it onto the station.” Marcel gave the captain a nervous glance as he explained and tried to give Carrie a more encouraging one.

“What a fucking mess,” said the captain and raked a hand through her hair as she started to pace around. She looked thoughtful for a moment before adding a question. “Which corporation is it?”

Carrie glanced at Lorelai. It wasn’t the sort of information she should be hearing the security forces talk about. When she glanced back at the captain she just waved a hand to dismiss her concern, so she replied. “The Guan Guo

corporation.”

“All right. Here’s what we’re going to do. You, you’re going to stay here and tell me everything that went down at the docks,” the captain directed her words at Lorelai who just nodded. “And you two, you’re going to head to the Guan Guo offices and ask some hard questions from them. Take a team with you if you feel it’s necessary. You have my full authorization to get to the bottom of this so if their security gives you any grief just stomp them and put them in cuffs. This fucking mess is putting the entire station in danger and I’m not going to take that lightly.”

“You’ve got it, boss,” said Carrie with a slight smile. Having the captain’s support and the red tape around corporations ripped to shreds meant there would be little preventing them from getting what ever they needed. She gave Lorelai a quick smile and nod before heading out with Marcel.

“We should get that backup,” Marcel said as they left behind the captain all the others fussing around the quarantine.

“Do you think the corporation will put up a fight?” asked Carrie as she made sure she’d gotten back all her equipment, including the gun which she hoped wouldn’t be necessary.

“We’re going there to rip apart their offices while accusing them of smuggling in harmful biological samples? Damn straight they’re going to put up a fight.” Marcel had a grim look on him. He seemed to expect things to go worse than they already were.

“Then we should get backup,” said Carrie. “Going to take more than the two of us to go through all they’ve got anyway.”

Marcel nodded and started talking through his comm to get people together. They made it to the station and hopped onto an empty transport that took them towards the corporate area.

“You all right?” asked Marcel once he’d arranged for their backup. He gave Carrie a look with more genuine concern than she would have expected.

“I think so. At least they gave me an all clear. I didn’t touch the body either. Though I suppose it wasn’t a body. He was still breathing.” Carrie shook her head. “But I still can’t help but worry I might have gotten it. At least my friend

didn't enter the quarters."

"Don't worry. The biohazard guys know what they're doing. It's not the first time they're doing this sort of thing here. We get scares all the time. I remember one time a container dropped at the docks and inside were canisters of Hendelson virus. That thing is vile, but the containment worked and everyone made it out all right."

"That's reassuring," said Carrie even though she couldn't shake the feeling of unease.

Marcel put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze. "You're fine. Just focus on getting those corporate creeps for putting us in this situation. They've broken some serious regulations with this."

Carrie nodded and gave the man a smile. "We're going to nail them to the wall."

Marcel nodded back. "Going to be an interesting day."

The transport came to a halt at the corporate section and the two stepped out and waited for their re-enforcements to arrive. It wasn't long before five men showed up in full gear and with the rifle version of the weapons used on the station. It wasn't much, but most of the security forces were tied up with maintaining the quarantined off area and shifting through the people in nearby quarters. Carrie assumed some were also tracking down any people Mr. Levesque might have been in contact with to track down any possible infections.

That was the biggest danger in closed off units like space stations. Infections could spread quickly and get out of control.

"Let's hope this doesn't turn into a Gaben station," Carrie muttered to Marcel so the other officers couldn't hear.

"Yeah," Marcel agreed.

Gaben station had not been as dramatic. Just a simple case of a virulent influenza that had spread on the station. Out of a crew of a hundred, twenty had died. So many had been bedridden at the same time that basic maintenance had been threatened. Worst case it could have turned the entire station into a ghost one.

"All right. Let's go in. Everyone, keep your eyes open and do your best to look

intimidating. Expect corporate security to object,” said Marcel and gave all of them an individual nod of encouragement.

“Watch each others backs,” Carrie added to his speech before the group headed for the entrance. The five officer had a firm grip on their rifles as they flanked the two detectives. With their full on gear they looked impressive enough that Carrie hoped the corporate security people would think twice before giving any trouble.

The door opened to a busy lobby. There were people rushing about with their compads in hand and other carrying actual papers. There were worried expressions and a sense of urgency in every move. Seeing the seven security officers enter made some stop for a moment while others gained an extra urgency to their steps.

Carrie and Marcel walked right over to the receptionist. She looked nervous enough to shake a drink just by holding it in her hand. She gave the two a nervous smile. “How may I help you?”

“Get the person in charge of this place,” said Marcel. “We have orders to search this facility. Carrie, why don’t you go and round up all the people in the lobby. We wouldn’t want anyone misplacing anything important, would we?”

“No, we wouldn’t,” Carrie agreed and did as told. She posted two of the officers on each door and everyone that came out or tried to get in was simply rounded up where one of the officers kept an eye on them along with help from Carrie. Corporate security came out from the research side entrance, but after seeing the rifles and grumpy faces they decided not to put up a fight.

Disobeying a lawful order from station security wouldn’t look good on the service record, after all.

Carrie started to get worried the corporation was buying time since the manager wasn’t coming out despite the receptionist calling him. She wondered if they should have just entered the research side without guidance. Holding back gave time to dispose of all sorts of things. Though she had to admit that with just seven of them they wouldn’t be able to stop anyone from doing that anyway. It was better to try and gather as many in the lobby as they could. That way there’d be less people tucked in the labs and offices, able to stash away information.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the manager came out from the office side of doors. Seeing him go talk to Marcel gave her hope things would soon be under control. The two seemed to have a heated argument, but eventually the manager relented. Seeing the armed forces certainly played a part in it as well as noticing that some of his own security had already surrendered. Marcel gave her a slight nod as he started to follow the manager through to the offices. The two guards at the door followed him in while the two on the lab side of things went in after a signal from Marcel.

The search was in full effect.

Staying back to guard the staff wasn't a glamorous task, but as the search went on more and more people were sent in from the offices and labs. It was starting to get to the point where Carrie started to consider getting an extra body to help out. Just the two of them couldn't have hoped to control all the workers if they decided to do something. Not that it seemed likely. Most of the people in the lobby looked nervous and apprehensive. Not the sort who'd start trouble.

"You'd better get on tactical," said the security officer helping her as she passed by. He seemed to be half distracted by the chatter coming in his ear.

Carrie nodded and pulled out her pad. She grabbed the small earpiece from its holding place and put it in her right ear. It quickly adjusted itself for a perfect fit that would keep it in place even if she got into a rough fight. She set the frequency on her pad and soon the chatter flooded her ear.

"It's loose!"

"Shoot! Shoot!"

"Fuck! Argh! It bit!"

"Aaahhh!"

It was chaotic. It was terrifying. Mixed with the screams of pain were the sounds of weapon fire and heavy breathing of people who were stressed to the max. Through all the the captains calm voice cut through.

"To all station security personnel. The creature has escaped quarantine. We are regrouping at the security offices. Every available officer is called into service. Gear up and be ready for further instructions. Those already on the field tracking the thing, exercise extreme caution. Use of deadly force on sight is authorized.

Try to keep the civilians out of the way. Captain Janus out.”

Carrie turned to the security guy next to her. “Sounds like shit has hit the fan out there.” She kept her voice low so the people near them wouldn’t hear. There was no reason to induce panic.

“Yeah, what do we do? What did she mean by creature?”

“I don’t know. I’ll contact the captain,” Carrie replied and glanced around. “You keep an eye on everyone. If anyone asks everything is fine.”

The man nodded and Carrie walked away to a part of the lobby where there were fewer people around. The conversation she was about to have wasn’t for their ears.

“This is Carrie Apalkov for Captain Janus.”

“This is the captain,” came the reply quicker than Carrie had expected.

“Captain, Carrie Apalkov here. We’re at the Guan Guo corporate offices performing the search you ordered. Do you want us to break that off and regroup with the rest?”

“No. Continue the search. You might stumble on something that could help us,” came the reply from Janus.

“Captain, what’s going on out there? You mentioned a creature?” Carrie felt nervous asking the questions. There were people she was worried about. The sigh that preceded the captain’s reply did nothing to alleviate her concerns.

“It’s bad. Mr. Levesque wasn’t as out of it as we thought. The moment the hazmat team tried to touch him he woke up and started a rampage. He killed the hazmat team that was in the room with him, he killed three officers while running from the quarantine and injured three more. They’re in bad shape. No one knows what a bite from him will do. Medical is stumped and the condition of the injured is getting worse.”

“Shit,” Carrie muttered without even thinking.

“You should lock down the corporate office. We can’t be sure just yet, but it could be that Mr. Levesque is headed your way.”

Carrie felt her hands get sweaty at the thought. She’d seen the way the man had been. He wasn’t going to be a pretty sight and if the regular office workers saw him there’d be panic. She could fully understand why the captain had called

him a creature. “All right. We’ll lock it down and continue searching.”

“Thank you.”

Carrie could hear the relief in the captain’s voice. She couldn’t imagine how hard it must have been for her. The people killed were people she’d worked with for a long time. It was different for Carrie. She barely knew anyone besides Marcel. It made things easier. Still, there was someone she was worried over.

“Captain, I hate to ask this, but is Lorelai all right? The woman I was with.”

“She’s fine. Safely at the security offices with me. Don’t worry about her. I’ll keep her safe.”

“Thank you, captain. I’ll get to securing this place. Carrie out.”

“Good luck.”

Carrie knew the wish for good luck was genuine, but she couldn’t help but feel it conveyed more effectively just how serious the situation was out there. She shook her head and started working on the lock down.

Chapter 14

“Give them their guns back.” Carrie gave the corporate security guys a stern look. “I’ve told you the situation outside. This isn’t a time to be trying anything fishy. We need to secure this location and keep the civilians safe. Agreed?”

There were nods in return and some quiet yes answers. Huddled together away from the civilians they did their best to keep everything from getting out in the open.

“All right. Grab your guns and lock this place down.” Marcel gave the men an equally stern look. Carrie had explained the situation outside to him and the rest of the security force guys. The search was still going on in the offices and labs, but Marcel had taken a short break to help Carrie with arranging the lock down. The corporate security grabbed their weapons and started to disperse into the lobby.

“We should try and get one of the scientists involved with the project to talk,” said Carrie as she was left alone with Marcel. The officer they’d brought with them were keeping an eye on the corporate guys to make sure none of them had any funny ideas about the use of their weapons. “Maybe they can give us something on what Levesque has become.”

Marcel nodded. “I’ll go grab one of them.”

“I’ll make sure the outer door is secure. Meet you here?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Carrie nodded and headed for the door. The reception desk had been a good place to meet. It had had the room for all the weapons and offered a good view of the lobby while keeping any nosy ears out of reach. She could hear nervous whispers as she made her way to the entrance doors. They’d seen their own security get weapons back. There was no preventing that. It had people wondering what was going on.

She expected the doors to be secured and they were. What she worried were the small windows left despite the metal doors being locked in place. They were designed, as a first layer, to keep out the void of space should the need for

detaching from the main station rise, but who knew what the mutated Levesque could do. Peering through one of the windows Carrie saw nothing but an empty corridor leading to the transport station. The thick glass looked like it could withstand anything, but Carrie couldn't help but feel nervous. She checked the console next to the door one more time to ensure it was locked and then headed back to the reception desk.

Marcel was already there with a man dressed in a white lab coat.

"Good. Carrie, this is Johan Ävested. He heads up the Phoenix project." Marcel had some trouble pronouncing the man's last name. He gave Johan an apologetic look.

"Good to meet you," said Carrie and examined the man. He was young for someone heading up a project for a major corporation. Couldn't have been much past thirty. He looked fit so he did more than spend his days at a lab. Some might have found him handsome, but Carrie thought there was something off-putting about him, though she couldn't quite put her finger on the cause.

"And you too," said Johan and stashed his hands in the lab coat's pockets. "I'm not sure what you expect from me. I can't tell you anything about any project I might be working on. That would be a breach of my contract and the penalties for that are substantial."

Carrie gave Marcel a look. He nodded so she pushed the researcher. "We have some of your files. We know you found a life form on Europa. Some sort of amoeba like organism. We know you shipped samples of that here to the station. We know there was an accident at the docks and your container got damaged. That's all something you probably know. What you don't know is that container breach led to one of the dock workers being exposed to that organism."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but there really isn't anything I can tell you about it," said Johan. Carrie kept a close eye on him. He was starting to get nervous. The way he had cut her off made it seem like he didn't want to hear more.

"We found him in his quarters today," Carrie continued. "We thought he was dead on the account of him looking like a mummy that had started to mould, but we were wrong. He's alive and he's rampaging through the station as we speak. People are injured and dead. Last we heard he, or it, was headed this way."

That made the expression on Johan turn into a mix of fear and panic.

“Are you certain there is nothing you can tell us? Anything that might help us because it’s entirely possible we’ll all be facing it momentarily.”

Johan licked his lips and glanced around as if to ensure no one would hear him spill the corporate secrets. “Look, we don’t know that much about it. We cored some samples on Europa not in search of life, but just to see what the layers of ice can tell us about the history of climate there. When we started looking into it we found the organisms. We assumed they were dead. Few things survive being frozen, but when we melted the sample we found they started to move. Needless to say we were extremely excited by it, but then we found some of the nasty sides of it. It has an amazing talent for surviving. It adapts more quickly than anything we’ve seen.”

“The reports we read told it got past hazmat suits,” said Marcel.

Johan nodded. “There really isn’t much that can keep it contained for a long time. Being frozen so it’s immobile seemed like the best way. It was a safe way to store them as samples and move them. Apparently something went wrong with the container and its cooling and the samples melted on their way here. That the container was dropped and there was a spill had nothing to do with the organism. Just poor luck.”

“And the melted samples got our guy infected. Any idea what the organism would do to a human if it really got into their system?” Carrie gave her partner a look and hoped her roundabout question would finally reveal some useful information.

“Look, it’s something no one has seen before,” said Johan with no small amount of stress in his voice. “No one knows what it would do if it interacted with the human body. It might act like a parasite, it might take over the body and cause mutations. We just don’t know and we weren’t yet ready to test it.”

“Yet?” asked Marcel.

“No, not human tests. Of course not!” Johan was quick to put down that idea. “Animal tests? Absolutely. Mice. That sort of thing. They’re great at giving us an idea what might happen with a human.”

“So we’ve established you’re immoral bastards, but that doesn’t really help

us,” said Carrie in frustration.

Johan gave her a frightened look. He then glanced around the room again. “The only thing I can say for certain is this. Those organism don’t like to be separated. Take one away and the rest become unusually aggressive. The one you took away will try everything to get back to the rest. It’s very unusual for such tiny and simple organisms. Those that got separated from the rest and the docks just might be trying to reunite with the rest.”

“The rest being the samples you have in your labs here?” asked Marcel.

Johan nodded.

“Great,” Carrie muttered. The new bit of information had killed any hope she had that the creature would stay away from where they were. Now it looked more likely it was exactly where it would be headed to.

“What if we destroyed the samples?” asked Marcel.

“You can’t do that,” Johan protested. “Those things are perhaps the most important discovery mankind has made. You can’t just destroy them. I won’t allow that.”

“You might not have a choice,” said Carrie, but what ever more she was about to say was interrupted by a loud thud at the entrance and an uneasy movement from gathered employees to put some distance between themselves and the doors.

Carrie gave Marcel a look and the two left Johan standing there. They both headed for the doors.

“They’re secure?” asked Marcel as they walked at a brisk pace.

“A hundred percent,” said Carrie though she had a hard time convincing herself that was the case. Johan had managed to worm enough doubt into her mind with his information.

Another thud made the employees chatter nervously.

Carrie hastened her steps and made it to the door first. She peered through the window. Levesque was standing there, or what had once been him. The mould had completely covered him now. It made it look like he had a fine fur of green and blue. His eyes had turned into a deep blue in their entirety. He was looking around the door before he noticed Carrie looking through the window. His eyes

focused on her and he lunged at the door. One fuzzy fist hit the window, but made no mark on it. The suddenness of it was enough to make Carrie jump back.

“Well, he’s there,” she said and gave room for Marcel to take a peek.

“His looks and strength sure don’t match,” said Marcel and backed away as another thud echoed from the door. “He just cracked the glass a bit.”

“Even if he breaks it he’s not going to come through that small window,” said Carrie. The window was a circle not big enough to even fit a human head through. “There are multiple panes of that glass too.”

There was another thud.

“I’m letting the captain know it’s here,” said Marcel. “Maybe the teams can get here and take care of him.”

Carrie piggybacked herself onto the same channel as Marcel and listened in.

“Captain, it’s here,” said Marcel as he peered through the window. Another thud told the assault against the glass continued.

“Shit.” Hearing the curse as the first response from Janus was disconcerting to say the least.

“Any help you could provide would be welcome,” Marcel added though his voice had gained a bit of hesitation at the odd response to his initial report.

“Shit has hit the fan out here,” came the reply from Janus. “There’s more of those creatures now. The ones who got injured by Mr. Levesque. They’ve turned into the same sort of creatures he is. It’s a rapid change. We’re trying to contain the others and it’s eating up all our resources. I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to deal with it yourselves. I have no one to send to you.”

Marcel turned to give Carrie a look. She imagined she had a similar look of worry on her own face. “Not much we can do,” she said and shrugged. There was no point throwing a tantrum over something the captain had no control over. She had to keep the station security in mind above everything else. Losing one corporations section wouldn’t be the end of the station.

“Roger that, captain. We’ll do what we can here,” said Marcel and shut down the com channel.

There was another thump from the door and the muffled sound of a frustrated growl. Carrie glanced at the people in the hall. Most of them had

already packed themselves on the opposite side of the room. The corporate security guys were standing between them and the door, guns at the ready. There was no more hiding the situation and the danger.

“It seems to have given up,” said Marcel and drew Carrie’s attention back towards the door.

“What is it doing?” she asked and took a few steps closer to the window. She couldn’t get to it to look through since Marcel was doing so.

Marcel peered through the window. “It’s looking around. Probably trying to figure out if there’s another way in here.”

“Let’s hope we’ve got everything covered,” said Carrie. The door should have been the only way in. Everything else was separate from the station itself, from air vents to power. Everything was independent to the corporate module with no connection to the station systems.

“It noticed the control panel,” said Marcel. He pushed his face against the window to try and see what the creature was doing. “It’s.. it’s trying to open the door using it!”

“Can it do that?” asked Carrie, now worried the creature might be smarter than it looked.

“If it knows the right codes,” said Marcel and pulled away from the window. He turned to regard Carrie. “Best we work on the assumption it’ll get in here.”

“Agreed,” said Carrie and pulled her own weapon out and readied it. Marcel did the same as they began to back away from the door. The people that had bunched up around the reception desk and the doors leading to the offices and laboratories gave the pair some nervous looks. The corporate security along with their fellow officers did the same.

The door that had been holding back the monster slid open.

“How the fuck did it open it so quickly?” asked Carrie.

“No clue,” said Marcel and raised his weapon.

What had once been Mr. Levesque stepped through the doorway. It surveyed the open space and sniffed loudly before grinning. It was the sort of grin the grim-reaper would have been proud of.

“Fire!” Marcel ordered and pulled the trigger on his weapon. Carrie followed

suit as did everyone else with a weapon. Bullets went flying towards the creature while the scientists and office people let out frightened yelps and cries.

The pistols Carrie, Marcel and the corporate security used was low powered, but deadly. It would pass through clothing and burrow deep into flesh. More than lethal, but it was not strong enough that a sheet of metal wouldn't offer protection from the bullets. It was the standard for weapons on any spacestation to keep any gunfight from damaging anything important.

On a station a hole in the wall could turn into a catastrophe.

The bullets sunk into the monster, though it didn't seem to phase it at all. It continued to glare at them all like they were nothing more than annoying insects.

The rifle rounds from the more heavily armed security team didn't fare any better. The only difference was some of their bullets passed through the monster and hit the doorway behind it.

Carrie watched with horrified fascination as the bullet holes she saw form on Levesque quickly grew shut without shedding much in the way of blood. She was even more horrified when it took a leap forward and closed the gap between it and the nearest security person. It ripped away the rifle he was holding like it was nothing and grabbed the man by the head. One yank and the head came off. Blood spewed in the air like someone had turned on a fountain.

It didn't last long.

It was strength no man possessed.

"Scatter! Get around the thing and run into the station!" Marcel yelled at them all while he continue pumping bullets into the monster. Some did as he said and tried to get around Levesque. Some made it, others were not so fortunate and were either killed or injured by him. Carrie did her best to help the civilians out of the lobby and back to the station. She watched helplessly as some ran back into the offices and laboratories. They'd be trapped. She had already given up on the idea of stopping the creature. Bullets didn't work and they were all they had at their disposal at that moment.

She watched one of the corporate security strike Levesque with a baton, but it was shrugged off like it was nothing. A moment later the securityman was on the ground, nursing a horrible gash that ran down from his neck all the way to

his groin. His torn clothes were stained red.

Carrie took a shot at the creature and made her way towards the door. “Out! Out! Get out!”

The people stuffed themselves out the door. Glancing at the mass of bodies Carrie worried for a moment that the way would get blocked and the only way out would become the gate that trapped them all. But things seemed to move despite her worry. By the time she made it to the door all the civilians that had headed that way were out.

That is, those that had not died at the hands of Levesque.

She took a couple more shots at him despite the fact they did little to slow him down. Maybe that one second would be the difference between someone dying and living.

“Here’s the plan,” said Marcel as he jogged next to her. He took in heavy breaths. It had been a while since he’d had to exert himself so much. “We need to separate this section from the station. That’s the only way we can keep that thing from releasing all its friends and running over the station.”

“Agreed,” said Carrie and took reloaded her weapon. Levesque seemed content at making his way towards the labs. She knew some civilians had escaped there. There was nothing to be done to help them.

“Only problem is someone needs to stay here to manage it all,” said Marcel and gave her a glance. “Get going and stay safe.”

“But,” Carrie started as he gave the older man a look. He was going to stay behind. It was practically a suicide mission. The look on him told he knew that well enough. Given the choice between him and herself Carrie chose herself. She shut up, nodded and made her way to the door.

Marcel closed the door behind her. The locks sliding into place made it sound overtly final. He gave one last look through the window and gave Carrie a wave before disappearing.

She took a deep breath. The mix of emotions had her on the verge of tears now that the most pressing danger was gone. She’d seen a lot of people die. They had not been quick deaths. The screams still rang in her mind.

The red warning lights suddenly came on. She had to move away as another

set of doors closed to ensure there would be no loss of atmosphere when the corporate section separated from the station. With some reluctance she turned away and headed down the corridor for the transport platform.

The words of the captain sprang back to her mind.

There were more of the creatures roaming the station.

It was entirely possible she had stepped from one danger into a greater one.

Maybe Marcel had made the wise choice.

She shook her head. There was someone she needed to get to. There was still work to be done. Crumbling down could come later.

Carrie walked on with more determination in her steps.

Chapter 15

“What the fuck am I doing,” Marcel muttered to himself. It had been an easy decision when it had come to him, but now that the door had shut and he’d given Carrie a last wave through the window, doubts were crawling into his mind. Looking at the dead bodies strewn across the lobby made him doubt whether there was any point to doing what he was. He suspected some of the now seemingly dead would soon be coming back in the same form as Levesque.

The fact there were more of his kind loose on the station might easily make his sacrifice meaningless.

Just a glance at the carnage in front of him made the decision seem right. It had not lasted long. Maybe a minute in total. Yet there were dozens of bodies laying on the floor. Out of the security people only him and Carrie had survived without death or injury. He attributed it to the fact they’d stopped using their guns. Though that decision had led to some civilians dying instead. There were severed heads on the floor, plenty of pooled blood along with some intestines.

Mr. Levesque had been efficiently brutal.

Marcel shook his head and forced himself to walk through the gruesome sight towards the office entrance. He’d seen the monster go to the labs so it should have been fairly safe. Still, he kept his gun ready despite it not being much use and took care in keeping an eye on the lab door in case something decided to come out.

Without wasting time he ducked inside the office side. He stopped to give the area a look around. It was a large room with cubicles separated by low separator. Standing he could see into most of them. Empty desks, some still with left over lunch and cups of coffee at them, told how suddenly the situation had hit the place. He could spot a couple of civilians covering in some of the cubicles. It pained him not being able to do anything for them. It was now a question of numbers.

The tens of thousand on the station or the dozens still left in the corporate section.

It wasn't an easy choice, but when considering everything it wasn't much of a choice to begin with.

Lining the room were office doors reserved for manager and leaders. They weren't big rooms, but offered a peace that the cubicles lacked. Marcel made his way past them in the pale light provided by the lamps in the ceiling. The only thing making noise were his footsteps, the steady hum of the air circulation system and the distant noise of music coming from earpieces left on tables. He could swear there was the occasional stifled whimper from those hiding. He wished them all the best in trying to stay alive. Knowing what he was on a mission to do meant their chances were low to begin with.

He made his way past the offices to a door that warned unauthorized personnel to keep out. He tapped in his security code on the panel to the left and the door slid open. It may have been a corporate section of the station, but general station security still held codes to make the necessary decision in an emergency.

The room beyond the door was a small command bridge. There were several workstation there each with a comfortable looking chair in front of them. A huge screen took up the wall opposite to the door and to the right of the door there was what could only be described as a captain's chair. It offered the perfect view over the entire room and the people who'd be working there.

Marcel made his way to the captains chair and sat down. There was a small screen in front of him with controls in the arm of the chair. He started pressing buttons and hoped he remembered how it was done. He'd been trained to do it, everyone who had been in station security as long as he had had gone through it.

"What are you doing?"

Marcel looked up from the screen and saw the woman in the doorway. She looked like she'd been crying. Her blouse was wrinkled up and had more than a few buttons open that should have been buttoned up. Her black hair was a mess and the short skirt she was wearing revealed knees that seemed to have spent time brushing against the floor.

"I'm separating us from the station," Marcel replied and continued setting up the procedure. The big screen came to life as did some of the other workstations

in the room. Lights came on to drive away the darkness.

“You can’t do that,” said the woman and took a step towards him. The door behind her closed. “That creature is here. If you separate us there’s no saving us.”

Marcel lifted up his weapon and pointed it at her. “I’m doing this. Don’t try to stop me. Yes, the creature is here with us. Exactly why we need to separate from the station. It’s the only way to keep it from going back and causing more destruction.”

“But what about us? What about *my* life?” She was starting to sound hysterical. Given the situation it was hard to blame her for it. Thinking about your own life over others was only natural.

“We’ll think of something,” said Marcel and waved his gun towards one of the seats. “Now, why don’t you take a seat over there and don’t touch anything.” He gave the woman a stern look.

She looked like she wanted to argue and not do what she was being told, but one look at the gun pointed at her made her realize she didn’t really have a choice. She moved to the nearest chair and sat down.

Marcel put the gun down. He had a perfect view of her. There wasn’t a move she could do without him seeing it. The console in front of her was dead so there wasn’t much she’d be able to do anyway. She looked like a regular office worker so she probably didn’t even know how to interfere with the process.

“What’s your name?” Marcel asked her, thinking it was better to keep her talking than to let the silence give her thoughts.

“Joana.”

“Well, I sure wish we’d met under better circumstances, Joana,” said Marcel and continued to set up the process for separation. The outer doors had already been closed and sealed. The manoeuvring engines had been fired up and all that remained was to release the clamps that held the section down. He made some final checks to ensure everything that needed to be sealed was before pushing the button to separate.

There was a loud sound of metal clamps severing and then a jolt as the thrusters pushed the section away from the main station. Marcel pulled up a

couple of camera angles on the screen in front of him to see he didn't damage the station in any way. Everything seemed to be going well.

"You've doomed us," Joana muttered in a voice filled with sadness. She seemed resigned to die.

"What I've done is possibly save the thousands of people on the station," said Marcel and made some final adjustments to their trajectory. Ramming the place straight to Jupiter seemed like the safest plan so that's what he did. There'd be hell to pay from the corporation, but that was a worry for a later date. Right now all he cared about was killing that monster and preventing it from doing any further harm.

The final course corrections were done. The thrusters made some adjustments. The initial burn died down and, with the section being away from the rotating station, the gravity was gone. Marcel started to float off his chair as did everything else in the room that wasn't tied down. He hoped the monster would have as much trouble with no gravity as any human.

"All right. I'm done here," Marcel said and pushed his way down to the floor and hooked his toes under the desk he'd been sitting at a few moments ago. He gave Joana a look. She didn't seem to be paying any attention to the world around her. She was slowly floating towards the ceiling while hugging her legs against her chest. "Snap out of it, Joana. Time to think about saving our own asses."

Joana lifted her head up. She seemed to notice for the first time the gravity was gone. She started flailing around which sent her into a spin. She was headed for the ceiling in an uncontrollable mess of human hands and feet.

With a shove up from his toes, Marcel sent himself to the floor and then pushed himself towards the spinning woman. He floated through the air and slammed into her. He wrapped his arms around the struggling woman and tucked her head against his chest and did his best to stabilize both of them. They hit the ceiling with his back against it. It sent them back towards the floor, but the spin had been slowed down.

"Calm down or you're going to get both of us hurt," Marcel said in a firm voice which he further enhanced by gripping the woman tighter.

She calmed down. Her hands stopped trying to break free and she let Marcel get the pair under control. With his hands free to move now he managed to stop the spinning completely and bring them both down to the desk without incident. He anchored himself to one of the desks and helped Joana do the same.

“Where’s the nearest airlock?” Marcel asked. While he knew the station quite well the corporate sections were not that familiar to him. What he knew was they had at least two airlocks as per station regulation.

Joana took a deep breath. She still seemed uneasy in no gravity, but at least she wasn’t flailing around uncontrollably any more. “There’s one at the labs. The scientists use it to take some of their experiments outside. It’s not far from here.”

“All right. That’s where we’re headed then,” said Marcel. “Got to be careful though. That thing is roaming around there and we don’t want it spotting us. Hopefully it doesn’t fare well in no gravity.”

“It’s in the labs?” Joana asked in a weak voice.

Marcel nodded. “That’s where I last saw it. Could be gone by now, but who knows. That airlock is our only chance. We suit up and launch ourself back towards the station. Hopefully there are still suits left. Probably not the only ones thinking the outside is safer than in here.”

“I.. I haven’t been outside in a long time.”

“You’ve gone through the basic training?” Marcel asked. Everyone on board the station was required to go through a basic course of space walking. It wasn’t much if you didn’t do it often, but at least no one had to do it for the first time when an emergency hit. They’d know how to properly put on a spacesuit and how to avoid the worst mistakes.

At least in theory.

Joana nodded. “It was a long time ago.”

Marcel gave the woman a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry. It’s like riding a bike. It’ll come back to you and I’m here to help. Now, let’s get going before we get too far away from the station.”

Grabbing Joana by her hand, Marcel pushed the pair off the table and towards the single door leading out of the room. They came to a gentle stop by the door and Marcel pushed a button to open it. As soon as the door slid open he

peeked into the corridor and looked in every direction.

The corridor was a mess. There were droplets of blood bouncing around, parts of bodies floating about along with debris of all sorts, mostly trash from every single garbagebin in the office.

Most importantly there was silence. Only the hum of the air being pushed through grates, but no screams or wails of the dying.

“Seems clear. Let’s go.” Marcel still held Joana by hand as he launched himself into the corridor and towards the lobby that would allow them to cross over to the lab side. They had to push through debris and there was no avoiding some droplets of blood smattering against them. Once in a while they stopped at a convenient place where they had something to anchor themselves on to. Mostly it was big furniture. They tended to be fastened down in case gravity was lost. No one wanted a heavy desk crushing employees, least of all the employees.

They got to the door to the lobby without incident. They had seen dead bodies despite the fact the creature had gone to the lab side of the compound. Marcel figured the creature had turned around and come to the office area as well. It had taken him a bit of time to detach the place. Plenty of time for the quick moving monster to come around the place.

Carefully, Marcel pushed open the door and gave the lobby a quick look around.

The floating bodies and body parts made it hard to see. It wasn’t only the gruesomeness of the sight, but the fact there was so much blood and other bits of humans floating about that it physically blocked the view. He pulled back behind the door, satisfied that the way seemed clear of danger. He gave Joana a quick glance and made a judgement call.

“All right. The view in the lobby isn’t very nice. Just hold on to me and let me guide you. Keep your eyes closed. No reason for you to see that.” The distance to the lab door wasn’t very long since the two entrances were practically side by side.

“Is it really that bad?” Joana asked. She had seen the few bodies on their way and while they had shocked her and made her hands shake and break out in a cold sweat it had not made her cry or sob.

“Probably worse,” said Marcel and gave the woman a grim look.

Her eyes met his. She saw the truth in them. “Just don’t let go of me.”

“I won’t,” Marcel assured her and grabbed her extended arm. He gripped it tightly and pushed open the door again before launching the pair out of it. A quick glance back told him she had taken the advice. Her eyes were tightly shut and she had an apprehensive expression on her. She wasn’t happy about it, but at least she wasn’t arguing against it.

Turning his attention forward he did his best to guide them away from any floating body pieces and the largest blobs of blood. Most of it was concentrated away from the two doorways so it wasn’t that hard. He grabbed hold of the railing at the bit of wall that separated the two entrances and swung around towards the lab doorway. A few seconds later the pair were through and in the corridor.

“We’re through,” said Marcel and inspected the two corridors that were open to them. There were see through windows that separated out laboratories. What he saw inside them wasn’t that much different from what the scene in the lobby had been. There were shredded full body suits meant to protect scientists from whatever they were working with. There was blood and body parts floating amongst the loose vials and other scientific equipment.

The loud gasp from next to him told of Joana opening her eyes and seeing the scene in front of her. It was far worse than what had been present in the office area.

“It’s all right. We’re going to be fine,” Marcel assured her almost as much as to ease his own mind. “Which way to the airlock?”

It took a moment for Joana to regain her voice and reply. “There. To the right.”

Just as the words left her lips they heard a loud crash and an inhuman growl from the corridor up ahead of them. It was enough to make their hearts skip a beat.

“Glad we’re not going that way,” said Marcel in a lowered voice. He grabbed Joana once more and pushed them off to where she had pointed. Luckily, it took them away from what could have only been the monster that had caused all the death around them.

They passed by lab after lab. All of them were in a similar state of disarray. Some had lighting fixtures hanging from the ceiling, flickering, after having something heavy thrown at them. Judging by the carnage it could very well have been a human body. There was broken glass, broken machinery, exposed wiring sending out sparks and on top of that all the thin layers of blood and human tissue that remained from the shredded bodies.

A loud thump carried after them through the corridor.

The lights dimmed and then went out completely. The red emergency lighting kicked in quickly. It made Marcel curse.

“It’s tearing the place apart,” he muttered and grabbed hold of a railing on one side of the corridor to bring them to a stop.

“If we lose power we’ll have to operate the airlock manually,” Joana said in an attempt to keep her mind focused on escape instead of the horror behind them. At least the emergency lighting hid most of the labs from view.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Marcel grunted. Even one person could do it, but having to manually turn the locks and push the heavy doors would add time to their departure. Not to mention the noise it would make. Plenty of time for the creature to hear it and come investigate. “There’s an intersection up ahead. Which way do we head?”

Joana glanced up ahead. “Straight ahead. We’re not far.”

Marcel nodded and grabbed the woman once more and pushed them in that direction. His shoulder brushed aside something moist feeling. In the dim lighting he was grateful for not seeing what it had been.

Another blood stilling wail followed them through the corridor. It sounded like it was coming further away.

“That’s it,” Joana whispered when they got close to a door.

“Is there a lab beyond it or just the airlock?” Marcel asked. “Wouldn’t want to run into a dangerous experiment on the loose. Could kill us just as easily as that creature.”

Joana closed her eyes. “I.. I’m not sure. I think there’s a room that separates the two. We won’t be walking straight into a lab. No place here is designed like that, I think. There’s always a preparation room where you put on the protective

gear.”

Marcel nodded. For a brief moment he considered whether it would be worth it to try and find the samples that had caused all of this. They had to be somewhere in the labs. Then he remembered the monster was likely seeking the same thing and that the whole place would be crashing to Jupiter, making all of it a moot point.

Without saying anything more he opened the door and dragged Joana with him.

She had been right. They entered a room with three doors. One straight ahead and the other to the left. The left side had the same see through walls that revealed a lab beyond them. Straight ahead was the sturdy looking door to the airlock chamber.

The room itself had benches in it as well as lockers. Thankfully they had all been bolted down to the floor so the only things floating around were the smaller items that had been loose. Mostly it was pens, notepads and clothing.

Closing the door behind them Marcel led the way to the airlock chamber door. Normally they would have changed their clothing for a more comfortable time in the suits, but there was no time for that sort of luxury. They'd have to make do with what they were wearing now.

The airlock chamber was divided into two parts. The first one had the spacesuits. Four in total. One was missing. Judging by the items near the empty spot, some scientist had made it out. The heavy suits hung from the wall in special holders. They were positioned so that it was easy to slip into the suit even if there was no one to help. The heavy helmet could be lowered and fastened in place easily.

“Let's get into the suits,” said Marcel. He pushed himself to one of the suits. Joana struggled to get to one as well. She quickly figured out the skirt she was wearing wasn't going to fit into the suit without giving her a lot of trouble so she quickly took it off and started fitting herself into the suit with just her panties on.

The sounds he started to pay attention to had Marcel feeling anxious to get out. In the corridors all he'd heard had been his own heartbeat and heavy breathing. Now he was starting to hear creaks, hissing sounds as who knew what

escaped from its containers, the light sound of glass breaking and the endless thump as things crashed into the walls, floor and ceiling. It made for a frightening world of sounds.

He did his best to ignore it and focused on getting into the suit. It was easy enough to get the bottom part of it on. His legs slipped into it without trouble. Reaching back to put his arms into the sleeves took a bit more effort and pulling the suit onto his shoulders almost had him falling over. No gravity made even simple moves a challenge. Finally, he managed to get it on and pulled up the zippers that closed the suit and fastened the flaps on top that ensured a proper seal.

Standing up the heavy helmet aligned perfectly with his head and slipped over it. The metal clasps around the neck locked in place and Marcel made the final checks to ensure everything was locked and tightly sealed. A leaky suit would result in an already bad day getting markedly worse.

Done with his own equipment, Marcel pushed himself over to Joana and helped her with pulling the suit on and locking down the helmet. He helped her make the final checks and finally made a comms checks so they were both on the same channel and the equipment was working.

“You good?” Marcel asked over the radio. It was odd wearing the helmet. It blocked off almost all the sounds from the outside. It made him feel nervous that the monster might be headed their way and any sounds of warning would go unheard.

“Yes,” came the reply from Joana. “Could have sworn the training suits were lighter than these.”

“Probably were,” Marcel said. “These aren’t exactly the newest model.” He pushed himself towards the airlock chamber door. Joana followed. She seemed to have gotten better at controlling her movements. The suit restricting her probably helped in this case.

Marcel cranked the wheel on the door to open it. With power it would have worked automatically, but now it had to be done manually. When the locks popped open he had to ask Joana to help pull the door open since it was so heavy. The pair slipped into the chamber and pulled the door shut and locked it.

“Let’s hope the pressurization works,” said Marcel and headed for the control panel. “The doors aren’t on a separate backup system, but the air pump is. Saves power for the really critical part.”

“You’d think they’d just put in a bigger battery,” Joana muttered. She looked around the small chamber, nervous. It was a claustrophobics nightmare. Small enough that barely four people could fit in. The only window was the one on the door they had just used and even that was just a small, round one you’d see on spaceships or ocean going ships. The door leading out, into the cold, dark space, was solid metal with no windows.

“Keeps the costs down and makes for a more simple system,” Marcel replied as he pressed the on-screen button. He was relieved to hear the hiss of air getting sucked out the room. He could feel the slight vibration of the pump as it worked. He hoped it wouldn’t be enough to attract the monster to them. It seemed to take forever for the room to be sucked empty of air.

Finally, the light above the outer door turned from red to green. Marcel rushed over and started to turn the wheel to open it. The door opened with a slight pop and Marcel pushed it open. He floated outside and grabbed hold of one of the many handles placed around the outside of the airlock. Joana floated out a moment later. Marcel grabbed hold of her and guided her to one of the handles. Marcel then closed the airlock door.

The void of space gave him a sense of security that had been lacking on the inside. Without a suit the monster wouldn’t be able to chase after them. No way it could survive outside.

Looking around to assess the situation he noted Jupiter was growing bigger and bigger. Looking back the station was growing smaller and smaller. The distance had grown greater than he’d anticipated. Whether they’d be able to make it there or not was starting to look like a serious question.

“Come on. We’ve got to hurry,” Marcel said and started tapping away at the wrist computer on his suit. Calculating the distance, trajectory, needed force and all the other aspects that needed to be accounted for in the manoeuvre took a moment. The suit had plenty of sensors to be aware of the large objects he was working with. “I’ve sent the data to your suit. Accept it and follow it to the tee.

Any deviation and you might miss Minerva or slam into it too hard. No one wants that.”

“All right.” The radio distorted her voice a bit, but Marcel could swear she sounded more confident. Maybe she had come to the same conclusion about the threat inside.

“We need to get on top of this thing. Launching from the side is too dangerous with all the antennae.” Marcel started pulling himself towards the top of the section. It was an irregular shape so it was hard to tell what was the bottom and what was the top, but there was a clear path of handles leading to where he wanted to go. Joana followed close behind. He could hear her heavy breathing through the radio. In a weird way it was a comforting sound in what would have been an uncomfortable silence.

The top of the section was far more clutter free than the sides. It was where it had been attached to the station so there wasn't much more than smooth sheets of metal everywhere. A few large clamps that had anchored it down didn't offer much in the way of obstacles. Marcel made a conscious choice to keep his attention on the station instead of worrying about the deadly ball of gas they were headed towards.

Walking was a chore with the magnetic boots. Marcel was soon breathing just as heavily as Joana was. Having made it safely to an area that was suitable for their launch they took a moment. Marcel checked to see if he had enough oxygen left for the trip. It was getting close. It had not felt it, but the section had gained quite a bit of momentum when separating from the station. It made sense. It was mostly meant to be used in a situation where either the section itself was going to explode or the main station was under a similar threat.

“Let me see your computer.” Marcel moved over next to Joana. She presented the little wrist computer to him. He made certain she had accepted the program he'd sent her and everything was set to go.

“I don't think I can do this.” The nervousness in Joana's voice was evident and Marcel wouldn't have been surprised if her hands were trembling inside the suit. The hint of panic that crept in at the end sealed the suspicion.

“It's going to be fine,” Marcel assured her. “The suit will do most of the

work.”

“But I’ll be out there. On nothing. Just.. empty space. I can’t handle it. I’ll go crazy.” The panic started to get stronger in her voice. Marcel could see her through the visor on the helmet. She was in full panic.

Taking a strong grip on both her arms Marcel brought their helmet together so they could be as close to face to face as was possible in their current situation. “Look at me, Joana. Look at me. It’s going to be all right. I’ll be right there with you. You’re not alone.”

“But..”

“Focus on what’s ahead of us and what we’re leaving behind. Think of the monster that’s still tearing through the insides of this hunk of metal we’re standing on. Think of the station we’re headed to. Back home. All your friends, all your relatives, your family. They’ll all be there waiting for you. All you have to do is trust me and make that tiny jump. It’ll be smooth sailing from there on out.”

“I don’t know..”

Marcel sighed. “Take a deep breath. Whether you like it or not this is our only way out of here. Either we do this or we crash into Jupiter. I know which option I prefer.”

There were a couple of deep breaths that came through the radio. “Fine.”

She still didn’t sound too sure about it, but at least she wasn’t arguing for staying.

“All right. I’m going to attach this tether to you. That way we won’t be drifting too far apart.” Marcel reached for the belt around his waist and unhooked the other end of the tether. He attached it to her belt and tugged on it to ensure it was secure. The tether was made from elastic so it stretched quite a bit, but would keep them together with no more than ten feet between them.

Joana seemed to gain some confidence from being linked to Marcel.

Getting ready to launch, Marcel moved next to her and gave his own wrist computer a quick glance. The math was quickly starting to trend towards a negative outcome. It was go or die time.

“Here goes,” said Marcel. “Press the button on three.”

“On three,” Joana repeated in a dull voice.

“One, two, three.” Marcel pushed the button on his wrist computer. The magnetic lock on his boots was released and the thrusters attached to the pack on the back of the suit pushed him onward. He was happy to see Joana was right there next to him. The corporate section was quickly left behind them, leaving nothing but black space to surround them. Even Marcel had to admit the feeling was unsettling. As a human you were accustomed to having some point of reference, something solid under your feet. Even in the distance, Minerva station did not offer much consolation.

Marcel had been on space walks plenty of times before, but always with something solid under his feet or close by. Now, with nothing but empty space all around, he had to fight to keep the panic inside him from taking over. The uneasy feeling at the bottom of his stomach almost made him want to vomit. Everything in his body screamed against the unnatural state he was in.

“You doing all right?” Marcel asked, hoping to distract not only himself, but her as well. A quick glance at the wrist computer and he calmed down a bit. Everything was going as calculated.

“This could drive someone crazy,” came the reply from Joana.

“Only if you’re out here for too long,” Marcel replied. He remembered a story. While it might not have been the best to tell right then, it was something to distract their minds. “During the construction of this station one of the workers went adrift. Malfunctioning suit they said. He was adrift in space for eight hours. So disoriented that he couldn’t tell where Jupiter was even though it fills half the sky. He didn’t have thrusters on his suit so it wasn’t really possible for him to change direction that well. When the rescue team finally found him he was already showing signs of a breaking mind.”

“What happened to him?” Joana asked. Her voice was more curious than anxiety filled. Marcel took that as a good sign.

“He wasn’t right in the head after that,” Marcel said and glanced at his wrist computer again. There was still plenty more to go before they even got close to the station. “They drugged him up and sent him back home. Man hasn’t been to space since then.”

“This isn’t a place for humans,” Joana said.

“Certainly no home,” Marcel agreed. “But that’s the thing with us humans. We don’t listen to the universe when it tries to tell us something isn’t for us. We’ll think about it for a bit and then come up with something to circumvent the universe trying to keep us away.”

“Makes you feel sorry for the universe,” Joana replied.

“Not when it throws something like that creature at us. Sadistic bastard, the universe is.” Marcel couldn’t hide the bitterness in his voice. It wasn’t only because the thing had killed so many people and ruined what should have been the final easy days of his career. It was because nothing would be the same again. Life outside Earth, seemingly intelligent at that, and utterly hostile. That would change humanity forever and Marcel feared it would not be for the better.

Joana didn’t reply, but he could hear her breathing over the open radio. The silence stretched. It felt like they were standing still. The faint lights of Minerva didn’t seem to get any closer. It made Marcel check the wrist computer just to verify they were indeed moving.

The timer showed two more hours to go.

Chapter 16

The way to the security offices was eerie. Carrie knew that normally the transport pods would have been full of people going to and from work. Now, she got to ride the entire way all by herself. The platforms that passed by were largely empty. She saw two groups that were waiting for transport. Late movers who had ignore or missed the warning blaring throughout the station.

It wasn't an evacuation order. It was an order to get to your cabin, lock the door and wait for further information. Carrie knew full well why it wasn't an evacuation order. The risk of someone carrying that organism off the station and further spreading it amongst where ever they ended up was too great. Potentially humanity ending scale kind of risk.

She had not been on the station for long, but she knew the captain would rather self destruct the station and kill everyone aboard than let that thing loose on the solar system.

Most platforms she passed were silent. Others had noises echoing from the corridors leading to them. There were screams and shouts. At one there was gunfire. For a brief moment Carrie considered stopping and going to investigate, but decided against it. One person wouldn't change anything if there was one of the creatures. Part of it was simple fear for her own life, part was the firm knowledge she'd be unable to render any aid. Her weapon wouldn't work against the creature.

It was better to move on and come up with a plan to deal real damage to them.

She tried to get her mind off the empty platforms by listening in on the communication going on. It seemed everything had concentrated on the main security station. The medical teams had gathered there because one of the creatures had attacked the main hospital. It meant a lot of equipment was not available for use and they had to make do with what they had when treating the injured.

By the reports they had their work cut out for them. Not just people injured

by the monsters, but people who had ran in a panic and broken bones or gotten knocked about by others.

A bunch of civilians, cut off from their lodgings, had also gathered there. While they weren't giving the security forces nor the medical staff any trouble, they were taking up much needed space.

Carrie let out a sigh as the transport came to halt at her destination. She stopped at the platform for a moment to listen for any sounds of trouble in the corridor she was headed for. All she could hear was the slight hum of the station.

She started walking towards the main security office.

She wasn't far off when a squad in full gear jogged past her. They had the high powered rifles that were reserved for true emergencies. They had enough kick to them that they could puncture the stations critical bulkheads. Use of them was severely restricted due to obvious concerns for station safety.

Things had to be truly desperate for them to be deployed.

The protective gear they wore was also among the heaviest available. With it they were close to the armies of old in levels of protection. Not much would be getting through the protective vests and other bits and pieces that protected them from head to toe. Even if a creature bit on their arm it was unlikely the teeth would beat the protection. Though none of that would protect from the sheer strength that could pull off arms.

Carrie continued walking on. The closer she got to the office the more people there were. Mostly civilians looking for a safe place to ride things out. They gave her desperate looks on the account of her uniform, but left her be. She pushed on with quickened steps. She didn't want to get stopped and questioned by civilians.

She had no idea what to tell them.

Two officers were standing guard right at the entrance. There were plenty of people piled over there, but things seemed calm. There was some nervous chatter, but no one seemed to be trying to push their way into the offices. Perhaps they had been told there was no space inside. Probably they'd seen the situation themselves. Not that the flimsy doors would offer much more protection.

Carrie walked over to the two guards and showed her badge to be let in. They both gave her a nod and opened the door.

If the corridor outside had been calm, the security office was anything but. There were screams of pain and the low wail of someone on the edge of consciousness. People were shouting for attention and supplies and others were rushing around, trying to fill all the demand. There were the doctors and nurses in their white outfits. There were the heavily armed security officers standing guard, ready to defend everyone inside. Then there was the calm island that was the captain, hunched over one of the detectives desks.

Carrie made her way to her.

“Captain,” she greeted her.

Janus looked up from her pad. She seemed genuinely relieved to see her. “Apalkov. Glad to see you made it here all right.”

“Was eerily quiet where I came from,” Carrie replied.

Janus nodded. “Most of the action is in the other direction. Report?”

Carrie put her hands behind her back and assumed a firm stance. “Marcel and I were investigating the source of the infection, ice samples cored from Europa that had been transferred illegally by the Guang Guo company. As we were conducting our investigation in their corporate section, the creature, formerly known as Levesque, arrived on the scene. He started killing people. We tried to stop it, but our weapons were useless. Marcel came up with a plan to separate the corporate section to lessen the casualties and to get the creature off the station. He remained behind to see to it.”

“No word from him since then?” Janus asked.

Carrie shook her head. “The corporate section was successfully separated. Headed for Jupiter right now, I imagine.”

“A shame,” said Janus and rubbed her eyes. “He didn’t have much to go until retirement. Let’s hope he somehow pulls it off and comes back.”

“From what little I’ve been with him he seems the sort who finds a way,” Carrie said and hoped her impression of the man was correct. She glanced around the room. A part of her hoped to catch a glimpse of Lorelai, but in the crowd it would have been easy to miss her. All she saw was nurses rushing to render first aid as well as security officers answering calls and looking through camera feeds and giving feedback to those on the field.

“We’ll have to trust him,” Janus said and glanced at her pad as it flashed some message on it. She quickly tapped it away. “I wish I could give you a bit of a breather, but we need everyone on duty. Last count there were five of those creatures roaming the station, not including the one Marcel got off. With how they spread whatever it is we might well have tens more in the next hour or two.”

Carrie swallowed hard as Janus leaned on the desk in front of her and put her tablet on it to show her a map of the station.

“They seem to be drawn to energy sources. One is headed for the main reactor. We have a team with heavy rifles going to stop it. I authorized the use of explosive rounds since it seems the only way to stop those things is to shred them to pieces.”

“Let’s hope they have accurate aim,” Carrie said. “A single stray bullet in that area and the whole station might blow up.”

“If we don’t use them we’ll lose the station anyway,” Janus noted and looked up at her from the map. “This is survival and that doesn’t come without risks.”

Carrie nodded. “What can I do?”

“Two of the creatures are near the docks. Plenty of energy there. Some vessels are still stuck and their reactors are juicy targets. I’ve got one team headed there. I’d like you to join the other. We need to keep the creatures away from those vessels. We can’t risk them getting off the station on one of them. Not to mention we don’t know what will happen if they get the energy they want so badly.”

Carrie nodded. “If I may ask a question?”

Janus nodded.

“Is there any word on how they infect people? I’ve seen people scratched, but nothing happened.”

“Hell if we know,” Janus replied and straightened herself. She took a moment to straighten a wrinkle on her jacket. “We’ve had bites, scratches, gashes, all sorts of injuries. Some have turned, most have not. Our best guess is that they’re able to choose who they change and who they do not. Could be they’re like snakes and have a limited amount of what ever starts the mutation.”

“So best bet is to just not get injured by them.”

Janus nodded. "Sound advice that. Now, get your heavy gear on. The rest of your team is getting together in the locker room. They'll brief you on the details."

"Will do, ma'am." Carrie gave Janus a nod before turning around and heading for the locker room. The office around her was abuzz. She looked around, hoping for a glimpse of Lorelai, but she was nowhere to be seen. With a disappointed sigh, Carrie opened the door to the locker room and entered it.

"Carrie!"

The familiar voice caught her off guard as much as the figure that rushed over to her to give her a hug did. Under all the gear it was hard to tell her slim figure, but the voice confirmed it.

"Lorelai?" Carrie managed to ask as she wrapped her hands around the figure.

"You're safe," Lorelai managed to say as the two parted from the hug. The way her eyes were focused on her, the brief smile that passed her lips, was enough to tell Carrie she wanted to do more than hug her. The small smile that passed her own lips told her as much. They both knew where they were, what they wanted to do and why they couldn't. But they knew.

"I could say the same about you," said Carrie as she examined Lorelai. She was in full gear, from the tactical vest to the helmet to the padded trousers protecting her legs from any harm. "What are you doing here?"

Lorelai reached behind her and tightened the ponytail she had wrapped her hair into. "They needed someone who knows the docks. Figured it beats waiting here for those creatures to over run the entire station."

"It's dangerous out there," Carrie said with a concerned frown. "I've seen what they can do."

Lorelai shrugged and gave her a reassuring smile. "I know what I'm getting into. Besides, I'm not going alone. You're here along with the rest of the group."

Carrie looked past her. She saw six others sitting on the benches. They were fastening boots, checking weapons and chatting to keep the nervousness away.

"Guess I better report in then," said Carrie and gave Lorelai a look. "Who's in charge? The captain didn't tell me much before sending me here."

"We don't know," said Lorelai. "Captain Janus said she'd send someone."

“Shit,” Carrie muttered and gave the group a look over. None of them were as high ranking as she was. They were normal officers. One looked to be a trainee. It was the sort of group that got cobbled together out of desperation. “I guess I’m that someone.”

Lorelai gave her a pat on the shoulder. “You’ll do fine.”

Of that, Carrie was not as certain, but she had an appreciation for Lorelai coming along. Without her navigating the docks would have been a nightmare for a group that likely had not been there before. She stepped past her and coughed to get the groups attention. “All right. Seems like I’m the highest ranking here so I’ll be taking the command until someone else comes along. Most of you probably don’t know me. My name is Carrie Apalkov and I only recently joined you on this station. I worked with Marcel Wolfe. Now, I understand you’ve been briefed on the details of our operation. Care to fill me in?”

Not waiting for anyone to come forward, Carrie turned her attention to the gear set on one of the benches. She took the few steps to get there and started putting on the protective vest and other gear the heavy equipment entailed.

“I suppose I might as well do the briefing.” The man had blonde hair that was cut short. His blue eyes were mesmerizing and he had the frame of someone who liked to stay in shape. “My name is Jasper Tran. I’m just a regular officer, but I’ve been here for a few years now.”

“Go ahead, Jasper.” Carrie continued putting on her gear, but slowed down to pay better attention. Lorelai was handing her new items to put on.

“The captain gave us two objectives at the docks. Secure it against any of those critters and secure all the transports and other vessels stuck there. We don’t want any leaving the station and from what we’ve heard some of the captains are getting angry.”

“Just us or is there any help waiting?” Carrie asked.

“Just us,” Jasper replied. “The regular guard was called off to help deal with what’s going on on the station.”

“All right.” Carrie fastened the last strap on the holster that rested against her left thigh. She ensured the gun in it was secure and then lifted the heavy rifle and flung its strap across her chest. The rifle felt heavy in her hands and she had

to dig back on memories on how to operate it. "I've got the gist of what we're supposed to do. Now, who do I have to help me do that? Jasper here introduced himself and Lorelai I know from the past. What about the rest of you?"

"Nolan Kelly," said a man standing next to Jasper. He was significantly older than the blonde man with wrinkles on his forehead that told of countless hours spent worrying about something. There were the first signs of grey in his brown hair. The dark eyes that stared at Carrie had a kindness to them. "Been on the station for a year working security in the pleasure district."

Carrie gave the man a nod.

"Lenard Hanson." The man stood up from the bench. He was a heads length taller than Jasper. It made him a giant of a man who made even the large framed blonde seem small. While not as muscle bound he still looked like he could rip a console right out of the wall and chuck it a good hundred feet away. His voice had a depth to it that matched his heavy set jaw. "Been here five years. Basic grunt work. You need a head bashed in I'm the man to do it."

"Move you oaf," came a female voice from behind Lenard. The big man stepped aside to reveal the small frame of a woman with thick brown hair. She glanced up the man with a grumpy expression. "You're always covering me."

"Sorry, Aline. Doesn't take much to cover you."

Aline snorted and turned her attention to Carrie. "Aline Horne. Been here three years. Mostly worked with Lenard here as you can probably tell. He bashes, I snipe, not that there's much sniping to do on a station like this." She was not a big woman and Lenard made it almost comically obvious. Instead of a high powered rifle she was holding onto what looked to be a precision rifle, the kind sharpshooters would use. It seemed almost too heavy for someone like her to handle.

"I'm Peter Bray," said a man from the opposite side of the narrow path between the lockers. He flashed a quick smile at everyone with teeth that would have fit in a commercial. His sand brown hair was a mess and there were dark pouches under his green eyes. He had a bit of stomach and everything about him cried laziness or, at the very least, a cavalier attitude towards keeping himself in shape. "Been here seven years or so. Basic patrolling and crowd control."

Carrie nodded at everyone who had introduced themselves so far and then turned to regard the last person who remained a mystery. She got a grumpy glare in return.

“Pointless shit,” the man muttered. “We’ll all be dead soon anyway.”

“I’d still like to know whose corpse will be next to mine,” said Carrie with a grin. It got a few chuckles from the rest of the unit. The grumpy man’s mouth corner twitched ever so slightly.

“Fine. I’m Kirby Camacho.” He stood up from the bench and adjusted rifle resting against his back. It was obvious that even under all the gear he was a fit man. His black hair was tied in a ponytail and his chin had a patch of beard on it running down from his lower lip. There was a tattoo on the left side of his face. Nothing artistic. Just geometrical shapes arranged in an odd fashion.

“All right, Kirby. That’s everyone. Good. We’ve got a bit of everything here, skills wise, so we should do well. Just to remind everyone, Lorelai is not a part of the security force. She’s our guide, a worker from the docks. Keep that in mind and keep her safe. She’s a civilian that has volunteered to help us.”

There were silent nods.

Carrie grabbed her rifle and pulled on her helmet. “Gear up and let’s go. We’ll hone a plan once we’re in the transport.”

Despite showing the confidence she had there were doubts in her mind. The docks were a huge area and all she had was a team of eight. That was barely enough to secure a single transport, much less the numerous gates and vessel at the docks. Best she could hope for was that nothing serious would happen or come their way.

She led the team through the office. The captain spotted them and gave a nod. Carrie returned it. People gave them way. Eight people in full gear tended to have that effect. Outside the security offices the gathered civilians gave them weary looks as they walked past. It wasn’t the first group of its kind that they had seen, but each one brought to surface all the anxiety and fears that had been briefly forgotten.

The group kept a good pace and soon arrived at the transport station. They didn’t have to wait long for an empty one to arrive. They stuffed themselves in it

and said goodbye to the safety of their home base.

“All right, Lorelai. How are we going to do this?” Carrie asked and everyone’s eyes turned on the dockworker. “We’ve got eight of us, seven if we count those who can fight, and the entire dock to keep tabs on.”

Lorelai sat on the opposite side of the transport pod, next to Aline and Lenard. Everyone else was on the other side. Nolan and Jasper had their rifles at the ready as they watched the stations whisk past them through the windows. While it was unlikely, no one wanted to get surprised by one of the creatures.

“The docks have several entrances,” Lorelai said and pulled out her pad. She held it out and everyone gathered around to see the map she had on it. “The two big ones are the cargo and passenger terminals. They can be closed off with doors that have been built to withstand a transport exploding in the docks. There’s an entire wall that separates the docks from the rest of the station to keep such events from taking down this entire place.”

“Good. We’ll need to seal those doors as a first priority,” Carrie said.

“That’s a start, but there are several other ways into the docks. Most are just small doorways the dockworkers and maintenance crew use, but there are several of them. The good news is they’re pretty easy to lock as well, but keeping an eye on them will be a bit more difficult. I know at least a few of them have busted cameras pointing at them and I doubt maintenance has had time to fix them with all that’s going on.”

“What sort of doors are they?” asked Kirby.

“Standard restricted area ones,” Lorelai replied.

“We can jam them then,” Kirby said. “I know how to. Once that’s done ain’t nothing getting through. Those beasts are rated to withstand the same sort of explosion as the main terminal doors.”

“How long does that take?” Carrie asked.

“A couple of minutes,” Kirby replied. “Maintenance ain’t going to thank us for it later, though.”

“Maintenance will have its hands full anyway. A few doors won’t even be noticed,” Carrie replied. “All right. That takes care of the entrances, I take it?”

Lorelai nodded. “That should do it. Now, keeping the vessels that are already

docked inside the station and keeping the crews and passengers from starting a riot is going to be more tricky. We don't have the manpower to keep a presence on all the vessels. If we're lucky there are still some dockworkers there who can help us out, but if any vessel starts fighting it's going to be tough for us."

Carrie nodded as did the others as she worked the pad to show them the layout of the docks. There were twelve berths all in all and by the display it looked like eleven of them were in use. That was thousands of passengers if they were unlucky and thousands of tons of cargo. The small team would be hard pressed if even one started trouble.

"Luckily the outside gates are closed and no vessel is getting through those, short of backing up to them and going full burn on their engines, but that'd be suicide. They'd crash right into the station." Lorelai moved the schematic a bit more and highlighted a room. "That's the control centre. We need to go there and ensure it stays under our control. If any vessel is going to try and leave they'll need to take over that to open the outside doors."

"One entrance. Two way corridor with bends pretty close to the entrance. Shouldn't be too hard to defend," Aline noted. "No good for sniping though."

"The berths are in a single area. If the people in them want to take the control centre they'll need to go through a large open area here," Lorelai moved the schematics to show a large empty area. "It's a crossing point for unloading cargo and passengers. There's plenty of room there for sniping. You should probably set up there just in case."

Aline examined the schematic and nodded approving. She pointed to spot near two entrances. "Seems to be a raised walkway there. Gives a good view of the entrances leading to the actual docks. I set up there and keep the place locked down good."

Carrie nodded. "Sounds like a plan. The rest of us keep the control centre secure and an eye on the vessels."

"We can communicate with the vessels from there so hopefully someone can talk them into remaining calm." Lorelai gave each one of them a hopeful look.

"We'll see," Carrie replied not as hopeful. "By the sounds of it the situation is getting bad in the vessels. Desperate people are hard to talk sense into."

“If talk doesn’t work, a bullet will,” Kirby noted and tapped his rifle with a grim smile.

“That’s about all I can offer in advance,” Lorelai said and put away her tab. “If there are any questions then don’t hesitate.”

There was silence. The slight hum of the transport as it pushed them onward towards their destination was the only sound.

“All right. We’ve got something of a plan. Let’s execute it once we arrive.” Carrie gave everyone a look. “And let’s all get out of this alive.”

She got approving nods in return.

Chapter 17

The station was rapidly growing bigger. Marcel was starting to get anxious about the rendezvous. The lights that had once seemed so far away were now almost blindingly bright if looked at straight. The marker beacons that announced the solar panels and heat sinks were there for the safety of transports, but now they acted like welcoming home lights for the pair in space suits.

“You doing all right over there?” Marcel asked and glanced at his wrist computer. The information matched what his helmet was displaying. Only a few minutes until they’d hit the station. Hopefully in a non-lethal manner.

There was a small moment of heavy breathing before an answer came over the comms. “I’m all right.”

Over the trip Joana had had her rough moments, but she had fought through it with help from Marcel. He’d kept her talking, sharing memories from her past as well as telling her stories from his time working security on the station.

“We’re just about home so get ready,” Marcel said to her.

“I can see that and it isn’t making me feel any better,” Joana said. “It’s getting closer awfully fast.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll start slowing down soon.” Marcel looked over the plan and tried to determine where they were going to touch down. The stations rotation made it a bit tricky, but he finally nailed it down. “We’re landing near a maintenance airlock. Won’t have to walk long on the outside.”

“Good to hear,” came the reply from Joana. Even over the static of the radio her voice sounded relieved.

Marcel tapped a few keys on the wrist computer and a countdown appeared on his visor screen. “Did a countdown appear on your visor?”

“It’s there.”

“Good. That’s when we start slowing down so brace for it. You don’t need to do anything. The suit will do it all so don’t fight it.”

“All right.” The moment of ease that had been in her voice was gone as quickly as it had come. She sounded anxious. Marcel couldn’t blame her. It wasn’t something anyone did every day and, despite the suits computers being reliable, there was always a chance of something not working as intended. That would mean smashing into the station at a lethal speed or shooting past the station, never to be seen by another human.

The orange warning flashing on his visor made Marcel sweat a bit. His oxygen was running low. Looking at the time he had remaining and the time it would take for them to get to the airlock made him realize how close it could be. If just one thing went wrong he might run out of air and suffocate.

“How’s your air?” Marcel asked over the radio.

“I’ve got twenty minutes to spare. How about you?”

Marcel decided a lie was the safest bet. No need to worry the woman. “About the same.” A lie of ten fold proportions.

The counter started flashing. It was running close to zero.

“Get ready for it,” Marcel said just seconds before the timer ran out. The station in front of them had grown huge, all encompassing. The suit thrusters fired. A white mist sprayed into nothingness from either side of them. The line between the two suits grew tighter. It was a harder burn than Marcel had expected. He could feel himself getting pushed against the front of his suit as the back of it slowed down before his body did.

In the end everything went relatively well. Their momentum slowed down enough that the contact with the station was a gentle one. The feeling of the magnetic boots clamping down on the solid metal gave Marcel the most reassuring feeling he’d had in a long time. Joana came to a halt next to him with a slight squeal over the radio.

“You all right?” Marcel asked and took the few steps separating them to come face to face with her, or as close to it as their visors allowed. The woman gave him a reassuring smile, though it was obvious she was still shaken up.

“Got a bit of a jolt,” she said and grimaced. “Should have let my legs bend a bit more.”

“I should have warned you,” Marcel said, feeling stupid for not reminding her

of such a basic thing to prevent injury. The orange warning light on his visor going to red made him forget all about that. “Come on. We’ve got to hurry to the airlock. Follow me.” Marcel undid the tether tying the pair together and started heading towards the airlock. Looking around he hoped to spot some handles or a painted sign to tell where the usual maintenance paths were. Those would be easier to traverse than the bare station wall. On top of that, he didn’t want to damage anything, though he suspected there would be enough damage to the station that no one would care about a few broken sensors.

He glanced back and saw Joana following him. She still struggled at points with the cumbersome magnetic boots, but it wasn’t bad enough to warrant help from Marcel.

They crossed a yellow line and started to follow it. It had an arrow that pointed them towards the nearest airlock. A blue line ran right next to it, with arrows and text pointing towards sensor arrays and other bits of important equipment a maintenance crew might need to attend to. It was simple, but it worked even if a suits computer froze.

The red warning hurried Marcel’s steps. When the small flat area in front of the airlock came to view he let out a sigh of relief. “There it is. How are you doing back there?”

“Worry about yourself,” Joana replied with a huff. “Don’t think I didn’t see that red warning. How much air do you have?”

“Enough,” Marcel replied and pushed on. He hoped it wouldn’t take long to cycle through the airlock. If it did, he’d be out of air. As soon as he arrived on the platform, he went for the button to open the door. To his relief the door swung open without issues. He let Joana go in first before entering himself and pushing the button to close the outer door. The heavy metal door closed with a thud he could feel through his boots and then the familiar hiss of air rushing in drowned out everything else. With heart racing he watched the oxygen level in the chamber rise and the one in his suit go down. It was close.

“Come on, come on,” Marcel muttered to himself.

“I’ll help you get your helmet off,” Joana said and got into position next to him so she could start helping as soon as the light turned green, telling there was

enough air in the chamber.

It was a small chamber so there wasn't much room to move so someone helping was a big bonus. If he didn't get the helmet off quick enough he could just as easily suffocate in the airless suit as he could have outside in the void of space.

The light turned green.

Marcel reached for his helmet and started rotating it and undoing clasps. Joana helped him. The light on the visor was now flashing and his wrist computer would have been blaring a warning sound had he not muted it. The slight hiss as the seal broke and let air into the suit was a welcome sound. Marcel lifted off the helmet and took in a deep breath. He couldn't help but smile.

"We made it," he said and gave Joana a brief smile before helping her get her helmet off. She had a relieved smile on her face and she quickly pulled off one of her gloves to wipe some sweat from her forehead.

"Feels good to be inside," Joana said.

Marcel nodded. He could not deny the comforting feel the metal surrounding him gave. One more deep breath and he pulled off the gloves on his suit and went to open the door separating the chamber from the inside of the station. For a brief moment he considered it might be better to report in before that, but he wanted to get out of the spacesuit as quick as possible.

The door led them to a room much similar to the one they had departed from. The only issue was all the places reserved for suits were full so they had to make do with simply helping each other out of the heavy suits. Dumping the upper half of the suit on the ground, Marcel was quick to climb out of the bottom part and help Joana get out of hers. The cool air made the hairs on his arms stand up. He kept his eye on the surroundings, hoping none of the monsters rampaging through the station were near the area.

At the very least all seemed quiet.

"Glad to be out of that thing," Joana said and straightened out her clothing and undid her hair from the tight knot she had tied it to to keep it from going wild in the gravity free ride they had taken.

"Me too," Marcel agreed before pulling out his pad and starting to set up his

comms once more. "I'd better call in, find out what's going on. Plenty of people probably worried about us too."

"Not me," Joana said quietly.

"Well, me then. Anyway. Got to find out what's going on." Marcel made a couple of taps on his pad and opened up a line to the headquarters on a general frequency. "This is Marcel Wolfe calling HQ. Anyone there?"

"Marcel?" The voice of his captain was unmistakable.

"It's me," Marcel replied, relieved that there was still someone alive on the station and not everything had been run over.

"You tough bastard. Last we heard you were headed for a holiday on Jupiter."

"Change of plans," Marcel replied with a small smile. "Guango ain't going to love me, though. Their section is still on its way with a deadly passenger."

"Well, it's good to have you back. We could really use all hands on deck. Where are you right now?" Janus sounded genuinely pleased to have him back. It made Marcel feel a slight warmth in his chest.

"I'm at a maintenance airlock," Marcel replied and looked around to determine exactly where and gave the information to the captain. "I have a civilian with me. Her name is Joana and she works for the corporation."

"All right. I'm not going to lie to you, we're in trouble. Best you head for the headquarters with her. She'll be safe here and we can talk more about the situation."

"All right. I'm headed your way."

"I'm sending you a real time map. It has all the creatures we know of. Try to steer clear of them. We have kill teams out with explosive rounds that are supposed to handle them, though we've yet to take one down."

"Sounds like the situation is fucked," Marcel said as he glanced at the map when it appeared on his pad. It didn't take him long to see where the monsters were drawn to.

"It is," Janus admitted. "Get a move on. I'll see you when you get here."

"Roger that." Marcel cut off the line and set it to play the open channel at a low sound level. Just enough to hear things if he focused on listening, but not

enough to disturb him from hearing things around him. He turned to regard Joana. She was giving him an odd look.

“What’ exactly is going on here?” Joana demanded. She crossed her arms across her chest and gave Marcel the sort of demanding look a mother might give her misbehaving child.

“You should ask your bosses that. They’re the ones who started it all,” Marcel replied, but seeing the answer not do much to appease the woman he relented and gave a more proper response. “There are several more of those monsters on the station. We got rid of one and that’s a big help, but we need to take care of the rest too. At least help. Well, you don’t have to, but I do. You can just come with me to the headquarters. You’ll be safe there. Lots of other people have gathered there as well, You’ll probably find some of your colleagues there.”

“I see,” Joana said in a steady voice. She did not look convinced.

“Look, I know it’s hard to be in this situation, but you’ve got to think positive. You’re alive. You could be headed for Jupiter right now. You could be laying on that section, torn to pieces by the monster. But you’re not. You’re here and alive. Make the most of it because a lot of people aren’t as lucky.”

The words softened her expression. Finally, she sighed. “I know. I’m lucky. We both are. If you hadn’t run into me I’d probably be dead. Thank you.” She even managed a small smile of gratitude to go along with the words. “You’re right. Let’s get to the headquarters.”

Marcel nodded. He glanced at the map on his pad and plotted out a route. Thankfully it looked like the monsters they knew of were nowhere near their route. “We should be safe to go. Get to the nearest transport station and get a ride. The monsters are far away in other areas.”

He started towards the exit and Joana followed. The door led to an empty corridor that went past a locker room and what looked to be a work area with tools and parts of all sorts needed to conduct what ever maintenance was needed on the station and outside it. There was an office that looked like it had been evacuated in a hurry. There were papers all over the floor, chairs fallen over and full cups of coffee on the desks.

“They left in a hurry,” Joana noted as they walked past the open doorway.

“Wouldn’t you?” Marcel asked.

“If given the chance,” Joana admitted. “Didn’t really get one.”

“Yeah. The place was screwed the moment that creature showed up.” Marcel couldn’t help but think back on all the people he’d seen die. It was hard to believe it had been only a few hours prior. It made him shake his head. “Some days feel longer than they really are.”

“I know the feeling.”

They walked through a couple of doorways and corridors and arrived at a transport station. It was empty. Their steps echoed through the empty space. Usually there would have been enough people to dampen the echoes, but now the bare metal walls were free to reflect sound as they pleased.

It made the otherwise mundane area seem foreboding.

Joana wrapped her arms around herself as the two stopped by a platform and waited for a transport to arrive. “It’s so empty.”

Marcel glanced around. The chatter from the open channel was keeping him from noticing the silence. “It’s a place created by people for people. When that element is gone it becomes less than what was intended.”

“Let’s hope that isn’t the permanent state,” Joana said and sneezed. The sound of it was startlingly loud as it echoed around.

“Bless you,” Marcel managed to say from behind the smile that passed his lips.

A small laugh escaped Joana as she thanked the man. Soon they were both laughing. Neither really knew why, but it felt relieving. Someone walking on them might have thought both crazy given the situation on the station, but the only one to creep up on them was a transport pod that came to a still on their platform.

The laughter died down. The two looked at each other with perplexed expressions, neither knowing what to say or make of the episode.

“Well, we better hop on,” Joana managed to say.

“Yes. You’re right.” Marcel was quick to agree and head for the transport. It was a three seater so there was plenty of space for the two. The benches were set three aside. They left the middle one empty and looked out of the windows, paying

no attention to each other as the transport nudged forward and started whisking them towards their destination.

Marcel glanced at his compad from time to time. The known monsters were still moving away from them. It looked like their trip would go without incident. The chatter on the general channel wasn't too alarming either. Reports of places being cleared, civilians being evacuated from the path of monsters, hunt teams trying to find the creatures, other keeping track of the movements of known ones.

Occasionally there would be a transmission with gunfire in the background. Most of those were unrelated to the monsters. The situation was perfect for some of the criminal element to try and exploit it. It was a distraction the security forces could have done without.

There were no signs of the kill teams the captain had talked of, but Marcel presumed they would be on a private channel. Seeing as they were also hunting for dangerous prey it made sense they'd be maintaining almost complete radio silence.

"Do you think we'll be able to make it through this?" Joana asked and kept her eyes on her side of the transport and the scenery that passed by, though most of it was just grey metal tunnel walls.

"Not gonna lie. I don't know," Marcel admitted. "If worst comes to being you'll be evacuated with the rest of the civilians. Don't worry, you'll make it out alive."

"What about you?" Joana asked and turned to regard the man. Given his age he seemed like someone who should have been retired already and not in the midst of an incident like they were.

"I have a job to do," Marcel replied, trying his best not to think about the possibility of death. It made him long for the bottle of whiskey back at his quarters. Real whiskey, aged and hauled across the solar system. Expensive, but well worth it for the taste. Suitable for special occasions and he couldn't really think of a more special occasion than the current one. "Whether that lets me live or leads to my death I have no control over. Just got to go with it. That's always been the case with security work."

A brief smile passed Joana's lips. "I always wanted a safe job. Something where a mistake wouldn't get anyone killed. I was hesitant to even head out here.

Would have been safer to remain on Earth, but for once I decided that taking a small risk would be good for me. Turns out it wasn't."

"Well, not like you could have predicted your company dragging an alien organism from the permafrost and then infecting people. That's the sort of stuff that happens in fiction."

"Doesn't feel like fiction any more," Joana said quietly and returned to looking out the window. The transport whisked through an empty station before plunging into another tunnel surrounded by grey metal walls.

"No. It's all too real," Marcel managed to say. The conversation ended there. The slight hum of the transport along with the changing sound of air as the transport emerged from tunnels onto open stations. Finally, the transport came to a halt. The pair climbed out and gave the empty station a look around. Marcel ensured from his pad that none of the creatures were near before declaring the route to the security offices safe.

Not wasting time, the two headed straight for the safety the offices presented. After a couple of empty corridors they started to see more people. Some were huddled against the wall and glanced up at them with frightened eyes. There were mothers with children. The silent sobs from the young ones combined some of the more audible ones created an atmosphere of despair that loomed heavy on the crowd of people. It was eased a bit by the passing security teams, but returned quickly every time the patrol turned a corner and disappeared from view.

The closer they got to the security office the more people there were.

"Why are all these people here?" Joana asked in a quiet voice in the hopes no one but Marcel would hear her. "The proper evacuation points are elsewhere."

Marcel shrugged. "Maybe they were cut off and thought this was the safest place. It's sound logic though I can't imagine the captain is too happy about it. Besides, standard evacuation procedure has people leaving the station. We can't have that with the current situation. Can't risk the thing getting out there."

"So it's a stop it here or die," Joana stated with little emotion despite the implication of such an situation.

Marcel simply gave a silent nod and continued walking.

They came to the entrance of the security office and found two guards there while people rushed in and out. Most of those people had medical staff clothing and some were moving injured people out while others were helping them in. It seemed the place had been turned into a makeshift medical area.

Joana looked like she was going to stay outside, but Marcel grabbed her hand and dragged her inside the main office.

It was chaos.

People were running around seemingly without purpose. There was shouting and cries of pain. Blood snaked on the floor and equipment was beeping warnings of another heart stopping its beat.

For a moment the pair stood there, stunned at the scene unfolding in front of them. By quick count there were at least thirty people laying around in bad shape. Some of them were probably dead already while the rest seemed to be on a highway to the afterlife.

“Shit,” Marcel managed to mutter as he scanned the room. He spotted the captain amongst the desks. “Come on. Stick close to me for now.”

Marcel led the way and Joana followed, not daring to leave the man’s side for fear of being sucked into the chaos in the room. They had to dodge people running as they made their way to the calm island that was the captain.

“Captain, what happened?” Marcel asked without going into any pleasantries. The situation didn’t seem like wasting time was a good idea.

Janus seemed genuinely relieve to see him. She even managed a brief smile as a greeting, but soon turned serious. “An elevator failed. Too many scared people stuffed in it. The thing fell several levels. The medical bays are already full and we were the nearest place with some medical personnel. So they came here. A miracle anyone survived that thing falling. It hit the bottom of the tunnel with such force the doors flew off and hurt people waiting for the elevator. Why we’ve got so many injured.”

“Shit,” Marcel managed to mutter as he looked around. “At least it wasn’t the monsters.”

“There’s that silver lining,” Janus admitted. She gave Joana a measuring look from head to toe. “She the woman you mentioned?”

“Yeah, that’s her,” Marcel replied.

“I’m Joana.”

“Captain Janus.” She didn’t seem interested in her beyond the cursory introduction. Her attention returned to Marcel almost immediately. “There’s something I need you to do.”

“Sure, boss,” Marcel replied.

The two entered into a discussion Joana had no interest in. Her attention wandered and soon so did her body. She couldn’t really pinpoint the moment a white coated nurse grabbed her arm and enlisted her to sit by an injured woman.

She held her hand.

She felt it get cold.

Joana wondered what the hell she was doing.

Chapter 18

Carrie and her team climbed off the transport at the nearest station to the docks. Just like all the other stations it was empty. There were warning lights flashing all around, telling everyone the place was on lock down. At least someone had turned off the audio message that would have directed people to the nearest shelters and medical areas.

“Weapons hot and let’s go,” Carrie said and fastened the strap of her helmet under her chin. She ensured it was tight. She didn’t want to lose it like she had last time.

There were the sounds of weapons going hot and grunts as the team adjusted some equipment to be more comfortable.

“Let’s head for the passenger terminal and take position as planned. Kirby, Lenard, you take point. Lorelai, Aline and Peter with me in the middle, the rest of you keep our rear safe.” With the orders given Carrie started onward. Kirby and Lenard rushed past her with their weapons at the ready, fingers on triggers. They weren’t expecting anything dangerous to be there, but given the situation it didn’t hurt to exercise caution.

The team seemed to be working well and people knew what they were supposed to do. No one was obviously lax, everyone seemed to be on point and ready for whatever came their way. Glancing at Lorelai Carrie could tell she was nervous.

“It’s going to be fine,” she said in a quiet voice.

Lorelai smiled briefly. “I know.”

It wasn’t a long walk to the passenger terminal. The doorway leading to the area was huge and still open. The team entered the open area where people usually waited for the transports to depart or to meet up with anyone coming over. There were rows of empty benches, tables and chairs from the various shops that surrounded the open area. Some tables still had plates and cups on them, telling of the quickness with which the area had emptied.

“Any way to close the door from right here?” Carrie asked and looked back.

She didn't like the idea of such a big opening being left behind them.

"Not the main doors," Lorelai replied and pulled up a schematic on her pad. It took her a moment to find the right connection. "There's a control panel behind the check-in counter that lowers a metal mesh to block it off. It's not meant for much more than crowd control. Won't keep anything determined out."

"Better than nothing," Carrie noted and ordered Jasper and Nolan to see to the switch while the rest of the group secured the area.

Carrie headed for the centre of the plaza. There was a small pedestal there with an actual piano on it. Sometimes a passenger would sit down and make everyone cringe. On the very rare occasion they'd be skilled and make everyone stop for a moment and appreciate the music. Carrie just wanted to make use of the bench in front of it.

Lorelai followed her. She kept looking around just as the trained security people around her did. The silence was unnerving. She was used to the place being constantly alive and buzzing with people.

Carrie looked around. There were three stories surrounding the open area with walk-paths crossing over it. It was all empty.

"Unsettling, isn't it?" Lorelai asked.

Carrie sat down on the small bench in front of the piano and started tying her boots again. "When a place built by people for people loses the people it becomes something it was never meant to be. Anyone can sense the feeling of wrong that sends out."

"Can't deny that," Lorelai said. She shifted her weight to her other foot. A moment later she did it again.

Carrie straightened herself and glanced around to get a sense of where everyone was. Jasper and Nolan had disappeared behind the counter. The rest of the team had spread out. Some were rummaging through empty stores and shops. Aline was the sole exception. She had sought the highest point on offer in the area and kept an eye on everything with her sniper rifle at the ready. Somehow she had climbed onto the roof of a stall that sold tickets. It gave her a perfect view of the entire area.

Looking up she saw Lorelai staring at her. Their eyes met. Both smiled

briefly.

The moment was broken by the sound of metal screeching. The metal mesh started coming down onto the main entrance. It looked flimsy, something that was there more to block the way of someone just casually walking, not someone who was looking to get in. Breaking it would make some noise, but that was about the extent of the protection it offered.

“Better than nothing, I suppose,” Carrie muttered and stood up. She grabbed her rifle and started heading to where the team seemed to be congregating now that the area was somewhat secure.

“Once we get the main doors shut nothing is getting through it,” Lorelai assured her as she followed after her.

Carrie glanced at her pad. The monsters had been moving around quite a bit since her last check. One was all but inside the main core of the station. A couple of others seemed content to play hide and seek with the kill teams after them. One had gotten a bit closer to the docks, but it wasn't clear where it was headed. Carrie quickly tagged it to better keep track of it.

“We better hurry with those doors,” Carrie said as soon as they met up with the group. “One of those creatures has gotten a bit closer to our position and I'm not liking it.”

The group grew visibly more tense. Looks were exchanged. None of them wanted to face one of those creatures.

“Come on. The command room is not far,” Lorelai said and started walking. The group quickly assumed their positions around her and Carrie. Lorelai guided them past the check-in counter and through a staff only door. They passed locker rooms, small offices and a larger cafeteria. Even Lorelai had to occasionally glance at her pad for the map. The corridors formed a maze that was easy to get lost in.

The metal clang carrying down to them made them stop.

“What is that?” Peter asked. His whisper was barely loud enough for those close to hear.

The metal clang repeated again. It was rhythmic and constant.

“Sounds like someone hitting metal with metal,” Kirby replied in an equally

silent whisper.

“It’s coming right from where we got to go,” Lorelai noted. Her whisper failed to be as discreet.

“Be ready for anything,” Carrie said. She didn’t bother trying to keep too quiet. It was more important everyone heard her. “Let’s go.”

Everyone grabbed their weapons a bit tighter and started onward with soft steps. The sounds came closer and closer. It was actually loud when they finally got close to the command centre corridor. Mixed in was the sounds of people talking, though the words were hard to make out from under all the noise.

Kirby was the first one to the bend in the corridor and he waved everyone to stop as he peeked around the corner to see what was making the noise. It was a quick move and Carrie wondered whether it was enough to get a picture of what was happening. Her doubts were put to rest when the man returned to them and gave the report.

“There’s four men there,” Kirby started in a low enough voice that it was unlikely to carry beyond the bend. “One is smashing the door to the command room with something. Three others are standing around, looking like they’ve been smashing the door for hours and are now resting. Didn’t see any weapons beyond the heavy hammers and other tools they’ve got there. Looks like they’ve been trying to get through that door for a while.”

“With sledgehammers?” Lorelai shook her head. “They’d need at least a plasma cutter to get through that door.”

Kirby nodded. “They had some tanks there so they probably did have that. Seems it wasn’t enough.”

“Well, that’s good news for us,” Carrie said. “We need that door intact and we need to rush those guys so we can take them down without any shooting. Kirby, you, Peter and Jasper head the other way. We come at them from both sides so they’ve got nowhere to run. Signal us when you’re in position. Watch the friendly fire if it gets to shooting.”

Kirby nodded and headed out with the two other men. It wasn’t a long walk to round to the other end of the corridor and there wasn’t much chance of getting lost.

Carrie, Lorelai and the rest of the group took up position near the corner and prepared for the attack. It gave Carrie an opportunity to peek around the corner and assess the situation for herself. She had nothing to add to the report Kirby had provided. The disregarded tools and tanks near the group told of their various attempts to breach the door. By the looks of it all their attempts had not yielded much in the way of results. She knew security doors could be tough, but given the equipment the men had they should have been in already. All she could conclude was they didn't know what they were doing.

She took another peek, this time focusing on the men's clothing.

None of them looked to be wearing the sort of clothing someone who knew how to use a plasma cutter would be wearing. Two of them had suits on, one was dressed in what looked to be a uniform, possibly a crew member on a transport and one had on a pair of jeans and a brown leather jacket. He was the one currently swinging a sledgehammer against the door.

"We're in position," came the report from Kirby. His voice sounded a bit distorted by the radio, but nothing that made him unintelligible.

"Go on one," Carrie replied and gave the people around her a look. There were nods of agreement. She started the countdown. On one everyone burst into action.

Carrie turned the corner, brought her weapon up and pointed it straight at one of the men. The shouting was deafening as everyone ordered them to drop their tools and get their hands up. For a moment the men just froze and looked at them like frightened animals, but then their brains kicked in and they dropped their tools and did as told. The group closed on them quickly and soon they were all patted down and their hands tied behind their backs with restraints. They were lined up against the wall opposite to the door.

"They've really given it all, haven't they?" Peter asked as he examined the door. It was a heavy security door. There was a cut running down the right side of it that ended shortly after it almost reached the floor and made a turn to the left. It had cut through the thick metal, but even after getting hit with the sledgehammer there was barely a dent in it.

"Didn't get them far," Aline noted and gave the four men a look filled with

contempt.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Carrie asked. “You know the station is on lock down and this area is restricted to staff only. You don’t look like station personnel. So you better start talking.”

“We just want to get out of here,” said the man in the suit. He looked ready to burst into tears. “We don’t want to die here.”

“It was all his idea,” said the man in the leather jacket and motioned towards the man in the suit. “The rich bastard thinks this world revolves around him.”

“Lorelai, see about getting that door open,” Carrie said before returning her attention to the four men. She focused on the one who looked like he was working on some transport. “You. What vessel do you work on?”

“The Salty Wave,” came the reply from the nervous man. Out of the bunch he was the youngest.

Carrie figured he’d be the first to crack. “Your captain know about this?”

The man shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “Maybe.”

“Does he or does he not?” Carrie pressed. Half-assed answers weren’t going to cut it.

“Yes. He authorized this,” the man admitted. The three others were glaring at him.

“So what was the plan? Cut through the door and open up the gates so all the vessel in the docks could rush out?”

“Something like that,” the man in the leather jacket admitted.

“Well, that’s not going to happen. You and that captain of yours are in a whole lot of trouble.” Carrie let the men sweat for a bit before continuing. “But luckily for you we have more important things to worry about than dishing out punishments so you’ll get to stay in a nice locked room for the rest of the crisis. Then we’ll deal with you. Lenard, Nolan, Kirby. Find a secure room to lock these stooges in.”

“Roger that.” Kirby took the lead among the trio and the men were soon herded away from the sensitive area. There were plenty of empty rooms along the corridors. They were no jail cells, but with the door locket from the outside with a security override they’d keep the four men secure enough.

With that taken care of, Carrie returned her attention to the door. Lorelai was busy with the access pad next to it. “They didn’t damage the locking mechanism, did they?” Carrie asked, now concerned the fools might have broken the door completely with their half-assed attempt at getting in.

“I don’t think so,” Lorelai replied. “Just.. ah, there we go.”

The door slid open. It wasn’t the silent swoosh that most doors managed. There was screeching metal and sounds of motors straining to get the thing moving. The men had done some damage, after all.

The room beyond wasn’t lit, but as soon as Lorelai entered the light came on. There were four consoles in the room with a whole bunch of monitors taking up the wall opposite to the door. They flickered to show a live feed of the various security cameras dotted around the docks and the terminals.

“Lorelai, you get the system up and running and get a read on what the vessels are doing at the docks.”

“On it.” the woman took a seat at one of the consoles and started inputting commands.

“Jasper, you cycle through the security feeds. See if anything is out of place.”

“Will do.” The man took the console next to Lorelai and started working.

“Aline, Peter. Get into position like we talked on the transport. Let’s start securing this place. I’ll head out and check the service doors. Then I’m going to have a long talk with the captain of the Salty Wave.”

“Roger that.” Peter acknowledged the order and headed off with Aline.

Carrie started off on her own work. She passed the room Lenard, Nolan and Kirby had chosen as the temporary prison. She ordered Kirby and Nolan to help with securing the various entrances. She and Nolan would use security codes to lock them first and Kirby would do the rounds afterwards to do whatever it was he did to completely jam them up. Lenard she assigned to guarding the prisoners until the command centre was fully under their control and the security situation had been locked down.

On the train Lorelai had flagged many of the entrances so it was easy to assign them to the group. It also made it easy to find them so it didn’t take Carrie that long to go through hers. Without a map navigating the maze of corridors

would have taken a lot more time. Each door was locked with a security override. Some were heavy blast doors, others just simple access doors that wouldn't hold a determined foe for long. That was where other security measures came into play. Like the cameras.

It took Carrie an hour to get back to the command room. By then Lorelai had a list of vessels compiled and Jasper had gotten the security feeds organized with the important area always running on the monitors that took up most of the wall in front of the consoles.

"Seems calm," Carrie noted as she walked in and got a glimpse of the security feeds.

"Couldn't find anything amiss," Jasper reported. "The relative feeds are up on the screens. Nothing going to slip in or out without us seeing."

"Good. Lorelai, you got a list of the vessels?"

"On my screen," she replied. Carrie walked over and gave the list a look. Six passenger vessels, seven cargo freighters. In total, crew and passengers counted, a little shy of ten thousand people. The only good thing Carrie could derive from the situation was the fact the fear of monsters had kept everyone on their vessels. Glancing up the security feeds she could see all the vessels and their docking ports. There was no movement and the vessel doors were closed. It didn't look like anyone wanted to get on the station.

"Which one is the Salty Wave?" Carrie asked.

"Berth five," Lorelai replied and pointed to the right security feed.

"All right. Can you patch a channel on my comms that will transmit to all the vessels?"

"Sure. Just a sec." Lorelai started tapping away at the console. Carrie soon had a notice on her pad on accepting the connection. She did so. Lorelai gave her a sign when the channel was live.

"Greeting to all vessels at the docks. My name is Carrie Apalkov and I am with the station security forces. I have been sent here to secure the docks and ensure nothing goes wrong. Now, I realize the situation is unnerving for all of you and you just want to leave, but I'm afraid that can not be allowed. We are under quarantine procedures."

She held a small break to let that bit of information sink in.

“This is because the danger we have on the station has the potential to cause immense harm if it gets out. We can not risk it for the whole of humanity. But I’m not here with only bad news. I have a team with me that will secure the area and keep you safe. We have blocked all the ways into the docks so we are quite secure and separated from the problem areas.”

Carrie stopped again to catch a breather and to let the people think through her words.

“To best do all that there are a few things we need from you. I ask that you remain calm and trust us to do our jobs. Do not attempt to leave the station. Make no mistake, we will stop you. We would also ask that you turn off your reactors if possible to assure us of your intentions.”

Carrie couldn’t help the small smile that passed her lips. There was no reason to cause panic by revealing the fact the monsters were attracted to high energy sources. She got a look from both Lorelai and Jasper for including that little bit in.

“That’s all for now. I’d like to thank you all for your co-operation beforehand. If we work together we’ll all get to go home. Apalkov out.”

She let out a deep sigh as soon as the channel was cut off. She anticipated there to be several calls in. There’d be those wanting to protests, those who had legitimate questions and then the most dangerous of them all, the ones trying to get on her good side.

“How was that?” Carrie asked of the two in the room.

“I’d have threatened them a bit more,” Jasper noted.

“It was fine,” Lorelai assured her. “There are already several vessels requesting to talk with you.”

“Any from the Salty Wave? That’s the captain I want to have a few words first with.”

“He was the first one to reach out,” Lorelai said in a dry voice. “Patch him through?”

“Please do,” said Carrie and prepared mentally for the conversation about to take place.

“This captain Mark Valtari of the Salty Wave.” The man had a pleasant voice. There was a slight accent that made every word feel like they were considered fully before being said.

“Captain Valtari, this is Carrie Apalkov. I am delighted you reached out so quickly.”

“I imagine you want to talk about the group that came from my vessel?”

“Indeed I do,” Carrie replied.

“I trust they are unharmed?”

“We have them locked up in a room. What they did can be considered a serious crime. They were in a restricted area, attempting to break into a station operations wise critical room during an emergency. They’re in a lot of trouble and so are you for allowing such an endeavour to take place.”

“I may be a captain, but there are limits to my powers. I can’t hold a passenger hostage.”

“They would be hostages only if you asked for a ransom,” Carrie pointed out. “You should not have allowed them off your vessel no matter who they are. That is what the quarantine procedure for the station specifies and by docking here you have agreed to those terms.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” Valtari asked, now with a slight hint of worry in his voice. It was obvious he had hoped to try and talk his way out of the trouble he was in, but Carrie wasn’t going to be the sort of person who’d let it slip.

“Like I said to those four guys, we have bigger issues at hand right now, but once those are sorted out be certain I will hand in a report and there will be punishments doled out. Right now all I ask is that you help me contain the situation. No more excursions out of the vessels and if any of the other captains get in touch with you, you do your best to convince them to help me keep the situation under control. I’ll note your co-operation in the report. That will certainly carry some weight when your guilt is being determined.”

There was a long silence over the channel. The slight hum of the radio picking up distortions from the environment were all the sounds coming through.

“I’ll do my best.” Valtari sounded sullen about the situation, but resigned to

his fate.

“Good. If you can power down your reactor that would be an immense help.” Carrie tried pushing the idea again. If she got one of them to do it the others might be more willing to follow.

“We can’t do that,” came the reply. “We’ll run out of air. The temperature will shoot right up. We’re a damn space vessel. These things are air tight cans. We can’t just shut down all the systems that keep us alive.”

Carrie sighed. “Very well. We have an understanding. If you’ll excuse me, there are other captain waiting to talk with me.”

“Very well.” Valtari shut down the communications without giving a proper farewell. Carrie didn’t mind. She rubbed her eyes and tilted her head back. Her mind was racing. The other captains were likely to give a similar answer on the reactor matter. There had to be a solution to it. Keeping the monsters attraction to the area to a minimum seemed like the best way to keep everyone alive.

“Any ideas on how we could persuade them to shut the reactors?” Carrie asked. She hoped Lorelai would have some ideas since she knew the docks. “There has to be some procedure that lets them shut it down and keep everything running.”

“Usually it involves opening the vessel doors and emptying it of people,” Lorelai replied. “Reactor maintenance is done like that. Keeps people safe if something goes wrong, too. Like the captain said, those things are built to be self sufficient and if the reactor goes then so does the entire vessel. Not immediately, of course, but a transport vessel filled with passengers isn’t going to stay viable for long.”

“So it’s not going to happen?” Carrie asked.

“Not unless we let all the people off the vessels,” Lorelai said. “Or somehow run power to them from the station, but that’s not really something we can do without extra crew to oversee the connections. I wouldn’t want to be the one to fry half the stations fuses in this situation.”

Carrie couldn’t hide her disappointment. At the same time it showed how little she knew of space and the various challenges it presented. Someone with twenty years of experience on the station would have known not to ask for reactor

shut down. Now she worried how it was making her look to the captain. They'd think she was crazy or simply a buffoon who didn't know what they were talking about.

Neither bode well for them listening to her.

"All right. I have to talk with all the captain individually. Start lining them up." Carire gave Lorelai a nod. She had made a mistake. Now was the time to fix that.

The talks went on for quite a while.

Chapter 19

“How the fuck did I get roped into this?” Marcel muttered to himself as he watched the creature stand in the corridor. It was looking around, smelling, licking its lips and twitching as if someone was electrocuting it.

Even watching through a monitor made Marcel feel unsafe. Knowing that the creature was just outside the door made it all the worse. He drew in a shallow breath and hoped it wouldn't be heard. There had been reports of the creatures hearing someone taking in a sharp breath.

Marcel had tracked the creature through security cameras and gotten closer and closer to it. It was the only one of them that didn't have a dedicated kill team tracking it. The station was running low on trained personnel and the fact new monsters had popped up made it that much more difficult to have a team hunting them all.

On the positive one of the creatures had been killed. The heavy rifles worked, but from the report it seemed you had to shoot the thing to tiny pieces before it finally died. Took a lot of ammo to do that.

When the captain had offered the mission to Marcel his first instinct had been to refuse. He had just gotten back alive by the width of his hair so asking him to risk his life again seemed unfair. Though everyone on the station was risking their lives to a degree or another. Those working security were all on the line to die first. The reasoning Marcel had for accepting was that he'd end up in a dangerous situation no matter what.

That was now feeling like flawed logic.

His palms started to sweat when the creature in the hall approached the door leading to the room he was hiding in. Not wanting to risk it, Marcel crawled under a desk and hoped he'd go unnoticed if the thing actually entered the room. He had to stash his compad in his pocket to keep the light from giving him away. He grabbed hold of his pistol fully knowing it was useless, but it gave him some measure of courage.

He heard the door slide open.

Even though his breathing was normal, it sounded insanely loud to him. He did his best to keep the noise down and hoped it would be enough.

He heard footsteps. The door slid close. The heavy inhale told him the creature was in the room.

It was looking.

More steps.

Marcel hunched further under the desk. The only way to see where he was was from the back of the desk. There was a chair in front of it blocking the view somewhat and the desk was fairly deep. A cursory glance might have left him unseen, but the creature was unlikely to be so casual in its search.

Claws scraped the desk above him. He had to fight against the urge to just scream and jump out. That would have been a certain road to death. Instead he held his gun tighter and hoped for the best.

More steps as the creature walked around the desk. Looking to his side Marcel could see it. The bluish hue of its legs that had once been human. The growths that were ever changing its appearance. It almost looked like the thing was walking on two logs taken over by mushrooms.

In his mind Marcel was begging for the creature not to look his way. He cursed the captain for sending him on the mission and himself for accepting it. They'd been mad to think a single person could track one of them safely. And for what? The security cameras could have done it well enough. In the back of his mind Marcel knew that wasn't true. The cameras had lost sight of the creatures many times and it was always the tracking team that finally put them back on the map.

The creature let out a wail. It wasn't an unfamiliar noise to Marcel. He'd heard it echoing through empty corridors plenty of times now. It never got any less haunting and hearing it a few feet away from you made it all the more chilling. He wouldn't have blamed anyone for letting out a frightened yelp at the sound of it. It took all his self control to stifle the reaction.

To his relief the creature moved away from the desk. It rounded it from the other side and headed for the door. It wasn't until the door slid close and a minute passed without any sound that Marcel felt comfortable taking out his

compad and looking up the security camera feeds for the creature. He found it in the same corridor, but a few doors down, headed away from him.

A heavy sigh of relief escaped him and he crawled out from under the desk.

“Fuck this shit,” Marcel muttered to himself and holstered his gun. He wished he had a heavy rifle. At least it would do some damage to the monster. Then again, it wouldn’t have fit under the desk. He’d have been caught by it and even with a rifle that would have been almost certain death.

He watched the monster on the security feed and as soon as it rounded a corner he switched to a different camera. He gave it a little bit of a head start before leaving the room. The cool air of the corridor felt nice after the stuffy air in the office he had hidden in. He figured there was something wrong with the air circulation in that particular room. Wouldn’t have been the first office to suffer from such a problem.

Doing his best not to make noise, Marcel crept onward to the bend in the corridor and kept an eye on his compad. The creature was slow moving. It didn’t seem to know where to go. It stopped often to smell the air and to examine the doors in front of it.

Suddenly it seemed to get a whiff of something. For a moment Marcel feared it would come running straight at him, but to his relief the creature started the other way. It moved quickly, quicker than any human could. Marcel cursed and rushed after it. He frantically switched security feeds to keep track of it. He had to abandon all measure of careful to keep up with it.

They rounded corners, went up access hatch ladders to reach levels above and below. The cramped service corridors made Marcel feel uncomfortable and sickly aware that if the creature stopped and turned around it would run face to face with him. There wouldn’t be any room to hide or even fight back.

Seeing the direction where the creature was headed Marcel started to worry. He kept tailing the thing for a few more levels before coming to the conclusion he had feared to be true. He stopped and opened a com channel.

“Marcel?” came the familiar voice of Carrie.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“You made it back alive? How?” There was no hiding the relief in her voice

nor the surprise. Clearly, she had presumed him dead.

“Took a leap of faith,” Marcel replied, not wanting to go into detail about the situation. “No time for chit chat. You’ve got trouble coming your way. I’m tracking one of the creatures and it seems to be headed straight for the docks.”

“Shit. I feared that would happen. All the vessel reactors must be drawing it to us.”

“How secure are you? That thing is moving fast.” Marcel started jogging along the corridor again. He couldn’t let it get too far ahead. Keeping track of the camera feeds while talking and walking was slowing him down badly enough already.

“We’ve got the docks buttoned up. Doors closed and they’re not the weak kind around here. Should keep it out. I hope.”

“You better get ready for those doors to fail. You’ve seen what they can do. It’ll find a way. You got a team with you?”

“Yeah. Heavy rifles too. We’ll tear that thing to shreds if it gets through.”

“All right. I’ll keep tracking it and keep you up to date on what it’s doing. You can position yourselves accordingly. If it gets in do you have an exit route?”

“One sec. Got to hop off the channel to verify that.”

The slight click told Marcel she had done just that. He waited impatiently and continued to follow the creature. It was now obvious it was headed for the docks. It only needed to go down two levels and ahead a couple of compartments and it would land in the wide open terminal area. Marcel hoped Carrie and her crew had sealed the place good.

“We’ve got an exit,” Carrie confirmed as she returned to the channel. “Won’t fit many people though.”

“As long as you and the team get out that’s good enough for me,” Marcel replied.

“There are passengers in the vessels,” Carrie reminded him. “We’re talking thousands of people.”

“People we probably can’t save if the monster gets in,” Marcel noted. “Even with heavy rifles engaging one is iffy. If it starts looking bad you get out to fight another day. Those vessels should be pretty safe. Maybe the monster won’t get in

or maybe it'll settle for just one."

"Slim hopes," Carrie replied.

"It's gotten pretty close now," Marcel noted before stashing away his compad so he could climb down an access hatch to get back on the same level with the thing. "If it keeps going like this it'll be banging your doors in ten to fifteen minutes."

"We'll be ready for it," Carrie assured him. "I'm reporting to the captain. Will be back soon. Send a priority message if something drastic happens."

"Will do," Marcel replied and put some more effort into climbing the ladders now that he didn't have to distract himself with talking.

He passed humming power conduits and tunnel entrances that allowed maintenance crew to access all the various bits and pieces of equipment that resided between the station floors. There was plenty of it as well as some thicker panels that would allow individual levels to be isolated in case of emergencies.

Mostly it was to prevent a single compromised compartment to vent out all the air on the station. They weren't built to keep anything else in or out. Useless against the creatures roaming the station.

Out of the tunnel, Marcel rushed onward almost recklessly. The creature's path was straight forward and it didn't take him longer than he'd estimated to come to the open area in front of the passenger terminal. He was happy to see the heavy blast doors were down and the creature was looking around, clearly wanting to find a path that didn't involve going through such a massive length of steel.

Not wanting to be seen by it he ducked into an empty store not far from the wide open area. There was a big window through which he could keep an eye on it without getting spotted too easily.

It was a small market that sold various goods a person leaving the station or arriving could want. There were mostly easy to carry snacks and toiletries along with an assortment of drinks as well as data cards filled with movies and other entertainment.

Figuring no one would mind, He reached for a bag of chips and popped it open. It had been a while since he last ate and the salty snack made his mouth

water. It wasn't the healthiest thing, but enough to make him feel a bit better. The crunch of the things made him worry the monster might hear him, but glancing out the window it looked like the thing was too busy trying to find a way past the thick blast door to notice him.

His moment of enjoyment was interrupted by an explosion.

He could hear it even through the thick doors and shortly after that he could feel it in the floor underneath him. The vibrations made him worry the entire front section of the station had been blown away. He quickly popped up to see what the creature was doing. It seemed to be as confused as he was. Marcel ducked back down and opened up a communication line.

"Carrie? Carrie? Come in. What happened. There was an explosion of some sort?"

The silence made his heart wrench. Had the entire team been wiped out by it? If the entire front section was gone then that was likely what had happened.

"Anyone on the dock team. Come in."

"Bit busy, Marcel. No time to talk."

Hearing Carrie's voice was a bigger relief than he wanted to admit. They were safe, for now. His moment of relief was short lived as he noticed the creature was gone. Cursing himself for letting his attention slip he stood up, tossed aside the bag of chips and started looking for it. He was careful not to come out in the open without being certain he wasn't getting seen by the thing. Cycling through cameras wasn't giving him any useful information. It was like it had simply vanished.

"Shit." Marcel looked around the open area. It couldn't have ran out so quickly. He looked up, hoping it would be somewhere in the ceiling structures, but no such luck. He brought up the station schematics and started going through them in the hopes that it would show some path he had not considered.

The station under him shook again.

There was no explosion this time. Just what felt like a ton of rubble crashing down. He didn't want to imagine the chaos the docks must have been in. He didn't envy Carrie one bit. She had her hands full and if she made it out alive it would be a small miracle. He hoped the exit they had secured had not been taken

out by the explosion and the ensuing destruction.

“Damn it.” The schematic of the station had shown him something. He rushed over to the left of the big doorway leading to the docks. Tucked away in a corner he could see a floor plate that had been shifted. He slowed down, pulled out his gun and proceeded to carefully make his way to it. He could hear the noise of metal bending.

It was a maintenance tunnel that had a conduit running power from the main reactors to the docks. While it was still plenty strong, it wasn't solid steel strong and certainly not as strong as the main doors. Enough to hold the same sort of blast thanks to its design, but given a determined foe it could be bent and clawed through. If nothing else, the power cables could be ripped out and that space used to crawl in.

Marcel had little doubt the monster would be able to pull that off despite the current running through them.

What he had plenty of doubts about was his current course of action.

It made him miss his room and the bottle of cheap whiskey he had stashed away in his sock drawer. Sucking down the amber liquid, enjoying the taste of smoke and slight hints of apricot while watching a movie sounded like the best thing ever.

With a shrug he rolled the die on whether he'd ever get to do that and dropped down into the hole.