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Elara's Wave

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ELARA'S WAVE

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by

Sarah Huizar

2021

Dedication

To my muse, our families, and second chances.

ELARA'S WAVE

by

SARAH HUIZAR, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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Summary

When Elara Osborne signed up for the Martian Marines (MM) to follow in her father Rome Osborne's footsteps, she knew nothing of his legacy as a Lieutenant Colonel and pioneer for Mars's experimental reproductive program. Formed through a partnership between Mars and the powerful planet Morado, the program kidnaps womb-bearing individuals from an underground prostitution ring as subjects for experimentation. Their aim is to transform and weaponize Martian bodies to produce an all-powerful group of Marines. Rome's final mission is a deadly one. His right hand, and occasional lover, Major Thorne, is instructed by Morado's command to kill him after constant disagreements. Rome's death is assumed an unfortunate casualty and becomes the cornerstone of Elara's decision to join up. Recruit training is much harder than Elara could have expected. From trainings, to missions, and facing death, how did her father do any of it? Elara wants to quit, but the memory of Rome's grit, commitment, and their final goodbye compels her to keep moving forward.

After a long day of training, Elara sits at a bar reminiscing with an old pal, Mango, the bar owner. They begin to talk about the suspicious goings on at the bar between a few MM higher-ups, but is caught off guard by a stunning Jazz performer, Rain, who hits Mango's stage with her band. What was perhaps intended to be a one-night stand, is the beginning of a whirlwind relationship. It's the first time Elara's felt any kind of love since her father's death.

A customary training mission with Thorne, who is now Elara's Commander, is coming up when Rain expresses her concern for Elara's safety. She has a funny feeling about Thorne, but she can't say what exactly. Elara remembers the last day she saw her father: she, too, was worried, and he ended up dead. But Elara's mission is a short rite of passage for all Marines, and she reminds Rain of her duty to not only the MM, but to her father. On the mission, an orbit

around a climate-devastated Earth, Elara sneaks away to call Rain who is working on paintings for her upcoming art show. But when Elara returns home to Mars, Rain appears to have left her when she never comes home from the art studio. Elara knew it was too good to be true. She knew someone she loved was bound to leave her, too.

Thorne, who has taken over Rome's work with Morado, is behind Rain's disappearance. Confronting Elara about her new relationship, Thorne is pleased to hear Rain has apparently left Elara; this means Thorne's operation was successful. Rain, whose bloodline consists of spies and Earth revivalists, needed to be taken out as she was a risk for the long-term success Mars and Morado's alliance. Long since the colonization of Mars, the Earth revivalists's grudge has grown stronger and holds the MM as a primary target of revenge. The revivalists, or left behind Earth survivors, hold a burning grudge against the MM, as they were left to die after Earth's ultimate climate devastation.

Elara finds solace in questionable uppers and energizing stimulants, and tries to put together the pieces of her breakup. Why would Rain leave her life with Elara behind? While making her way to the art studio, Elara overhears a couple of kids talking about the MM's supposed kidnapping of Martian citizens. Though a furious Elara snaps at the kids, she decides to entertain the idea that Rain didn't leave her at all but was kidnapped instead. Conspiracy websites lead Elara to discover disturbing proposition documents confirming the MM's plans to build an alliance with Morado. The documents are signed by none other than Major Thorne, and Lieutenant Colonel Rome Osborne.

Elara begins to act differently toward Thorne, hinting to Thorne that Elara knows something. During training, their demeanor toward each other changes. Thorne acts fast by giving Elara a phony high-risk mission. She is to lead an unfamiliar crew to an unidentified

planet to attain a soil sample, breaking MM protocols she has been conditioned to value. She meets Thorne with suspicion and resistance but is forcefully reminded by Thorne of her duty to the MM, and ultimately, to her father. Elara's scrappy crew has been instructed to reject her leadership. Elara's suspicions are confirmed when their ship is overrun in a forced landing.

Elara awakens in a capsule aboard an unfamiliar ship and is subjected a series of water torture tactics. She realizes she has an unnatural super strength that helps her break through the capsule and fight off anyone in her way. Elara comes across a long corridor leading her to Thorne and a handful of guards waiting for her in the ship's cockpit. A dying Rain, who is also a test subject, is brought out and a deadly fight ensues between Thorne and Elara. After killing Thorne and her crew, Elara makes her way to Rain who begs for one last request - kill her, before she what's inside of her does it first.

Preface

Journey to Elara's Wave

In a lot of ways, *Elara's Wave* has been a long time coming. Its themes, and story itself, are a culmination of years and years of internalized ideas, motives, creativity, experiences, and ideologies. Every movie, book, video game, and documentary, has led me to *Elara's Wave*. Sci-Fi as a genre has always been of interest to me, particularly within movies and video games. However, when it came to the genre in terms of books, it was, and still is, a major source of intimidation. Yet, here I am, entering a path I've never taken until now, but truly, I wouldn't have it any other way.

One of the many things my subconscious chooses to deem so insightful that it regularly comes to the forefront of my mind, is something an old co-worker explained to me. He was a musician and producer, and one early Sunday morning as we stood between clothing racks near the front of the sporting goods store, waiting to greet our valued customers, I asked what inspired him. I was surprised when he couldn't give me a clear answer. He could tell me what music he liked, and what he'd been listening to most recently, but those things weren't definitive sources of inspiration. Producing music "like" other artists wasn't a factor in his process. His way of remaining true to the music he produced was to look inward, versus outward. He found his inspiration from within himself, and that's not to say he wasn't inspired by other music or artists, but it was more a matter of honoring everything he enjoyed for the sole purpose of enjoyment. When it came down to producing music, he used all those little things as fuel, which enabled his work to flow and come to fruition. Something about that notion stuck with me over the years. I think about that guy from time to time and send out a mental "thank you" vibes to him whenever I do.

I remember the exact moment I wanted to write a Sci-Fi novel. I graduated high school in 2012, was attending my first college course that summer, and began reading James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* on my off time. The moment came when I watched *The Maze Runner* movie a couple years later when it came out and saw how they depicted one of the story's enemy creatures called "Griever." I'll let James Dashner describe them for you: "It looked like an experiment gone terribly wrong - something from a nightmare. Part animal, part machine, the Griever rolled and clicked along the stone pathway. Its body resembled a gigantic slug, sparsely covered in hair and glistening with slime, grotesquely pulsating in and out as it breathed. It had no distinguishable head or tail, but front to end it was at least six feet long, four feet thick." (Dashner, 126). Again, it's one of these subconscious things where I can't necessarily remember what about the Griever piqued my interest, but what I do remember about the book to movie adaptation was that the portrayal of them was not what I expected. But that portrayal is neither here nor there, and as I Google around to jog my memory, I'm coming to understand what it was that interested me about the concept of the Griever, and that was the idea of autonomy.

In *The Maze Runner*, each character's autonomy is essentially stolen. Their memories, families, and homes are taken away for the purposes of conducting life-saving experiments in a post-apocalyptic world. There's been global climate devastation and select kids are thrown in the thick of a giant problem-solving, space-brain, ethically messed up, fabricated farmland with a neighboring deadly maze. Elara, and all those who are subject to Morado and The MM's reproductive experiments, are thrown a huge middle finger and stripped of their autonomy, even though Mars is supposedly a much more progressive place than Earth ever was. And this is where things get a little deeper, controversial even. There is an ongoing fight for trans rights, and writing Elara's Wave motivated me to put my best foot forward in learning how to be a better

ally. Still, though, I feel worried about how I've chosen to define who in *Elara's Wave* is subject to experimentation, and I don't define sex-organs as a prerequisite for the experiments. It's not that trans rights that are controversial, because there shouldn't be anything controversial about a group of individuals advocating for equal rights; it's a shame trans folk have been put in the position to fight for equality and better representation in the first place. What can be controversial, and what I mean here, is the way in which inclusion and representation happens. I don't want to exclude trans women when speaking about these reproductive experiments in *Elara's Wave*, and I think that's part of the messed up-ness of it all. There are definitely women who work in The District who do not have biologically female reproduction organs, women who were born with these organs but have had them removed for whatever reason, and trans women who frankly don't care to have any sort of reassignment "bottom surgery." I want to honor and acknowledge all the work that's happened, and that can still happen, within *Elara's Wave*. I understand that I will never understand a trans person's struggles; the fact that I'm not trans means *Elara's Wave* stands with certain limitations. I extend an invitation to trans folk to provide feedback on the way I've represented a trans voice, that being Thorn's. If I want to represent and honor trans voices, then I need to put the work in to hear from them directly. As a next step, I would like to reach out to trans folk to enrich parts of my story that must be honored with care. Likewise, it's certainly my goal to continue learning how to be a better ally within the LGBT+ community.

Here's another profound moment in my journey to *Elara's Wave*. The moment I played a most wonderful, gut-wrenching, story-driven video game, and realized that someone had to write its emotional narrative. That game, the game that truly changed my path in unfathomable ways (no exaggeration), and one of the reasons I came to listen to my gut in pursuing a second minor

of Creative Writing during my time as an undergraduate, is Naughty Dog's 2013 video game title *The Last of Us*. It gets even better though, because this perfect game and I share the exact same birthday. Truly, it was fate. And if not fate, then some sort of magical alignment of stars. Or a happy coincidence. But in any case, it's just plain cool.

The Last of Us follows Ellie, a head-strong teenager who's only known the catastrophic world's dangerous way of living, and Joel, a stubborn street-smart 40 something year old man who's lived through the fruition of the world's devastating pandemic. Joel is tasked with escorting Ellie to St. Mary's Hospital in Salt Lake City, Utah, through the deadly post-apocalyptic world. Ellie's been bitten by a zombie-like creature called a "Clicker," but has miraculously suffered no side effects. Essentially, she is immune to a virus that's taken so many lives, and the folks at the hospital want to know why. Ellie and Joel encounter numerous life-threatening events, eventually building a father-daughter like relationship. What makes their journey so emotional, in conjunction to these events, is that the game starts off with Joel's experience with the initial outbreak. He and his daughter, Sarah, meet with Joel's brother to head out of their hometown, Austin, Texas, as the outbreak happens. Chaos ensues, they get in a car wreck, and are forced to make their way out of the city on foot. As they approach the outskirts of the city, Joel and Sarah encounter a policeman who's instructed to shoot them. Sarah is hit and dies in Joel's arms. Those first 20 or so minutes of the game are guaranteed to make you cry. Joel's cry for Sarah, and her painful whimpers as she fades, are devastating. When Ellie and Joel form a bond and caring relationship, we come to realize Joel is in the same position he was before. Someone he loved, a daughter, was in life threatening danger. What I'm getting at here is someone had to write down these ideas, emotional sequences, narrative, script, and put it all together with other game developers so that I could ugly cry at home in front of my TV. When I

finished the game, my life would be changed. Years now down the line, I came to find myself ugly crying, too, over my own story when Rain asks Elara to kill her to avoid the pain of becoming a Purp. What adds to Elara's pain is the loss of her dad years before.

There are plenty other games and worlds I've had the pleasure of playing, thus fueling my creativity, aside from being emotionally scarred from *The Last of Us*, *Resident Evil*, *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, the Lovecraftian inspired "Souls-Borne" universe which includes games like *Darks Souls 3* and *Bloodborne*, to name a few. And then there's games I've never actually played, and instead, watched someone else play online, either live via Twitch.tv, or posted on YouTube. Sometimes I watch parts of a game, or a full series play-through. I'd especially like to note a YouTube channel that, alongside those James Dashner books, was there from the very beginning of my journey to Elara. That's Georgia based creator Bradley Culburn's channel called "theRadBrad." Brad tops as one of YouTube's biggest gaming content creators with over 12 million subscribers, and no matter how big that number gets, his personality and genuine love of video games never changes. His full playthroughs have been integral to the way I experience games. When I can't invest the time to play one, I can always count on watching Brad play a game the same way I might. His reactions and experiences are authentic, not to mention he's continuously thanks his audience in almost every single video. Sometimes I think he forgets how big of a channel he's created, and I especially admire that about him. He's been able to turn gaming into a career while maintaining boundaries with his personal life offline. We don't know much about Brad, and we don't see him posting sponsored social media content, vlogs, or anything of that sort. Brad's a guy who's online to play games for other people to watch. It's that simple.

Ok, back to games I've never actually played. A few nights in a row back in March, myself and my lovely companion and partner in crime, Danny, took some time to listen to an audiobook as I sat on the couch watching him play *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*. I had Audible credits to use so I checked out their Sci-fi section. I was excited to see *Alien: Isolation* in the catalogue as an official adapted version of the 2014 survival horror video game by the same title. It centers around Ellen Ripley's daughter, Amanda Ripley, and takes place some 15 years after the first *Alien* film. *Alien: Isolation* is a game I want to play but have yet to find the right time to play it. For a couple hours each night, Danny and I would listen to Keith R.A. DeCandido's book adaptation of *Alien: Isolation*, where I'd pause every 15 minutes or so when I was struck with inspiration, writing down details and notes about how I could enrich Elara's story. For example, the sequence where Elara calls Rain in the guise of "testing out" the ship's communication systems, as well as Elara having a drink with Rain the first night they meet, and the flashback where Elara cleans her father's guns after he dies. While we listened to the audiobook, I'd sense myself drifting off, asking myself personal questions about who Elara is, and getting to know the parts of her I hadn't known before. Listening to this audiobook, and even discussing my ideas with Danny, was an essential experience I'm glad came about.

Elara's Wave has been in the works, whether I knew it or not, for the latter part of my life. But with all those inspirations, experiences, video games, books, movies, and more, comes putting pencil to paper, or fingers to keyboard. During my first year of graduate school, I challenged myself to write a short story that consisted only of dialogue. While the writing was difficult (and awful), it's where *Elara's Wave* was born. The short two-pager brings you into a scene where a girl is held against her will, chained to a hospital bed on a strange planet with odd looking characters. It was also during this time that I learned about the concept of "poetics," as

in, your own personal poetics. Laying down all of those inspirational things and such from before, but thinking about them in a critical and goal-oriented way. Reading Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* opened the door for me to make connections between what motivated me to write, and the tangibility of writing something that, not only I cared about, but that others might actually be interested in, too! *Letters to a Young Poet* shares ideals in line with many of Walt Whitman's ideologies, someone whose work I wholeheartedly appreciate. These are themes of kindness, honesty, equality, and even free sexuality. Now, these ideals have absolutely nothing to do with the art of writing, but that's the best part. Rainer Maria Rilke and Walt Whitman are perfect examples of how wonderful works can be created through genuine self-expression and passion.

During my second year, I slipped into the pool that is Franz Kafka, who stands on opposite side of the literary spectrum from Rilke and Whitman. Where Rilke's letters grounded me in compassion and equality, Kafka brought something different altogether, to say the least. It's not Kafka's classic *The Metamorphosis* that had me take the plunge. It was *In the Penal Colony*, one of Kafka's shorts where prisoners are subjected to bloody and painful torture tactics, that introduced me to a seriously grotesque literary style where anything could be possible at any moment time, no matter how horrifying it was. *The Hunger Artist* is another one. It brought me to the simple realization that if I could bring something to life even if it didn't exist in this tangible, physical world, it could exist within its own narrative reality. Inspired by Kafka's magical realism, and especially by *The Hunger Artist*, I wrote an absurd piece of flash fiction called *Absurdity of Rendered Flesh*, where a fat woman believes she could literally render herself skinny if she stayed out in the blistering sun long enough. Then, her husband finds her fried to death in their back yard. To us, none of this makes sense. Diet and exercise are the logic solution

to the woman's problem, and the sun doesn't fry someone to a crisp the way her husband found her. But to the woman and the story, both of these are true in their own narrative reality. Writing something both impossible and horrifying gave me the confidence to put Elara, and others, through awful situations. That sounds terrible because it *is* terrible. Awful ideas, from Kafka's starving artist and horribly tortured prisoners, to the notion that human flesh can be rendered to make you skinny, draw very clear parallels to many of societies issues around the body. The way our bodies look, the way they're used, the way they're spoken about and spoken for, are intensely normalized as a sole medium for power and criticism. Though *Elara's Wave* takes place far from now, Elara and Rain's experiences are absolutely cautionary.

After Kafka, and Rilke, I came to the realization that UTEP didn't offer a course that could help me tell Elara's story the way I wanted to. So, I created one. I'd done so much of the literary and foundational work that would be essential to her story, but I wanted video games to be a big part of that. My interest grew to be more than playing them. I wanted to write them. I'm lucky to be part of an academic space that embraces new ideas and avenues, so with the help of my advisor, Dr. José de Piérola, I developed a full independent study exploring the field of writing for video games, known as Narrative Design. The course surveyed a variety of book-to-game adaptations, where the books and their corresponding video game would be compared, as well as a textbook, and other resources written by Narrative Designers themselves. I also assigned a final project where I'd bring *Elara's Wave* to life in a visual sense, dabbling in some sketches as a simple mobile platformer. I'll admit, I think the course itself involved a lot more work than I realized, but what I learned in the process was worth every single challenge. After debriefing the course, Dr. de Piérola and I decided that, with some changes here and there, it had

potential to be an excellent course offered to UTEP undergraduates. And, I'm incredibly happy to say, these efforts have made it possible for the course to be offered within the next year!

I began my third and final year as a graduate student with a solid story idea, and while it was extremely intimidating, it was time to fully flesh out what *Elara's Wave* would look like as a book. But the thing was, I genuinely had no idea how to begin. With the guidance of my advisor, I began to write everything down that involved Elara and affected her directly. Those sequences then became chapters. In between those sequences is where I'd explore situations taking place around Elara, and though they would affect her in the grand scheme of the story, these sequences served to foster a platform for other characters. After writing these sequences in chronological order, I began to look at these events closely to figure out what motives each character held closely, as well as details that could help tie each piece of the story together. This process was filled with many "why" questions. Out of all Martian Marines, why Elara? Why did she and Rain meet? And why did Thorne care so much about Mars's legacy? It's possible asking myself these questions were the hardest part of writing the story, and that's because there were questions I simply had no answer for, which meant going back to the drawing board to alter the foundation of sequences I'd spent so much time on. The most difficult work comes when you're honest with yourself about things that aren't working in your story. However, that challenge is always rewarded with a much better story.

Another way I came to develop *Elara's Wave* was realizing there was more to the story than I could fit in one work. Elara and Mars couldn't be contained in a single book, so I began to outline what the story might look like as a trilogy. In particular, I mapped out a sequel, and like magic, so many of those questions I had about the first installment of *Elara's Wave* were answered. In particular, I mapped out Rome's death, and came to find that it had a much better

place within the first installment, rather than the second. Rome's death truly is the cornerstone of every main character's path. His death is either beneficial or motivating for each one of them. Incorporating his death also turned the story's chronological sequence on its head. Because his death is so detrimental to the main characters, the story turned into something more than solely based on Elara's experience. How did Rome's death affect Rain's path? How did it change Thorne's path? Staggering sequences from present and past, rather than having them in order from Elara's childhood, to Rome's death, and then facing Thorne, provided the context necessary to understand the character's motivations. I believe there are still details to be worked into the story, and many "why" questions to be asked. Likewise, I'm sure *Elara's Wave* has plot holes I haven't noticed due to being so consumed by the story. As I continue to work, I intend to keep being honest with myself about what things may or may not work. In order to do this, though, I think stepping away from the story for a while will be necessary. Similar to a painting, you can paint so many details, and feel very passionately about what you're doing, but you can only recognize flaws when you remove yourself from the work.

In the realm of reading and writing, I'm not well versed in Sci-Fi novels, and I've only begun discovering worlds created by the greats such as Isaac Asimov. Concepts of life, death, and what those mean in relation to the devastation and detriment of a society, are implied folklore within the genre. When we think of the Sci-Fi, we think about the future, cosmic conflict, other worldly wars, or wild genetic anomalies. I can't imagine what *Elara's Wave* might look like if I'd been a devoted Sci-Fi reader before, but I can absolutely imagine how enjoying great Sci-Fi classics now, after writing, can enrich my story from here on. Maybe my journey to *Elara's Wave* began as a test of my imagination, and now as I wrap up my first go with the story, it's my aim to go on a different journey, one that has nothing to do with my story at all, and

everything to do with discovering worlds by those who are notable for creating them best. I look forward to reading Sci-Fi classics for pleasure, without thinking about my own work. I'm very certain I'll find inspiration, but again, it's that notion that stepping away from something you've done could be the next step to take in making it better. Afterall, everything that's led me up to this moment was done much in the same way. For me, playing video games was never about getting inspired to write a book. There's something special about consuming and experience something wholeheartedly with no expectation or underlying motivation.

However, it's important to step back from the work as it stands now, too. Right? *Elara's Wave* certainly centers around Elara's experience, but the more I kept writing, I realized this was a story about Major Thorne, too! I would even consider Thorne to be a secondary protagonist, and a limitation I can see very easily is that we don't know much about Thorne. I currently have more questions about her than I do answers. What's her family like? Does she even have a family? What does she do in her spare time? Did she begin her transition while in the MM, or before? What does her home look like? There's a lot left to be explored here. I'm wondering, too, what her thoughts are on the Earth Revivalists, who aren't given an adequate background either. The Revivalists, though intended to be the main antagonist for the next installment of *Elara's Wave*, don't have clearly defined motives. We know they were left behind on Earth, but we don't know much else about their history or the details of their struggle. Right now, their presence is grounded in vague themes of revenge, anger, and justice. One of the biggest overarching questions, too, is how they plan to get to Mars in the first place.

In contrast to areas of improvement, there are a couple elements I believe help elevate *Elara's Wave*. As a cautionary story, drawing parallels to the society we live in today was always in the back of my mind. We hear Thorne's peers judge her transness, we see women violently

oppressed, and encounter sustained systemic corruption, to name a few. It's the dreary, hopeless themes in the story I believe can offer the reader an emotional connection. A key element to this connection is brought on by death. As an example, Rain's presumed death is something I believe has the potential to move a reader to tears. When reading this scene, I tend to put myself in Elara's shoes. Watching a loved one experience something horrific while not being able to do anything about it must be the epitome of helplessness. Would I have the courage to kill my own partner if he asked me to? Why did this happen to him and not me? Is there any way to save him? I think, too, what adds to the story's emotional connection is character dialogue. In previous versions, Elara and Rain's final conversation didn't last very long before Elara agreed to kill her. And, where Thorne used very proper language, common bad-guy phrases referring to Elara as something like "stupid girl," she now has her own voice. The only character who hasn't changed at all is Mango. Through all versions of *Elara's Wave*, he's been a grumpy little troll. Truly, I mean that in the best way possible. Mango may not be a prominent character, but his attitude and persona breathe a little much needed humor into a story founded in some less than humorous themes.

There's a reason I'm not the only one who feels so passionate and thankful for space given by academics. We really have worked our way up to this moment where we get to share little pieces of ourselves with our peers, colleagues, family, and anyone who'll hear us. It's exciting when professors, and other educators, care about your work. Sharing stories grounded in passion are what fulfills us, and ultimately, showcases that precious idea of autonomy I've been thinking about for a long time now. With my whole heart, I choose to share Elara's story, and I hope whoever reads it comes to question life, death, legacy, and all the above, the same way she does.

Table of Contents

Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Summary	vi
Preface	ix
Journey to <i>Elara's Wave</i>	ix
Table of Contents	xxi
Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	8
Chapter 3	14
Chapter 4	18
Chapter 5	22
Chapter 6	30
Chapter 7	38
Chapter 8	41
Chapter 9	46
Chapter 10	52
Chapter 11	55
Chapter 12	60
Chapter 13	65
Chapter 14	69
Chapter 15	73
Chapter 16	77
Chapter 17	82
Chapter 18	85

Chapter 19	88
Chapter 20	94
References	97
Vita	100

Chapter 1

Elara's squeaky cot woke her up. She could already feel the warmth on her skin that would come soon. She tossed and turned, losing those precious last minutes of sleep. It was enough to set the tone for the rest of her day, and today of all days. The end of Phase 2 had crept up on her quickly. She was two thirds of the way done with recruit training now. Well, for her, and the rest of her comrades. It was no use, Elara stopped tossing and turning, she already danced the sleep right out of her system. Besides, it was only making the itch of her days old, tightly wound together bun, more painful. Her thick long hair that wound round and around, was bound together with no less than three hair ties and a few crusty hair pins she found on the floor next to her cot. Her chest ached, too, from the pressure of having her breasts bound day after day. It was a trick she'd heard about and it meant worrying less about her body parts moving. It was uncomfortable, but at least it was practical.

Elara lay on her back with her bun uncomfortably elevating her neck and stared at the ceiling. This one wasn't dome shaped like her room at home, or what used to be home. It was more of an oval, which was sort of like a dome, so maybe it was kind of like a dome, but what did she know about geometry? If ovals could be domes, wasn't that more of a theory than actual math? Somehow the cot still squeaked with the smallest of movements, and she could have cried in that moment, but conjuring up the emotion was a chore. Considering she was already missing out on a few extra minutes of sleep, there was no need to add another emotional stressor. She needed all the energy she could muster. Elara closed her eyes for a few seconds before Sergeant Gunner's shoes began to sound outside the doors of the bunker.

Elara's recruit mates began to toss in their cots as well. Every single day they hoped and prayed Sergeant Gunner would be even just a little bit late, but in the 13 weeks they were there,

she had not been one second late. It was annoying that their bodies had been conditioned to automatically wake up so damn early. Elara's father, Rome, came into her mind and she squeezed her eyes. He slept in a cot just like this before, and she wondered if he ever looked up at the oval-dome ceiling too, wanting to cry. She was stupid to have ever taken him for granted. His wisdom, his advice, his philosophy as a Marine, it was all so useful, especially now. She wanted so badly to go back in time and tell him how much she loved him, ask him so many questions about training and what it would be like. When he was alive, she never saw herself in him, and now that he was gone, his memory was the only thing that kept her going.

As expected, a broad-chested woman entered barking a long and mostly indistinguishable stream of words. They didn't have to understand her to know what she meant. All of the recruits were quick to make their beds, dress into their PT gear, and stand at attention next to their crate of modest belongings. When Elara really thought about it, none of the things in her crate were hers. Everything was either a hand-me-down from her father's closet, or Martian Marine issued. The only thing that was hers, really and truly hers, was a picture of her and her dad at an MM party. Jag, Elara's cot neighbor, whispered to himself, repeating every single step of the getting ready process, *bed, clothes, shoes, bed, clothes shoes*. Jag didn't talk much to others, Elara had heard him whisper to himself more than she heard him speak to anyone. Speaking, a luxury, was energy to be conserved for the field.

Elara and the others hustled outside. Her mind was set on the dunes. She had to be the first one to make it to the top, today was her last chance to prove to Gunner that she could be at the top of her class. Gunner and Rome went through recruit training back in the day when it was probably tougher than it was now. Elara thought Gunner might single her out, maybe show her as an example of an excellent recruit, but she was wrong. If she had been great from the start, then

maybe that would have been true. But the truth was that Elara was struggling. Badly. Training was harder than she expected, and it occurred to her that no matter how much she prepared, it would have been just as hard. Some people naturally have it in them, and others have to work a lot more. She was an average recruit who needed to put in the extra work to become above average. Gunner often compared Elara to Rome, “Get a move on, Osborne! Your daddy ran faster than that!” “Osborne, I bet your daddy could shoot better from his grave!” Sure, Elara was average, but she had motive, and maybe that was more than she could say for everyone else. MM recruits joined up for the money, and to some degree, the power that came with being a part of Mars’s singular government and military force. For Elara, it was about her dad, and for him, she gave it all she had.

The first rays of sun felt warm on their skin and made their pink undertones glisten from within. Their formation was perfectly in sync as they ran to the near outskirts of base toward large red sand dunes. Fine sand kicked up into their eyes and yet they maintained harmony. Running dunes was a regular form of conditioning, and tamer as compared to Phase 1, which included hikes up nearly vertical volcanic mountains, wearing heavy fully equipped packs. Her dad’s boots touched these sands, and were shredded by those hikes, too. They made him strong and sturdy which she was trying her best to become. Her body was changing. She could see her progress in the glimpses she caught during her timely showers. Elara was a smart girl, but never a strong one. She saw and felt her newly defined muscles on her back and shoulders. Even her legs showed signs of strength. They felt firm yet supple to the touch. She wished she could have gotten to know her body more but there was no time to stand and gawk at herself. Everything moved, in and out. Shit, shower, and get the hell out. Even meals were calculated. She knew how many chews it took her to finish a bite of food in a certain amount of time. One too many chews,

savoring a piece of bread, or taking an extra sip of water was all time wasted. It was tedious and exhausting, and now four years after his death, Elara's understanding grew stronger for her dad. She began to truly see why he was the way he was. From why he was a creature of habit and routine, to why he looked at the clock every minute as they ate dinner together. He could never relax, as if he was being tested, or testing his own efficiency. It was weird to her then, but looking back now, it was admirable. He built himself here, running alongside his fellow boots and getting their asses kicked. Blood, sweat, tears, verbal abuse, all of it. Leaving her behind made sense, then. A quick mission with his crew mates, the ones who went through the shit with him. Low risk and quick, Elara thought, that's what the mission was. At least that's what he had told her, and she trusted him.

Elara had come to understand that inhabiting Mars was about a second chance to do things right another time around. For everything Earth did wrong, this was the chance to make it right. Rome had tried explaining the values of a Martian Marine to her, and what ideas like honor, pride, and commitment meant. It's true that the year 4044 brought on constant and immense evolutions in technology and society at large, but no matter how Martians, or Earthly derived humanoids, evolved, the "human" condition remained firmly intact. An advanced society was no match for the angsty adolescent or the bitter old crank, even if their bodies were semi-manufactured by technology. Within so much advancement, the soul was still a complete and utter oddity.

Sand found its way into Elara's boots. The friction caused her already tender skin to burn. The recruits reached a point in their run where they were allowed to break formation and make it to the end within a time limit. This was her final chance to show Gunner what she could do. Her boots dug into the dunes until she reached the very top. Her chest ached and her throat burned.

Elara's mouth begged for moisture, but the sandy sweat running down her face would have to make do. She licked her lips and huffed stale tasting breath. This, she thought, is what excellence tasted like. A final push brought her to pass the rest of the recruits. At the top, her body met the ground. She was exhausted, but she did it. A revving sound came from a distance. The reward, *water*. A vehicle with a large tank came to a halt some 50 feet away. She dragged herself a few feet forward before stumbling to her feet to jog to the water buffalo where Monty then jumped down to greet her with a hose.

Monty chuckled, "Thirsty, E?"

She wanted to respond, but the soothing moisture running down her throat was more important. Monty was an annoyingly confident Phase 3 recruit who happened to be on water duty at this time. They first met when Elara entered Phase 2. As an Aviation Mechanic in Phase 3, he was tasked with advising underclassmen. While they met to decide what the best plan of action would be for her time in AV-MECH school, he'd gotten close to her and squeezed her thigh, taking her angry response as an invitation to continue.

Elara wiped her mouth, "What's that?"

He smirked, leaned on the driver's side door of the water buffalo, and bit his bottom lip, "I asked if you were thirsty."

"I'm sorry," Elara crossed her arms and squared up to him, "What exactly does that mean?"

"It's, like, a joke. But that's right, you don't know what those are, do you?"

"Oh no, I know what those are. But coming from a scumbag like you, I'm not hearing anything funny."

"Scumbag? Oh, right, you're still with that. Get over it. You know you wanted me."

Elara gave a short, frustrated laugh, “You truly are a fucking pig. And you’re not my type anyway, you piece of shit.”

“Ah, yes, I know that you’re more into... cats.” He looked her up and down and licked his lips, “Think of all the fun we could have.”

Elara, knowing the rest of the recruits were just heading over the peak, walked into Monty where their chests met. She grabbed and squeezed his fragile, nearly non-existent manhood.

“How’s this for fun? Huh?” Elara looked him in the eyes as she pursed her lips and leaned in closer, “Leave me the fuck alone, along with everyone else you have ever put your hands on, or else you’re going to wish you had. You don’t know me and what I can do.” She whispered delicately into his ear, feeling the hair on his neck stand up with the warmth of her breath. She backed away and smiled as the others headed over the peak in the distance behind her, “Thanks for the water! Can’t tell you how *thirsty* I was.”

Monty squeezed his eyes shut and leaned back on the water buffalo, breathing long and heavy breaths. A surging pain went from his groin to his gut and he tasted something acrid. Slipping down to the ground, Monty heaved over to one side, and out came his modest breakfast accompanied with bile. Toast, an apple, and black coffee. What a shame, he’d been saving that coffee for a while. It was hard to come by these days. As for Elara, she honestly didn’t know what she would do if he messed with her again. It was mostly a front brought on by the confidence after making it up the dune, but even so, after seeing what her body could do now, she knew she could put up a pretty good fight. In reality, she thought, she’d probably go to human resources or something like that. But she wanted to be the girl who could handle her own, and heck, maybe she could. Maybe that’s someone she could be now. In any case, it felt good to

stand up to Monty like that. He was a spoiled MM baby who'd always gotten what he wanted before his dad died, courtesy of the MM, too. Death affected everyone differently, Elara thought, and it was funny that she and Monty ended up in the same place anyway. But the difference between them was he joined up to gain the same money and power as his dad. There was a reason he was out on water duty and not training like the rest of his Phase 3 comrades. Sure, he was an enlisted aviation mechanic, but the majority of his training took place in diplomatic offices and roof top banquets. Monty expected an easy ride to the top, and Elara wasn't surprised to see him get it. But her? She enlisted to honor her father's name. It wasn't about money or power, it was about the value of Martian life, and striving to protect it the same way he did. Then maybe, Elara thought again, she and Monty hadn't ended up in the same place at all.

Elara walked over checkout from PT. Gunner gazed down to where Monty was vomiting, looked at Elara, then at her notepad, "You're good to go. Shower, chow, and see you in class."

Chapter 2

A certain stillness lingered as the sun peaked over the horizon and made its way into each crevasse of the hallway and into Elara's sleepy eyes. Soft, fluffy blankets slipped over her skin as she yawned and stretched over to turn on her bedside lamp. Her mind held on to the final remnants of a hazy dream she'd already started to forget. Something about watching a band perform. Between dreams and reality, she stared at the dome shaped ceiling. How did they make it perfectly round? She nuzzled her head deeper into the fluffy pillow for a final snooze. Her gaze automatically fell on a picture she kept on her bedside table. She and her dad all dressed up at one of the only MM rooftop parties he accepted an invitation to. Rome looked handsome in his dress blues adorned with ribbons and medals. He held Elara's waist as she wrapped both arms around him, playfully kicking her leg out to the side showing off the sparkling heels that peeked under her royal blue gown. Behind them was a clear view of the MM greenhouses. Rows of stories high glass domes powered by whatever energies sustained each one of them. She still wondered what went on in those domes. Occasionally, the MM's four-star General, General Tass, was televised for a ribbon cutting when they discovered something exciting enough to add to a dome, giving some non-specific description of what was found, and a general morale boosting speech about hope for the future. She knew they housed plants from other planets, but how did the MM manage to get them there? And, how were they kept alive? She did know some of the domes were in phases of experimentation to solve the exact questions she had, but how *they*, whoever worked inside, actually did what they did was a mystery to her, and many others.

Elara knew some of the Marines who went on missions to gather samples for the greenhouses. Rather, she knew them in one of four states: alive, recovering, in critical condition, or dead. She and Rome visited them whenever a mission went haywire, or nearly killed

everyone. They visited them in their homes while on leave, recovering, or at their funerals. Elara enjoyed hospital visits, not necessarily for the Marines, but to pass by the womb pods, where tiny specimens grew into infant children. The MM hospital walls were painted in a depressed blue, accented with anxious white moldings. All except the pod sector, where there were no blues but instead yellows, and soft, warm whites. Elara wanted to know what it was like to be in one of those pods. She knew she'd been in one at some point in her life, but it was a shame she couldn't remember any of it. Her earliest memory was at 3 years old, when she fell into Rome's arms after climbing up a set of curtains. Elara didn't know how she came to exist, and only knew that she did. Somewhere in the complicated mess of the union of egg and sperm, she wanted to know where existing began. Knowing she came from a series of lab experiments wasn't enough. Passing by the pods made her wonder, too, when life ceased to exist. Life and existence, whatever it was, breathed into one tiny being, and only one story above the pods, life was coming to an end. It had happened more than once where the same Marine she'd seen recovering in the hospital, was the same one whose funeral they attended the following week.

Elara's eyes swelled with the kind of anger that brought on a gut-wrenching sadness. Turning over onto her aching stomach, a steady stammering gasp came out from within her. She stuffed her face deeper into the fluffy pillow that sopped up her semi-silent sadness. She moved around, cocooning herself and swiftly kicking her feet back and forth underneath the bedding. The blankets wrapped around her with every writhe and wiggle. Her tears were a lifeforce being drained from her, becoming weaker and more helpless every moment, fueling her tantrum less and less, until she lay still in her fluffy cocoon. Elara popped her head out and took a good look at the picture again. She thought his last mission would be the final time she'd have to say goodbye, but today was the day her father would leave again.

Rome, in his own room, was getting dressed in his uniform that fit bigger these days. Stress seemed to be a normalized state of mind for him. The MM provided a guardian for every child of a single-family household when the parent went on deployment, but this mission was a short one, and he trusted Elara on her own, so he opted out this time. Still, he contemplated her safety. A fire. An intruder. A freak accident. Rome grabbed his boots which sat next to his bed and slipped them over his thick long socks. He was all zipped and tied, bags packed, bed made, fridge full, house tidied up, but he wasn't ready. Leaving Elara today meant more than he let on, and a lot more than he could tell her. Rome knew he would leave her again someday for good, and maybe not by choice, but he hoped that moment would come later on as he saw her into adulthood. Things at the MM were getting more dangerous, and if a mission didn't kill him, he was sure the MM would claim it did. There was too much he knew, too much at stake for them to let him walk off and live a regular retired life. The MM didn't work like that, well, not at least for people in his position. He denied himself the realization that this really might be it. It was too sad to face. Rome didn't care about his Marines the way he did for Elara, which made sense, of course. He only cared for them in that he needed them alive to execute an order. A dead Marine was, in every sense of the word, useless. The hospital visits were nothing more than an obligation. Rome came to understand death as an inevitable side effect for everyone, but for Marines, it came on quicker than it did everyone else. But even then, his own death was something he couldn't come to terms with. It terrified him. To protect his own life was to protect his daughter's.

Elara was still in her pajamas when Rome finally walked out of his room toward hers. Hearing his footsteps, she sat upright, still engulfed by the blankets, dampened with snot. She wiggled her way up and out, taking just a few steps over to her bedroom door. Waiting for

Rome's approach brought seconds of panic. Should she grab clothes to quickly get dressed, implying she'd already been up? Should she get back into bed and pretend she was still asleep? Well, that wouldn't work, he'd probably already heard her break free from her nest. She opted for something else which was to stand there and do nothing. Just stand there, wait, and wipe her nose with the neck of her shirt. She'd gone through this so many times before, and each time she simply didn't know how to say goodbye.

"Honey, are you awake?" The silence confirmed she was. "Listen, I know you don't want me to go, but please don't shut me out this time."

"G... go away." The words moistened her palate and quivered out as if she'd forgotten how to speak. She fidgeted side to side, retreating her arms into her stretchy sleeping shirt, and hugged herself. It wasn't cold but a chill came over her. Her lips tasted like salt.

"Come on. Are you going to leave me here like this? What if I die?" Rome's failed attempt at lightening the mood.

"You said you weren't leaving again."

"I know, baby, but you know how it is."

"No, dad, I *don't* know how it is."

"They need me, El. I can't let my team down."

"But you can let me down?"

Rome rubbed his hands over his face, she had a good point, "I'm doing my best, El. I know it's not fair, but I'm in a tough spot. I wouldn't be leaving if I didn't have to. I'm sorry."

"So when are you coming back?"

"Tomorrow night. I told you it's a quick thing. Thorne and I..."

"Ok, yeah, I know. But, like, what time?"

“Baby, you know I can’t answer that. I don’t know.” Rome closed his eyes, pinching his thumb and index finger between them against the bridge of his nose.

“You see? You can never tell me anything.”

“I really don’t know. Something could happen, something could go wrong, everything could go perfectly fine, maybe I get to base and they reschedule the launch. I know it’s hard, especially being alone this time around. But I promise when you’re in my position someday, you’ll—.”

“In your position? What makes you think I want that? Wow, dad.”

“I love you and I’ll miss you. Can we maybe talk about this when I get back?”

“You see, dad? You’re the one shutting me out!”

“Please come out. I don’t want to leave like this. I promise we’ll talk when I get back. We’ll talk about whatever you want.”

Elara’s urge to oppose everything her dad said about her future was an innate. Her? A Martian Marine? She’d rather suffocate on Earth. Innate, too though, was her love for Rome.

“Fine. Okay, fine. I’ll come out. But you promise?”

“Yes, honey, I promise. We’ll talk about everything.”

“Everything, everything?”

“Almost everything. How’s that?”

“Um, yeah, I can do almost everything.”

Elara popped her arms back into their sleeves. One hand covered her face while the other opened the door. She didn’t have to cry silently now. Rome held her fully, gently rocking side to side. She could never know *everything, everything*, no matter how much he wanted to tell her. It would kill her. It meant deceit, manipulation, cover-ups, crimes, and casualties. It meant her food

being poisoned or being an unfortunate victim in a deadly accident somewhere, anything the MM could do to take her out. But it also meant the betterment of Martian kind. He made his choice the way every other Marine did, there was no going back. The problem that led Earth to its fatality was the same problem the MM aimed to solve; the idea of equality and equal say didn't exist, nor did it have an ideal space within the fabric of a successful societal structure. There were things people couldn't know, shouldn't know, and would never know. How can members of a society cast a vote to solve a problem they knew nothing about? There's a reason life seemed unfair, and that's because it was.

Equality, though great in theory, was an illusion the MM learned to integrate in certain and specific ways by building a society on equal grounds, socio-economic equality, and protection from discrimination. That was as equal as equal needed be. When it came to ultimate decision-making processes, that was up to the MM, which made up the entirety of Mars's governmental body. Behind the scenes, the MM dealt with complicated and problematic situations, a lot of which could start a revolution if revealed to civilians. Whistle blowers, another one of Earth's fatal problems. On the surface, Mars and the MM ran smoothly. The illusion of equality was the fuel that kept Martian society intact. In a lot of ways, Martian kind was sheltered from so much of what was really going on. As it happens when raising a child, a parent holds on tightly to harsh realities their child will face. But these realities can't be held on to forever. At some point or another, the child will endure a multitude of challenges, bringing them an uncertain amount of pain and suffering. The same was true for Martian kind. Pain and suffering was yet to come, and for their protection, they couldn't know. As for Elara, the best Rome could do was hold on to her for dear life as long as he could, and hope she came to her senses enough to join the MM.

Chapter 3

A quick body shower and change over, that was the plan. Elara hoped to have enough time to re-do her hair, but every second was precious. The time it would take her to do her hair could instead be allotted to feeling the warmth of the water on her skin. She stuck her neck up and out to avoid more water seeping into her tightly wrapped chest. The water on her face was soothing as she closed her eyes and pretended to be at spa of some kind. Showering with her chest bound was yet another calculated task. She often counted the seconds it took her to re-wrap her chest, in comparison to the time it took to move so intricately in the shower. Her comfort, or lack of it, wasn't necessarily a factor she took into consideration when choosing to wrap her chest. It was more about functionality and proficiency. Was her dance in the shower practical? Maybe not, but her wrap meant she had more functional movement, and it sure as hell made her more proficient running up that dune. The wrap would stay, it would continue to get a little soggy each day, and she would continue to choose to re-confine her body before the start of a new week. Elara turned off the water, savoring the last few seconds of warmth, trailing her face forward to feel the last trickles. Three seconds too long.

Luckily, the extra seconds in the shower didn't seem to hinder her from getting to class on time. How Gunner managed to be the last one on the dunes, and the first one in the classroom, was a mystery. Elara was the second. Gunner paced over to her, arms crossed, looking as intimidating as ever in her blacked out uniform. Everyone in the MM wore the same thing, but for some reason, she looked more menacing than the rest.

“Good work today, Osborne. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, ma'am.”

“Last day in my class. Last day of Phase 2. Are you ready?”

“Yes, ma’am. I believe I’m ready. My father—

“Is there a problem with Monty?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

Class began after Jag walked in. Barely a second to spare. Today would be nothing more than an inspirational lecture from Gunner. Usually, Elara would appreciate this kind of thing, but she was exhausted. Mentally and physically. Gunner shut the door and began.

“Honor, courage, and commitment. Don’t you fucking forget it, not when you leave my door, not ever. The day you forget better be the day you stop breathing. Goddamn it, Jag, will you shut the fuck up!” Sergeant Gunner’s final lecture accompanied Jag’s involuntary whispers, *honor, courage, commitment, honor, courage, commitment.*

“Today marks the end of Phase 2. You’ve been given some independence during this time, but don’t forget where you came from. If you thought Phase 1 was hard, then this is your last chance to give up. What exactly does that mean? Well, if you were too busy talking to yourself like your good friend over there, then let me remind you. The MM, as you know, has always aimed to solve the problems our old useless families on Earth created. In the MM, we give you one chance. That chance ends today. You can walk out that door a Marine, or you can turn your backs. But let me tell you this, not one single recruit has ever walked out on us. Never. So, tell me, do you want to be the first?”

Giving recruits one final chance to back out of their commitment came with an invisible asterisk. Yes, they were given that chance, that wasn’t a lie. Gunner didn’t lie at all. She had never seen a recruit walk out, but that was because they never got the chance to. Loyalty began the moment anyone signed their recruit papers, and ended in death. Ryan Han, Phase 2, was

Gunner's first encounter with a "VERP." The Venus Entering Relocation Program was one of three options for people like Ryan. 1) Enter the VERP, 2) Continue as an MM recruit, 3) Death.

With the VERP program, Earth's smartest and most elite got a head start to Mars's systemic skeleton before anyone else did. Their mission was to develop a plan to control and contain, by any means necessary, citizens who were less than committed to the success of Mars and the MM. As they knew it, Mars was a rare chance at continuing the human legacy. What was rare, too, was the coming together of nations all over the world. It was a cooperation effort led, not by politicians and law makers, but by biomedical scientists, founders of big tech, physicists, climate scientists, mathematicians, psychologists, and social scientists. They were asked to put their morals and ethics aside and would be contemplated graciously in return. Truly, it was a matter of how much money they would take, versus how morally sound the idea was.

Gunner had been to the VERP as part of her training. The only reason Venus wasn't a practical choice for human existence was its incredible heat and sulfuric acidic atmosphere. The VERP was sold as a program to, 'Aid the MM and its constituents by developing, utilizing, and reviewing experimental weapons and tactics.' It was rare when anyone chose the option of death. Whatever VERP was sounded better than dying, and being a Marine was sure to kill them, too. What they didn't know was that their bodies would undergo extreme amounts of trauma, with Venus's heat being the nexus of it all. Earth's brightest beings developed blimp-like chambers which hovered above the planet at just the perfect elevation. Gunner had the pleasure of visiting the Hot Box. A highly reflective box, the size of an average living room, which was heated directly from Venus, and channeled light from the sun overtop. The subject inside, who was lucky enough to still be alive, sobbed and yelled and ran and jumped all at once. The boils on their naked body erupted just as quickly as they formed.

“Are you serious?” Ryan had naïvely asked Gunner.

“Three options. Pick one.” Others in Gunner’s position wouldn’t have had so much empathy and restraint.

They sat opposite each other in a square concrete room on base somewhere underground. A charming Earthly relic that still symbolized someone’s made a terrible mistake.

“Is this necessary?” Ryan lifted his bound hands.

“Pick one.” Gunner’s stone-cold face hid what she was really feeling. She had to make him choose his preferred method of death, and he didn’t even know it.

“You have a chance, Ryan,” She leaned in and looked at him closely, “to choose to become an integral part of the MM, or not.” She didn’t want him to be subject to what the VERP had in store. But, she also knew the MM would have her ass if she downplayed its importance. Or else, she’d also end up like Ryan. Exiled and tortured, under the guise of an honorable MM death, out on a mission.

“My scores are shit and you know what that means.”

“Either way you take a chance.”

“Well, VERP is a chance, isn’t it?”

“That is correct.” It was, technically.

“Then send me.”

Chapter 4

Rome set Arial I's navigation after sitting in flight command for over an hour. The meeting would happen soon after they landed. There were a couple of things on his mind, none of them pertaining to Elara. First, he needed to mentally prepare himself for another tedious meeting with Morado's command, The Highers. Second, he wanted those Purps to respect him as much, or more, than they did Thorne. Why did they like her so damn much? He was in charge of this mission, damn it. And finally, he thought about the girls down at The District.

Thorne sat in a chair next to Rome where she kept track of the ship's operating systems, from oxygen levels, to system malfunctions, and fuel consumption. She was incredible at evaluating a ship's data, and not once had she failed her crew by bringing them back in a body bag. She'd seen just as much, if not more, than Rome had. Sure, humanity was evolved, but so many fundamental issues had never been addressed inside the workspaces of the elite. For one, working hard wasn't always rewarded, a lot of times it didn't even matter, most of the time, the men in those spaces never considered her to be a *real* woman. Thorne attended every MM event, made face, and got to know all the right people, but as soon as she left a conversation, she could hear them make comments from her appearance, to what might be between her legs. Was *this* the one they heard about? Had she gotten *the* surgery? How long had she been on hormones? How does she pee? Thorne had heard it all. Rome, on the other hand, never bothered to show up, and yet received award after award for his 'valiant efforts' leading the simplest of missions. It didn't matter how many Marines died on his watch. Morado's liking to her was more than deserved. They never took her as less-than. Heck, after all she'd been through on Mars, it was earned. It was something she had that Rome didn't. Rome never judged her outright, but he made it clear

that nobody could know about their casual romance. Maybe she was more of a novelty to him. Some twisted little secret.

Rome sat gazing through the glass that separated him and the thick abyss outside. He was hunched over, elbows on knees, contemplating a number of things, but mostly, he thought about those girls. Thorne turned her head, and in swift motion, stood up from her seat, took one step over, and straddled him, taking Rome out of his bent meditative state.

“Nav is set, what do you want to do now?”

“Not now,” Rome said, “I don’t...”

Thorne kissed his neck, “Don’t what?”

“What are you doing? I can’t do this right now.” Rome waved his hands in front of his face. He got up from his seat which was now replaced with Thorne, “You don’t have any idea, do you?”

“I have tons of ideas. Want to hear one?” Thorne responded sarcastically. She stood up with her arms crossed and paced toward Rome. His reluctance and lack of confidence triggered her power, “Here’s my first idea, no, actually, my only idea: whenever we meet with those stupid purple idiots, you shut me out.”

“Yeah, you seriously have no idea. You have no idea what this means, no idea how important it is, and no idea how this is going to impact everyone.”

“Oh, no, I know exactly what this means. Maybe you’re the one who isn’t understanding. Here’s another idea: you hate that they like me more than you, and I think that’s what this is really about.”

“That’s not true. I’m glad they like you, and it makes sense you’re so involved the way you are. You’re next in command.”

“Rome, the Purps on Morado don’t want to hear about ‘tactful implementation’ anymore. They don’t care about anyone on Mars, and we at least have that much in common. Seems like you’re falling off on the idea, though.”

“No, I know this has to be done. And we’ll get it done. It’s Elara... she doesn’t want to join the MM.”

“Elara’s protected. You know that.” *For now*, Thorne thought.

“They can only protect her for so long. If she doesn’t join, I have no control over what could happen to her. And the other women who—”

“Who what? Don’t have any family who gives a shit about them? The difference between them and Elara is that she has you. They, on the other hand, they have nobody, and they made their choice. Honestly, they should be honored to be in the position they’re in.”

“They didn’t ask for any of this. And their bodies... you’ve seen what happens to them. What if Elara ends up like them?”

He was right, but Thorne wanted to keep her power, so she fell back on ideals of duty and priority, “Rome, I suggest you put your priorities in order, at least for the next 24 hours. Think about the bigger picture.”

The bigger picture, Rome thought, was genocide, “I wouldn’t be here if—”

Thorne cut him off, “With progress comes sacrifice, and in case you didn’t know, we don’t have the luxury of starting a war with Morado. You’ve seen what they can do. What they can *be*. Sacrificing a few civilians for the greater good means a step in the right direction. These women should be proud to be able to carry our future. We’re lucky the Purps are even willing to negotiate at—”

“I know all of that! And what do you mean proud?” Rome threw hands, “It’s not about backing out, it’s about normalizing and integrating the right way. Painting a picture of choice. It’s about strategy. Nobody’s going to miss anyone from The District, I get that, but what happens when civilians start to notice? Just because you can’t—”

Thorne found pleasure in downplaying Rome’s concerns, but she also knew where he was going with this, she’d heard it before. Just because she lacked a womb didn’t mean others would be so inclined to sacrifice theirs. Overall, she knew his approach was better, but she couldn’t let him take her power.

“Just because I can’t what, huh Rome? And how many times do I have to say it? They don’t want to hear it. They don’t care about your strategies, even if they do make sense.” Which, she thought, was true, “Morado is messy, powerful, and all of the above. We can’t afford to compromise. My ability to be a carrier has nothing to do with this, and you know what? Morado’s never once taken a jab at me for that because they don’t care! They don’t care about me, or about you, they just want the job done, and so do I!” Thorne began to walk off, “What’s that thing they used to say about keeping your enemies closer? Didn’t you ever hear that? Get your head out of your ass.”

Thorne’s voice was a small trail behind her. This was part of the ‘everything’ Elara couldn’t know. Joining the MM was about protection. What would happen when he wasn’t around anymore? He couldn’t trust the MM with his own life, look at him, he was headed to a place where he could be killed in seconds. Elara’s life was just as expendable, if not, much more. Like those girls working down at The District, if he died, there’d be no one around to miss Elara, either.

Chapter 5

Thorne and Rome approached their room inside Regalia, home of Morado's command, and other elites. Without any word to each other, they understood they needed to be on the same team now. Their problems could be addressed later. It was a matter of putting up a front to Morado and all who watched them. Being on the same team meant Rome couldn't step in between whatever connection they seemed to feel with her. It ate at Rome knowing he was really the one in charge but wasn't treated it. She enjoyed every bit of attention so much that it was dangerous. *He* had all of the right solutions, *he* had put so much thought and care into this mission, only for it to be shot down on the basis of opinion and power. He was the one who knew about strategic planning, not them. Rome knew it didn't matter how advanced the Purps were, because none of that mattered if they couldn't keep their shit together. Strategy, now that was important. Compulsive action with an aim to kill? That was reckless. Why did the Purps come to the MM anyway? What did they have that the Purps didn't? The answer was glaring right at them in every single proposition Rome made. Ask people to volunteer their bodies in the name of science, manipulate society to believe an overwhelming number of noble Martians were willing to give their life. Wow, how patriotic! An outcome like that would have never happened on Earth! See how far we've come? But of course, that didn't matter. What mattered then, more than killing? Another clear answer: domination.

Regalia was located on a mountain of purple sand and rock, overlooking all of Morado's wonders. Crystal streets, bright white statues of all those in command, and beautifully dressed Purps, who looked nothing like the ones they had come to manufacture. No, these Purps, the ones buying jewels and wearing gowns, were long, lean, and crept along like a praying mantis, swaying with exactitude, precision, and grace. Black, unblinking eyes sat closely toward

the center of their thin oval head, and mouth outlined closely on the perimeter of the bottom half of it. Smooth, delicate skin radiated a white-purple pearlescent aura to match the almost transparent hue of what skin slipped out of their silken sleeves.

As usual, someone waited in their room to greet Thorne and Rome. A much smaller Purp, perhaps a young one, gestured to the clothes laying out on the bed. Two delicate outfits for each of them. Thorne's, a silken emerald green suit with gold accents, and Rome's, a deep blue suit with silver accents. Guests of Regalia were assumed to comply with wearing whatever was laid out for them. It was sign of respect for Morado's command, The Highers, but also a sign of compliance, and to some extent, control. The young Purp gestured to a grand bathroom, where crystal floors, and even crystal walls, were present throughout. They reflected light with a perfect sparkle and radiance. Being presented these luxuries was a routine Thorne had come to find as a waste of time.

"Yes, yes, we know about your fancy crystal toilet. I don't know why you all insist on showing us every single time we come. Respect, royalty, loyalty, we got it. You can wait for us out there." Thorne pointed and wiggled her finger at the door.

Rome, on the other hand, understood it to be just a few minutes of his time he could spare for a poor Purp who, not doubt, was only told what to do and when to do it. A few minutes of patience was the least he could offer. Patience, an Earthly thing, would always be a virtue.

"Thorne, just...." Rome began, already exhausted by her the minute they landed, "What would happen if you *didn't* do that?"

"Express myself and my needs?"

The young Purp sensed their tension and walked toward the door.

“No, wait!” Thorne stopped the Purp, “As a guest here, you care about what my needs are, right?”

The young Purp nodded in agreement.

“You see? My needs are important.” Thorne took Rome’s annoyance as a win.

Rome opened the door for the young Purp, “You’re not a queen just because they like you. They’re using us, we’re using them, it’s a mutual thing. Don’t forget that.” Rome shut the door.

“What’s wrong? Why are you worked up?”

“We’re here to do a job! Not to indulge in what little attention anyone will give you!”

“You care too much about what they think.”

“This isn’t a vacation.” Rome rebutted.

“Who says it’s not? Feels like a vacation to me!” Thorne unbuttoned her top and continued to undress, “I’m hitting the shower. You’re welcome to join me...” She let her hair out of her tightly wound bun. Long curls draped over her slim, muscular back.

“I’ll pass. We can go as soon as you’re done.”

As expected, the same young Purp waited for them outside the door, where she led them to another room where they would wait for The Highers to accept them. The room was small and plain with nowhere to sit. They couldn’t know how long it would take, the wait could go on for a while, and one time it did. On their first visit, they waited hours for The Highers. Rome couldn’t understand how compulsive they could be, and yet ask their guests to be patient enough to wait, for who knows how long, just to meet with them. Luckily, this time, the doors in front of them slid open just as soon as they got there. Rome trailed behind Thorne, but as soon as she crossed the threshold, a Purp put his long thin arm out to block Rome from entering.

“What’s going on?” Rome asked, but the only response he received was a plain stare.

Thorne walked into a vast, dimly lit room. Five crystal thrones sat side by side in front of her, and on them, The Highers, who unlike every other Purp, were much larger in size. They wore no clothing, their bodies were thick, and eyes glowed white instead of black. Their light purple porcelain skin was mesmerizing. Their bodies vibrated lightly as a deep voice began to hum in Thorne’s mind. She could never get used to the feeling despite having talked to them times before.

“Do you know why you’re here?” The hum lingered in the background and a deep voice came to the forefront.

“Yes.”

“Do you know why he’s here?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Are we *clear* about *your* mission?”

“Yes.”

“Bring him in.”

The Purp guarding the sliding doors grazed its three-pronged hand over it to reveal Rome. The Highers and their skin lightly vibrated once more. Rome flinched.

“Come.” The deep voice said.

Rome stepped forward next to Thorne. He gave her a confused look and whispered to her, “What’s going on?”

The Higher who’d spoken with Thorne began, “We need to know that you and your leaders are committed to our collective. We summoned you here today to confirm you are ready to follow through.”

Rome opened his mouth to speak, but Thorne's words spilled out before his, "The District," she began, "Continues to be our most reliable option. There are MM operatives there who are committed to the success of this mission. And we—"

"Wait," Rome interrupted, "Please, there is more strategic way of doing this. We don't have to be so reckless."

The deep voice responded, "War is strategic. Games are strategic. Would you prefer one of those options? In your mind, do you see this as a game, Lieutenant Colonel Osborne? What is it that your colleague, Major Thorne, understands, that you don't?"

Rome stepped forward, "With all due respect, we could increase our numbers substantially if we strive to manipulate, rather than force our way into The District. What are we going to do when too many women go missing? Too many women, who, we can't even guarantee will provide us with the result we're looking for. Again, I propose we utilize a voluntary program, where we gain the confidence of Martian civilians. A revitalization effort, something where they feel unified. Something where—"

"Rome," Thorne interrupted, "There's something you need to know. There's a group on Earth looking to attack. They call themselves—"

The deep voice interrupted, "The Revivalists."

"What?" Rome turned to Thorne, "But you said there was nothing left on Earth."

"It was a mission given to me by General Tass."

"Why... didn't you say anything?"

"I couldn't."

"Oh, but you told them?" Rome pointed at The Highers.

"They already knew."

“Thorne, what are you doing?”

“The question is, Mr. Osborne, what are *you* doing to help this cause?” The deep voice responded.

“What am *I* doing?” Rome yelled, “I created this fucking cause!”

“The Earthly anomaly is something so deeply profound, isn’t it? You hold it much too closely, Rome, and that will be the death of you. You are a cog. You are not special. What you think makes you smarter only makes you weaker.”

“If I’m weak then why do you need us, huh? Why can’t you do this on your own?”

“You are being given a chance, understand? We chose you and your people.”

“Chose us? No, you’re using us. And they’re using you, too, Thorne.”

“We’re using each other, Rome,” Thorne said, “Didn’t we just talk about this?”

“No! You know that’s not what I meant!”

“Rome!” Thorne yelled, “Calm down! Just listen, please?”

“There’s no need,” the deep voice was calmer now, “Mr. Osborne is right. We’re using you just as much as you are using us. This is obvious. We should have been over this detail. A reevaluation is in order. You are, or you are not, with us. Those are your only two options. We cannot make that choice for you.”

“Give us a chance, please.” Thorne begged, “Rome, we need this. Listen to me. Mars needs this. Elara needs this.”

“Us? Don’t you get it? There is no ‘us’. It’s just you and them.”

The Highers and their skin began to vibrate lightly again. Rome and Thorne’s minds went blank and the doors behind them slid open. They walked back into the plain room where the young Purp waited to escort them back to their room. They walked silently and quickly all the

way back, leaving the young Purp behind. Thorne knew what would happen the minute they entered, Rome would try to interrogate her, yell at her, remind her of her place and what her real mission was, to assist *him* with *his* operation. What did *she* think she was doing? What else does she know? And how the fuck do The Highers know something he doesn't? As soon as they get back to Arial I he's reporting straight to General Tass!

Rome slammed the door shut and continued, "Sit down." He pointed to the edge of the bed. "We aren't leaving this room until you tell me everything."

"I can't." Thorne sat up straight and confident.

Rome got close and grabbed her face with one hand, "I don't care what you can and cannot do. You will do what I say. You report to me!"

Thorne struggled to speak, "Is this part of your strategy? I'm done putting up with your shit, Rome. This is what you do. You don't get what you want and then pout like a fucking child."

Rome let go of her face and slapped her, "What was your mission with General Tass!"

"Fuck you."

Another slap, along with a shove to the floor. Rome grabbed Thorne's collar with his hands, "What was your mission!"

"What a great leader you are, huh?" Thorne spit the blood accumulating in her mouth at him, "I didn't know you had it in you," a slap turned to a punch.

"Tell me!"

"Over my dead body, Lieutenant Colonel Rome Osborne."

"You have no idea what you've done. You have no idea what this means!"

“I know exactly what this means, and I know exactly what I’m doing.” Thorne, with bloody teeth, smiled and laughed at Rome, “Your anger, your emotion, your inability to let anyone else be in control, that’s your biggest failure. I hope Elara doesn’t grow up to be like you. It’s too bad you won’t get to find out.” In a swift motion, Thorne grabbed the decorative comb in her hair that kept her locks in place, given to her by The Highers for this moment. Thorne sliced Rome’s side, overpowered him, bringing him belly side down to the floor. Thorne grabbed hold of his arms, put them behind his back and straddled him.

“You’re going to regret this,” Rome struggled to breathe.

“My only regret is not doing it sooner.” Thorne took the comb and sliced through Rome’s throat. She got up, opened the door, and found the young Purp as she expected to.

Thorne breathed heavy and leaned over to catch her breath, “It’s done. Tell them it’s done.”

The young Purp shuffled off with the message.

Chapter 6

After a day of training with Thorne and the other recruits, Elara was ready for a break. They had gone over basic Arial I ship schematics, toured a few small ships that were no longer in commission, and went through troubleshooting and problem-solving methods. It was a day of taking notes and asking questions.

She recalled her conversation with Thorne after class.

“Good work, Osborne. Quick learner, huh? Just like your father. I taught him how to fly, did he ever tell you that?”

“No, Major, he didn’t tell me a lot of things.” Elara tucked her schematics book back into her pack.

“Man, I don’t blame him. You wouldn’t like half the shit that goes on around here, well, the kind of shit we were sent out to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is this is a real hard job, Osborne. What you’re doing is going to change you in a lot of ways. I had a lot of respect for your father, he was a real smart guy with guts. And I’ll tell you what, the kinds of people he had to deal with weren’t the nicest guys around.”

“Seems like you knew him a lot better than I did.”

“Honestly, you got to know the best side of him.”

“In any case, I’m here because of him.”

“Speaking of Rome, I’m going for dinner in an hour with a few of our colleagues. I’m sure they’d love to meet you.”

“Thanks, but I already have dinner plans.”

Mango's Curry was a grimy little low brow hole in the wall on base around the corner from the barracks. A combination of live jazz vibes floated through the air along with aromas of cardamom, cumin, and clove. Each seat was covered in red velvet fabric with a slight brown aged tint that you could only notice if you looked close enough. The lights inside were dimmed just enough to make anyone feel cozy, and distract from the lack of cleanliness. Mango, the owner, simply could not care less about what anyone thought about his place. What kept his shop open were the regulars who couldn't get enough of the food. Those regulars would bring their friends, and they would bring theirs, and so on, and that's what made it special. Mango knew every single regular by name and knew some ins and outs of the MM's dealings. He could have a conversation with anyone and always managed to relieve them of a secret or two. Truly, Mango was almost as passionate about gossip as he was his curry. From time to time, Mango hired bands to showcase their talents on stage to keep the vibe alive. Some of them came around a few nights in a row and then he'd never see them again. Others had long streaks of performing. Mango's crowd liked what they liked. A dressed-up jazz singer in a sleek long dress was sure to get more tips in one night than a guy playing his saxophone all week long.

Elara couldn't remember the first time she'd ever been to Mango's. She and Rome had always made time to say hello, and eat some curry. But Mango had a way of making everyone feel at home. And, he also had no problem keeping up with Elara's sass. Mango, an old grumpy goblin looking man, who measured 4 feet high and 2 feet in circumference, maintained loads of sarcasm and had a reputation for telling people exactly what was on his mind. Sometimes childish and petty, but that was Mango.

Elara hadn't seen Mango for a few years. After Rome's death, he came around to drop off food once in a while for Elara and her assigned MM guardian who was, somehow, supposed to

replace Rome. Food was the only way Mango knew how to tell someone he cared about them. As time passed, Mango stopped coming around, and she stopped reaching out. That was just the way things worked out sometimes. It wasn't anything other than time and life that fostered their disconnect. But now, being in the MM, Elara had a chance to reconnect with him, and in turn, reconnect with the memories she had with Rome.

The neon "Mango's Curry" sign blinked and changed colors from highlighter orange, to acidic green, then both together to create an unappealing brown color to mimic the color of his curry. From outside the door, she could smell the familiar spices. It was like being there for the first time all over again. After 13 weeks of intense conditioning and eating out of necessity rather than pleasure, her mouth watered. Elara opened the door to a dimly lit space where a band played a few melodies for Mango's guests.

"Hey ho, welcome to Mango's Cur—," Mango's standard greeting came out of him like second nature when he heard the door open, but cut himself off at the sight of Elara, "Wait, is that a goddamned Osborne showin' up at my door? E, is that you?" He squinted and jokingly slapped his eyes.

"What's wrong? Eyes not working like they used to, old man?" Elara walked toward the bar.

"Kid, shut your mouth, I ain't that old."

"I don't know about that... you've always been kind of old."

"I swear on all things holy I will kick you out of this place, don't even care how much I've missed ya!" Mango wagged his stubby finger, which seemed permanently stained yellow from his spices.

Elara smirked and surrendered, “Alright, alright, you’re not *that* old. You’re the youngest little goblin I’ve seen around!” She approached Mango and propped her elbow on his balding head, “And looks like you still have some growing to do!”

“You little twat,” Mango hobbled a few steps forward, turned around, hugged Elara, then gave her a swift punch on the arm, “and this one’s for being a brat!”

She rubbed her arm and sat down on a stool at the bar, “You going to make that up to me with some food?”

Mango hobbled back up the stairs behind the counter, and leaned over cupping his hands, “Not until ya tell me what you think ya doing here!”

“I mean, why else would I be here? I’m in MM training.”

“No, no, no. Why you’re *here*! Here, here!” He uncupped his hands, tapped his finger on the counter, and threw his hands up, “Ain’t seen ya in ages, kid!”

“Well, to be honest, I got tired of the food down at the chow hall. And I guess seeing you is just a plus.” Elara mockingly threw her hands up, too.

“Here I am, doing my best to be a welcoming host, and look at ya, mocking a poor old man who just wants to feed ya!” Mango stuck his tongue out at Elara and mumbled under his breath, walking off into the kitchen, “Ya like it hot? Not hot? Real hot? Real, real hot?” He yelled with a raspy voice, ending with a cough.

“Real hot!”

“Alight, alright, I got you, E! Hang tight!” another cough, likely his secret to a great curry.

Elara had never heard any jazz melodies, much less live music, other than at Mango’s. About the only exception was a scratchy snippet of a few tunes from her Relics class as a kid.

Earthly relics, though many didn't make their rounds within Martian pop culture, were an essential part of any good education. Rather, Earth was a novelty. Given they had the money, anyone could take trips just above what was left of its atmosphere. Never landing, and never getting close enough to make out anything specific, was part of the experience. The mystery of what could be down there was fascinating.

Mango brought out Elara's food as the jazz band began another song, this one was sultry and slow which caught Elara's attention. It wasn't everyday she heard music with so many words. What also caught her attention was the singer on stage. She swayed her hips as she began to sing about the magic of falling in love for the first time. *The heart is a thing that loves, loves, loves, and mine sure loves you. The heart is a thing that wants what it wants, and mine sure wants you.* Elara's face felt hot and flushed when the singer opened her eyes to meet Elara's. Had the singer spotted her before she'd spotted the singer? The singer's tight shoulder length curls bounced slightly with her movement. Her eyes were a deep olive and seemed to sparkle. Elara turned to Mango who also seemed mesmerized by the singer as he walked out of the kitchen.

"Who's that?" Elara asked

Mango snapped out of it, "What? Who?"

"That girl up there. What's her name?"

"Oh, her? Rain."

"Rain? Interesting. Rain what?"

"Rain, uh, something with a p... Patel! Rain Patel. She's bringing me good business. Folks like her."

"Mango, do you know how to make a sidecar?"

“Girl, who do you think I am? Of course!”

“Great. Can I please order two of them?”

“Two?”

“That’s right.” Elara raised her eyebrows and looked over at Rain.

“Fine. But you better eat! I didn’t make that for nothin’!” Mango responded and waddled over to grab two glasses.

Mango came back with yellow drinks that smelled beautifully of fresh citrus. Elara quickly piled food into her mouth, gave Mango a nod of tasty approval, grabbed the drinks and found a place to sit in front of the stage. The song ended soon after. Elara stood up expecting Rain to quickly walk off, but she was surprised when Rain began to speak.

“That drink for me?” Rain’s radiant smile was contagious.

“Not at all.” Elara playfully scratched her head, “I’m just really thirsty and thought you might enjoy watching me drink both of them.”

“I’d love to.” Rain laughed and walked to the front of the stage, holding out her hand, “A little help miss…”

“Elara.” Elara responded, “I’m Elara.”

“A little help, Elara?” She took Rain’s hand who carefully hopped off stage. They sat at the table.

“I saw you talking to Mango,” Rain began, “You know him?”

“Something like that. Me and my dad used to come here when I was little. I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“Elara, I want to say you look familiar. But maybe it’s just your clothes. A lot of you folks come around here.”

“What do you mean?”

“MM’s.”

Elara looked around, “I mean, I seem to be the only one...”

Rain took hold of one of the drinks and put it to her lips. The glass was left with a rosy tint. “You missed them earlier. I didn’t hear much but apparently there’s something going on.”

“Honestly, I’m still a recruit. I’m in training right now. I wouldn’t know about anything important yet.”

“What kind of training?”

“I’m an Aviation Mechanic. What about you? Do you sing full-time?” Elara sipped her drink.

“Mostly. Mango’s been good to me, and I make good money here, but I kind of hate it.”

“What? But you’re so good!”

“That’s what they say...” Rain took another sip, “But putting on a show isn’t my thing.”

“What’s your thing then?”

“I paint!” Rain sat up straight and smiled.

“So why don’t you sell your paintings?”

“Do you know how many times I’ve heard that?”

“Uh, probably a lot?”

“More than a lot.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Fine art is an old-world thing. Why would people need to hire an artist these days when anything can be made with pixels on a screen? Painting is a highly underappreciated

craft.” Rain raised her eyebrows, crossed her legs, and took another sip. “What is this? It’s so good.”

“It’s called a sidecar. My dad used to order it. Cognac, orange liqueur, and lemon.”

“I’m going to need another one of these…” Rain gulped the rest of her drink.

“I just so happen to have all the ingredients at my place.” Elara finished her drink, too.

“Would you look at that. Some coincidence.” Rain winked.

“It would be a shame not to share, you know.” Elara said.

“It definitely would be.” Rain played along.

“Because I’m so generous, I’d like to offer to make you the perfect sidecar.”

“They say sharing is caring.”

“I’ll have you know I am *very* caring when it comes to sharing.” Elara winked.

“I like the sound of that.”

Chapter 7

Rain gathered a few pieces of art to take to the gallery. Elara's kindness and reassurance made her feel guilty about Ruse and Rinko's. It wasn't guilt about the job, but guilt about why she'd gotten it, and how. Ruse and Rinko's was a haven for those who worked in The District. They offered women "honest" work, whatever *that* meant, as a means to get away from The District.

Rain's association with The District wasn't by choice. Coming from a long line of Earth Revivalists, Rain was forced into sex work as a spy. It was a choice between gaining information about the MM, or death. The Revivalists on Mars kept a low profile to inform the others back on Earth. After women went missing, it was Rain's job to work in The District and figure out what the MM was up to. There were talks of secret experiments happening on Venus, heck, something suspicious was always happening on Venus. The Revivalists knew all about the MM's torture chambers there, but this was something new, something totally different. Rain also wanted to know why women had gone missing, but it was getting too real now. Elara had been good to her over the past months. And honestly, in the short time they were together, she came to like Elara. A lot. It wasn't fair to be using her like this. But what else could she do? Rain remembered her last conversation with Remy.

"Rain, I want you to know that a lot is on your shoulders. Our livelihood is in your hands. Our chance is near, can you feel it?" Remy ask her.

"Getting anything out of them is getting harder."

"Then you need to *work* harder. We've been planning this for longer than you've been alive. Longer than I've been alive. Longer than..."

“I’m tired, Remy. My body can’t take this anymore. I’ve been at this for months with nothing in return.”

“In return?”

“Yeah, Remy. I’m doing a lot up here while you and everyone else sit back and wait!”

“Sit and wait? Is that what you think we’re doing? They left us down here to die! This is the least you can do!”

“I didn’t ask to be born into this Revivalist bullshit.”

“Would you prefer the alternative?” Remy proposed.

“Well, I guess I’ll let you know if that’s ever what I want. But I can assure you I’d rather take my own life before I let you take it. But I know this isn’t why you wanted to talk.”

“Mango’s Curry. Have you heard of it?”

“Some place on base, I think?”

“That’s right. Do you see where this is going?”

“Is there anyone I should look out for?”

“Rome’s daughter. She’s a new recruit. Find her, get close to her, and see where that takes us.”

“Does this mean I can take a break from The District.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re making us good money. Figure it out and get it done. It’s not like you’re doing anything else valuable with your time.”

Rain headed out. Ruse and Rinko’s was her only solution. She’d work to put on an art show or two, and then head to The District in her spare time. Elara would think she stayed late working on her show. Art was the only solace Rain found, and she was good at it. Remy, on the other hand, didn’t like the idea. She could hear him in the back of her head, “Don’t fuck this up,

Rain. Remember who she is.” *Remember who she is.* Elara was just a person. She’d never done any wrong. Rome was the one who was behind all the missing women. The Revivalists didn’t know exactly what the MM was up to, but they did know Rome was in charge of it all. As Rain got to know Elara, she realized she didn’t know anything. Why would Remy want her to get close to Elara? Why not Thorne? Wasn’t she Rome’s accomplice?

Rain made it to her safe haven and glanced over at her purgatory. She’d be there later doing the same damn thing. You couldn’t see it from the outside, but down the alley in the distance, she knew what was there. And so many others knew, too. Those who didn’t just walked by without a second thought. But Rain? She knew. And she was disgusted, at herself, and at what she was doing despite knowing it was wrong. She unlocked the empty gallery and made her way to her own personal corner. The walls were filled with so many types of landscape paintings, odd sculptures, and all of them were so much better than hers. But hers? Hers were real. They were accurate little depictions of what Remy told her Earth really looked like down there.

Chapter 8

Elara opened her apartment door which was now bright and cheery after meeting Rain. Rain who had stopped her gigs at Mango's, which he wasn't thrilled about, moved in with Elara. What began with a night of sharing drinks, and more, turned into a fully unexpected romance. Since transitioning to Aviation Mechanic training, Elara could now afford to provide for both of them. Elara's living situation was perfectly fine before Rain. She didn't have much, no decorations, a couple of dishes and pans, no more than one set of silverware, and for what it was worth, that was all she needed. She was at work most of the time anyway. Elara and Rome never bought pillows just because they looked nice, and they didn't buy candles and things that made their place smell good. As long as things didn't smell bad, still worked and served their purpose, was there a need for anything else? Elara couldn't deny, though, that it was nice to have more than one pillow on the bed, and yeah, it was nice to have a couch, and a few chairs, and drawers to put things in. Rain also displayed her paintings. Some would come down as she sold them, they would soon be replaced with another, and the cycle would continue.

Rain was a talented painter and had gone around to a few galleries in hopes of selling more of her paintings, or even a few commissions. Mars didn't exactly value the art scene, but there were a few areas near The District that served as havens for artists like her. Though not extremely lucrative, there were still people who were willing to pay for beautiful works of art. One gallery in particular caught interest in Rain's Earthly landscapes. Her reimagining of what it looked like caught the attention of the owners of Ruse and Rinko's gallery. Ruse and Rinko, a married duo, offered Rain an opening in their schedule to put on an art show alongside others whose focus were also other-worldly pieces. A woman, who was well known around The District, but trying to get back into making money through more traditional means, had suddenly

backed out of their upcoming show, conveniently leaving an opening for Rain. Elara was happy to help her, but really, Rain had helped her more than she knew. Elara never expected to meet anyone, much less get serious, and so quickly. Her mind was set on continuing her father's legacy in the MM and keep the Osborne name relevant. Settling down with anyone was never the intention, but this is where she found herself. A waft of something sweet and savory hit Elara when she opened the door. Cinnamon? Cardamom? Was Mango here?

“Rain, I'm home! Hey, is Mango here?”

“Sorry hon, can't hear you!” Rain yelled from the kitchen, “Come here! I don't want to burn anything!”

Elara dropped her keys in the key bowl, another new phenomenon that meant Elara hadn't lost her keys since Rain put it there, along with an entryway table, and began to unbutton her shirt as she made her way to the kitchen.

“I was asking if Mango was— woah, what's this?”

“Can you smell that? It almost smells like his, right? Like Mango's!”

Elara wafted the smell of curry to her nose, “Damn, it really does. But the real test is... does it taste like his?” Elara turned around to grab a spoon from the new collection of five, and dipped into the chunky mustard colored concoction.

“What's that? Potatoes and carrots?” Elara pointed into the pot with a joking suspicion.

“Obviously! Well... what do you think?”

“Mhm... I taste the curry power, cardamom...”

“Yes, yes...”

“And... mmm... there's another interesting flavor. Something I've never tasted before, it's kind of sour, I think? Bleh!”

“What! Sour? No, no, no, I didn’t put anything sour in there! Maybe the coconut milk was bad? Dang it.”

Elara laughed, and Rain worried, “What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing! I’m joking! It’s great!” Rain smirked and nudged Elara, “Honestly, Rain, you should bottle this up and give Mango a run for his money!”

“Ha, you’re so funny. Ok, but do you really like it? Come on tell me!”

“Yes! I’m telling you, it’s great. Maybe it’s a little sour but...”

Another nudge from Rain. “I’m kidding! I’m kidding! Seriously, it’s good. Have you made rice? Should I make some? Can I help?”

“Go get changed first and then come help me. You owe me after being so mean!” Rain stuck her tongue out and nudged Elara again, but this time with her curvy hip, all the way until Elara was out of the kitchen.

Elara went into the bedroom to change over into a pair of MM cold weather sweats, and a long sleeve. Rain liked it cold, Elara didn’t, but she could compromise.

“Hey, can you teach me how to do the rice again?” Elara walked out of the bedroom.

“Um, sorry, I already set it to cook.”

“Wait, you said I could help you.”

“Can you come sit with me?” Rain delicately slipped her hand into Elara’s, and led her to the couch. Something was coming, but Elara couldn’t be sure what it was.

“Is... everything alright? Did I do something wrong?” They sat facing each other, legs crossed.

“No, no. You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just...look,” Rain settled in, “I want to tell you how thankful I am for this. Whatever this is,” Rain gestured her hand back and forth

between them, “I mean, I know what this is. What *we* are, but I need you to know that. I really, really need you to know how much you mean to me.”

“You mean a lot to me too, Rain. What’s going on? Where’s this coming from?”

“I know you said it’s nothing to worry about, but tomorrow...”

“I’ll be back really quick. Like I said, it’s an overnight kind of a thing with Thorne and the crew.”

“There’s something off about that woman.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve only seen her in passing, but I get this weird vibe from her.”

“Well, she’s kind of my boss, so I don’t have a choice.”

“And, I mean, isn’t it dangerous to get so close to Earth?”

“Rain, there’s going to be a lot scarier things than circling Earth. You know that.”

“I don’t want to lose you.”

Elara held Rain’s face with both her hands, “Rain, don’t worry about that. You won’t. I’m right here right now, and I’m going to come back safe and sound.”

Elara sympathized with Rain’s fear. She’d gone through it, too, and the person she loved most never made it back. She took Rain’s hand, cupped it onto her face, closed her eyes, and gasped.

“I love you so much, but what you should really be worrying about is that curry!” Elara playfully opened her eyes extra wide.

Rain squinted hers at Elara, “Shut up, you’re still going to eat it.”

“Of course! And I’m going to tell Mango it’s better than his!”

“As if he didn’t hate me already. Has he really lost business since I left?”

“No, not at all. He’s a dramatic little troll!” Elara put one hand on her hip and wagged a pointed finger at Rain with the other, “You know how he is. ‘Ya gonna owe me money, E! How’m I gonna find another Rain!’”

“You’re going to be ok, right?”

“Yes, I’m going to be fine.” Elara now cupped her hand to Rain’s face.

“Ok, great. Because I’ll be really mad if you die!”

Chapter 9

Another day brought Rain back to the gallery. Time was such an odd thing, Rain thought, someone could work all day long doing what they loved, and still, it passed so quickly. So many of the paintings she curated and hung up were done, seemly, in a matter of minutes. Working in The District was long and brutal. Cleaning herself up enough to get back home to Elara without any suspicion was a chore. Remy insisted Elara knew something, but that couldn't have been farther from the truth.

On the ship, Thorne walked around Arial I, checking on every single Marine at their station. Elara's job was to keep tabs on fuel supplies and any electronic malfunctions that could happen, 'preventative action' Thorne's voice was soldered in her mind, 'You have lives depending on you, Osborne. You're the problem solver here. The fixer. Don't know what you're doing? Figure it out. Get used to it.'

"Osborne!"

"Yes, Major."

"What's she looking like?"

"All good, ma'am. Arial I's got enough juice to get us to Earth and back."

This was every MM's rite of passage. Fly around Earth to get lectured about how Mars better not end up like Earth.

"Jag!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Jag repeated to himself, as usual, the steps he needed to take to complete a task.

"First thing's first, shut your mouth, you're giving me a headache. Second, can you please inform the rest of your crew mates how long until we reach Earth's atmosphere?"

“Yes ma’am.” Jag glanced at all the numbers in front of him, struggling to decide which one to choose. Truthfully, he had no idea what he was looking at.

“Jag.” Thorne walked over to his station, “Sometimes I have no idea how you made it this far. You see these numbers here?” Thorne pointed, and Jag looked up at her nodding in agreement, “We’ve got 30 minutes till we get there.” Jag nodded again, “Does your tiny brain understand?”

A quick trip is all it was. Elara’s promise to Rain could easily be kept. She wondered what Rain was doing and her curiosity led her to make a “routine comms check” in the communication pod. Someone needed to make sure the comm systems were working, right? Arial I was on its way to Earth, and while the crew rested for the remainder of the flight, she figured she could slip away without them, or Thorne, noticing. Down the hall was a room with a large screen and a few simple options to select. She opted for a video call. It would be quick. She dialed in for Rain Patel, number 201-849. The call loaded.

“E! Hi!”

“Not so loud. I’m, uh, doing a quick comms check.”

“Oh... right,” Rain gave a suspicious looking nod to affirm she knew what Elara was really up to.

“Seems the systems are running smoothly, hmm...” Elara tapped the screen a few times here and there, as if there was anything to check. They both grinned and giggled.

“You at the gallery?”

“Yep. Want to see what I did today?” Rain changed the camera view on her phone to show an outlined sketch of a landscape, “Well, I finished some other stuff. But this is what I’m doing right now. I don’t have a name for it yet, and it’s just a sketch, but it took me a lot of time

to get it right. The next step is to take some paint to the canvas and really start the dang thing. Painting is pretty hard..." Rain's voice drifted into silence. She contemplated explaining more of her process.

"Wow, that looks great!" Elara didn't know how hard art was, but she took Rain's word for it.

Rain changed the camera view to face her, "Anyway, how are things on the ship? How are things with you?"

"Can't complain. Everything's fine. We'll be there soon. Everyone is just hanging around for now."

"And Thorne?"

"What about her?"

"I don't know. Just wondering."

"Rain, I'm fine. Why don't you like her? What is it?"

"Nothing really. Like I said, something's just off with her."

"She knew my dad really well, so I'm not worried about it."

"Well, if you're not worried, then I'm not worried. Love you!" Rain gave a big, squinty eyed smile.

"You're a weirdo." Elara chuckled softly and stuck her tongue out at Rain.

"You're more of a weirdo for loving me." Rain stuck her tongue out, too.

"Well, I better get back. Thanks for helping me check the comms." Elara winked.

"Any time." Rain winked back.

Honestly, if Rain was worried now, then she had a lot more coming to her later on when things got real. Could she handle something like that? Rain, an artist, someone with more

emotion than she knew what to do with? What would happen when she came back from some mission all messed up in the head, missing limbs, or worse? Elara's mind spiraled. Was it resentment? But this was all Elara's idea. She insisted Rain quit Mango's and follow her dream to be a full-time artist. The closer Arial I approached Earth, the more Elara questioned herself and her relationship with Rain. Maybe, Elara thought, that's why her dad never brought anyone around. Love was a distraction, and maybe he had that all figured out. Elara made it back to the crew just in time. Thorne stood in front of the crowd.

"Marines, gather round! Osborne, I trust our communication systems are doing just fine?"

Elara said nothing and nodded in agreement. Yes, the comms were indeed doing just fine. Arial I slowed down swiftly and began its rotation around Earth, a now barren wasteland, with sparse greenery and water flow.

"That right there, is a failure." Thorne pointed outward, "Take a good hard look at it. If you don't want Mars to fail, then it's your job to not fuck up. What happened down there was a climate catastrophe they couldn't come back from, and that's why we take good care of our fellow civilians. Sustainable habits, accountability, and a singular governmental body is what helps to make sure this never happens to us. Everyone here is an integral part of making sure Mars continues to remain the greatest planet it can be. For better or worse, you all are a team, and I expect each one of you to act like it. Now, get your asses over here, look out this window, and take it all in. Remember everything you see. Study it. Write notes. I don't care what you do, just never forget it. I'll expect a detailed report from each of you."

While Elara and the rest received a lecture from Thorne, which was what the training was really about, Rain finished up at the gallery. It was time to head down that alley and into the rocky hills that was The District.

“Hey Ron,” She greeted the bouncer, a large and strange looking man who had more than a few modifications done to his face.

“Hey kid,” Ron replied, his voice was always much deeper than she remembered, “You got customers waiting inside.”

“Fuck them. They can wait.”

“That’s my girl. Go get ‘em, baby.”

Ron opened a hidden door to his left that led to a changing room. All kinds of women prepared their bodies for the night. Many of them, like Ron, had altered their bodies into whatever fetish made them the most money. There was always someone who came to The District to find just what they were looking for, no matter how wild. That’s what kept business coming. Rain’s customers liked her, though, not always because of what she looked like, but how she treated them. That was, horribly. An interrogation tactic in disguise, Rain knew so many her customer’s secrets, and she could blackmail almost anyone who came to her. But they trusted her, and that’s why they kept coming back. She made nice with a few random guests, but she had her regulars, some who she knew were MM affiliated. Generals, important diplomats, newly graduated recruits, and still, she had no leads on any of the women who were missing.

Ron was right, she had someone waiting. General Tass sat, unsurprisingly, in his usual spot at the very end of the room in a corner with two women, one at each side. ‘Appetizers’ is what he liked to call them. Disgusting. Rain cringed as she walked toward him. The women beside him left as soon as they saw her, mumbling under their breath as General Tass handed them a few bills for their time.

“Well, well, my little singer’s come to visit me.” Tass patted his lap, inviting her to sit.

“For once, I’d like to see you in uniform.” Rain sat on his lap and tugged the collar of his shirt, “It doesn’t matter anyway, everyone knows who you are, and I know what you’d do to them if they talked.”

“Do you know what I’d do to you if you talked?” He grabbed Rain’s neck with his chubby hand, “Tell me, my little singer, do you know what I’d do?”

Rain struggled to respond. She hated every second of this. His stale breath, clammy hands on her body, his invitation suitable for a pet. Fuck Remy. She wanted out.

“I...” She swallowed hard, “I... want you... to show me.” His grip got tighter as she spoke.

“That’s right, it’s my turn to show you, little singer.” Tass looked over to another bouncer nearby and gave him a nod, finally letting go of Rain, “Let’s go.”

The bouncer let them into a long hallway that was red from top to bottom. Doors lined the walls with signs indicating if a room was in use or not. Tass opened the door to room number 11 where there stood a few men in MM uniforms.

“Guests? I don’t do guests.” Rain said, standing outside the room.

“Come in, little singer. Sit with us.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Don’t make us go get you. We don’t want to make this any harder for you.”

Rain looked down the hall and jetted toward the exit in the opposite direction they entered.

“Little singer, please don’t run! You’re only making this harder for yourself!”

Rain made it to the end of the hall and slammed open the door. More MM’s waited for her on the other side. Fuck Remy.

Chapter 10

Just like that, Rain was gone. She left everything, but she was gone. Elara didn't know how much time passed. Time really was an odd thing. At first, she thought Rain stayed late working at the gallery. A couple missed calls to Rain made her worry. When they spoke on the comms the day before, Rain seemed completely fine. Concerned of course, but fine. She's got to be at the gallery, Elara thought, there's no other place she could be. She couldn't have left just like that. As minutes turned into hours, Elara contemplated going down to the gallery. It was late. What if something happened to her on her way home? Ruse and Rinko's was in a sketchy part of town. Elara, still in her uniform, changed over and made the decision to head out. Ruse and Rinko's Gallery sat a few miles from Elara's place. Not too far, she'd walked and ran ten times that in a given week during Phase 1. Elara didn't know what she'd do if Rain wasn't there.

On the way there was a night market with lively performers and food vendors. Just outside the entrance was one of those preachy types who yapped about conspiracy theories and uncovering horrible truths about the MM. Without the MM, Elara thought, we'd all be dead. Homelessness was an old-world thing. On Mars, everyone was taken care of, and yet there were still people on the streets who found something to complain about. *They want to control you! The MM is no good! They have a torture camp on Venus! They'll kill us all!* Elara passed the preaching man, and with a few coins in her pocket, anxiety crawling up and down her throat, she made a bee line for a kebab truck. A curly pink-haired woman greeted her at the window.

"Welcome to K-Kebab! What can I get for you dear?"

"Can I just get whatever's popular? To go, please. I'm kind of in a hurry. For Elara, please."

“In a hurry, but still got time for food? My girl!” The pink haired woman snapped her fingers, smiled, and called out to the cook, “Ray! We got a double K to-go, double time, honey!” She turned back to Elara who held out her hand with coins, “Thank you! It’s coming right up, sweet pea!”

Elara stood around with the others who were waiting for their orders. She hoped it wouldn’t take too long. She also hoped she’d catch Rain walking home, or sitting there at the night market having a solo dinner and didn’t bother to tell Elara for whatever reason. Maybe Rain got her days mixed up. Maybe she misunderstood Elara and thought she was coming back the next day, instead of today. Or, maybe, Rain was with someone else. In someone’s bed. In someone else’s arms. Cooking someone else a curry concoction. Elara bit her lip and swayed slowly with her hands on her hips. To her left, she heard whispers turn into gasps, and a conversation ensued between two young strangers. Elara listened.

“So, you’re telling me they went missing? Like, poof! Or, like.... Kidnapped?”

“Come on man, what do you mean poof? Does this sound like a magic trick to you?”

“Where are they taking them?”

“Shit, no idea, but you know the MM has something to do with it.”

Elara’s sway came to a halt. The MM? Ridiculous, “What did you say?” Elara turned and snapped.

“The missing chicks from The District. You didn’t hear?”

“But what about the MM?” Elara paced over to the two strangers, “What did you say about us? Is there a problem?”

“Na, it’s not like that,” The second voice said, “We don’t know anything. We don’t want any trouble. It’s just, I don’t know... never mind. We don’t want any trouble.”

“Don’t know what?” Elara stepped closer.

The second voice responded again, “There’s a rumor going around that the MM is taking people from The District. Stealing them. But, you know, it’s just a rumor and —”

Elara interrupted, “You ungrateful little shits. Do you know what the MM does to people like you who go around spreading lies?”

“Double K for Elara!” The pink haired lady yelled out. Elara took a deep breath, looked them both in the eyes, and turned around to pick up her food.

“Thanks,” Elara said, unenthusiastically.

“You alright, sweet pea?” The pink haired lady asked.

“I... you know, I have no idea.”

“Let me tell you something. The double K is a cure-all, guaranteed. My advice? Eat up before you go on doing whatever it is you’re in a hurry to do. Trust me. And take care, honey. Don’t go beating up on any kids either, alright?”

The pink haired lady was right. Elara thanked her once again and walked off. Not to Ruse and Rinko’s, but back home. Rain had made her choice and Elara needed to make hers, too.

Chapter 11

Back at the apartment, Elara followed the pink haired lady's instructions. She sat on the couch which faced the balcony overlooking the city. Rain was in there, somewhere. She had to be. Elara finished up the last of the kebab. It wasn't a cure-all, but it was definitely doing something, because she still felt sad, mad even, but she knew Rain better than that. She wouldn't have walked out on her. That's not who she was. Rain and Elara hadn't known each other very long, but even then, they came to know each other in a way Elara never experienced. Rain liked to talk things out no matter how big or small. She was honest, communicative, caring. She made dating fun. If something bothered her, or if something was on her mind, she found a way to gently bring it to Elara's attention. Elara thought about what those young boys said earlier. *The District*, Elara thought. No... there's no way. Ruse and Rinko's was right there, so close to The District, but Rain had no business there. And the MM? Taking women? For what? Elara stared at the empty piece of foil in her hands, then at her laptop sitting in front of her on the coffee table.

It didn't take long to find articles written by a few conspiracy theorists. Being connected online really wasn't her thing. It wasn't Rome's thing, either. It was a matter of protecting Elara. Her exposure to what was online scared him. And yet, the very thing he wanted to protect her from, was the very thing Elara was about to find out. A rabbit hole of articles, from sites like Martian Daily, Red News, and Martian Times, entertained ideas of MM kidnappings, as related to The District in their op-ed sections. Elara wrote down every single piece of relevant information, and everything that could be related to Ruse and Rinko's. If she could piece together evidence to support any reason Rain was kidnapped, then was she giving in to a conspiracy? Was this even a conspiracy at all? Elara found an interesting article about Ruse and

Rinko's, which she now knew, according to Big Red Daily, was a 'Sanctuary to the women of The District.'

Big Red Daily

June 14, 4044

Author: Stanton Marsh

Ruse and Rinko's Gallery Provides Sanctuary

I sat down with the advocate duo, Ruse and Rinko Pinkman, who have just opened up a gallery with an aim to help women from The District transition to a more sustainable life. People have called them hypocrites, others call them saviors. In this exclusive interview they address some concerns, judgements, and talk about why they started their gallery in the first place.

Stanton: Ruse and Rinko, that has a nice ring to it!

Ruse: Ah, yes, yes, yes. We do love that, we always love a little rhyme.

Rinko: I would have opted for Rinko and Ruse, but of course I am the nicer one so his name is first.

All laugh

Stanton: So, in your own words, tell me... why are people calling you out as hypocrites? What's going on there?

Rinko: As you know, I performed. The money was good, but I wasn't going anywhere. My life felt empty and I had very little purpose in life. I found art through what I guess you could call a colleague of mine. We loved his drawings, and sometimes, people commissioned him just to draw them in whatever way they wanted – we are still talking about The District after all. I met Ruse after I quit dancing and kissing strangers and all of the things one does down there. I wanted to find something else, and there he was, just waiting for me. Ruse was my something

else. We met at a bar, one of his bars, as you know Ruse is quite the investor. We hit it off, and may his soul rest peacefully, Ruse and Rinko's was born out of my colleague's sweet memory.

Ruse: Yes, yes, yes, that is how it happened. Yes.

Rinko: And the hypocrisy, I suppose it comes from people who truly don't understand our goal. Truthfully, it is no bother to us. We know very well what we're doing, and those we serve, I can guarantee, stand by us.

Stanton: And what is your goal? Do you want everyone out of The District?

Ruse: No, why, not at all. As Rinko said, she was looking for something more – and art was her something more. We believe we can serve as a safety blanket and transitional piece for those at The District who may not have a place there. The work, down there, is not for everyone. And, well, we'd like to help anyone who changes their mind about that line of work. Because it is work. And hard work at that. It's a matter of performance, you must be a wonderful actor, a wonderful host. We aim to be a sanctuary.

Rinko: A sanctuary, that's right!

Stanton: That's lovely. How many people have you helped since you've been open?

Ruse: As of today, mind you we have been open for just about 3 months, we have given seven individuals space at our gallery. The opening art show will take place at the end of the year, and this is where pieces will get sold, and hopefully, our artists gain more commissions from those in attendance. The show, titled "Glimpses", is a representation of our Earthly curiosities. That is: What might Earth look like in its current state? What could it have looked like? Of course, we can only see it from a distance, even when we take rides around its orbit, we can never really see what is down there.

Stanton: Why Earth?

Ruse: Why not Earth?

Rinko: We are obsessed, if I'm honest.

Ruse: And you know what they say, don't you?

Stanton: What is that?

Rinko: There is apparently a myth going around. We've heard whispers concerning people who might still be down there. Impossible! Could you imagine?

All laugh

Stanton: Rinko, I have a question for you, specifically. Can you give us a picture of what a typical night at The District might look like as someone, such as yourself, who made a fair living off the income?

Rinko: Wow, Stanton, you know I could show you instead if you'd like.

All Laugh

Rinko: I can say, honestly, it's much like any line of work. You get ready. You know, hair, makeup, all of that. And then... you set off into the wild. There is always something for someone there. As Ruse said, it is so much like a performance. It's actually quite liberating, to have the ability to be someone else, push yourself to do new things, being careful all the while, of course! Safety always first! And, I have no ill will toward anyone down there. It was great for a time, and then I moved on, and there's nothing wrong with that! Sometimes we like something, and then we have our fill.

Stanton: Would you consider going back?

Ruse: She'd be a hit going back now!

All laugh

Rinko: I haven't put any thought to it!

Stanton: I agree, I think you'd be a hit!

Rinko: Oh Stanton, don't tempt me!

All laugh

Stanton: Thank you both for your time today.

Elara finished reading the rest of Stanton Marsh's article, which ended with a clear acknowledgement that sex work *is* work, and that Ruse and Rinko were like any other business owners, who not only hope their business could remain lucrative, but most importantly, help anyone part of The District who felt they couldn't get their bearings there. It was a fine balance, Stanton said, of fostering a safe place for anyone to choose the path of sex work, and also support those who may need an out from it.

Elara read enough. Pieces of paper, any paper she could find around, were written on, surrounding her from the couch to the floor. She closed her laptop and placed it back on the coffee table, which was also covered with notes. She gathered her guns and displayed them around the living room. Similar to the contents of her bedside crate back in Phase 2, what lay on the floor wasn't really hers. These guns belonged to her dad, and after he died, she made it her duty to maintain them, cleaning them every so often just as he did. His antique gun cabinet was displayed at the front of his room. It was made of a rare, polished hard oak, and thick glass to display old Earthly rifles, a Colt M16, Benelli M4, and Barret M107. Below the display were two drawers, one which housed a few handguns, a Colt 1911, Glock 19, and a Desert Eagle 50AE, and the other stored various cleaning supplies, cleaner lubricant and preservative, more commonly known in the old Earth Corps. as CLP, a few brushes, cleaning rods, rags, and a half empty bag of pipe cleaners. Elara closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she remembered the smell of the oak and cleaning oil.

Chapter 12

The day's training involved more schematics. Elara couldn't think straight with Thorne hovering around from table to table, making sure each group worked together to understand various ship parts. She wondered if Thorne knew anything about what was going on in The District. After the group work, each Marine was tasked with cleaning and re-installing each part that was taken off the aircraft. Elara was surprised when Thorne approached her.

"Osborne, what's going on with you?"

"Nothing, ma'am."

"You're here, but your mind is somewhere else."

Elara hesitated, but asked the question anyway, "Do you know anything about The District?"

"What do you mean?" Thorne crossed her arms.

"I think there's something going on. I think girls have gone missing."

"That seems very unfortunate."

"Well, yeah. Do you know anything about it?"

"No, Osborne. I don't." Thorne lied.

"I read something online—"

"Osborne, anyone can say anything online. If there's anything going on, don't you think the MM would be working to solve the problem?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"My advice to you is to spend your time more wisely and focus on turning in your assignments. It didn't go unnoticed you were the only one who didn't turn in your report. Meet

me in my office when you're done here. It's time we talked." Thorne walked off with her arms still crossed, but not before making a final round checking on each Marine's work.

Thorne was right, Elara thought, the MM would have already done something if people were being hurt. People lie all the time. She finished up, waved goodbye to Jag, and grabbed her things. The base was lonelier than usual but not uncommon for the time of day. The sun was getting ready to set when she knocked on Thorne's open door.

"Private Osborne, thank you for coming in. Close the door and sit down, please."

Elara sat across Thorne's clear acrylic desk, on a clear acrylic chair. She scribbled in her notebook before looking up at Elara. The office was cold through and through. Aside from her sparse acrylic furniture and blue-grey painted walls, the only other thing in the room was a purple rock displayed on her desk. Who knows where from, but apparently important enough to be displayed in the plainest room on base. The MM base, like many others before it on Earth, was in itself somewhat like a town. Roads and pathways led to shops and restaurants, as well as housing facilities for families and others. The building was the tallest on Mars and modeled after the architecture of what were once Earth's tallest buildings. As technology and Martian science advanced, architects gained the ability to develop buildings with much more ambitious heights than the ones whose remnants lay on Earth.

"How long have we known each other?" Thorne began, putting her pen down.

"For the most part, I've known you all my life, Major."

"And how is it we know each other?"

Elara made every effort not to express her confusion. "My father, ma'am. He was also a Marine. He was even your Commander for a time, as you are mine now." Elara responded.

"Osborne, is your father the reason you signed up?"

“Never needed another reason.” Elara responded, “But respectfully, I don’t get the feeling you called me here to play 21 questions.”

Thorne, sitting behind her desk as poised as ever, held her hand out and gestured toward the window, “Let’s take a walk, shall we?”

A walk in the MM’s gardens meant there was something more serious and private Thorne wanted to talk about. The MM’s gardens were home to numerous greenhouses with various insects, plants, shrubs, and other vegetation, from other planets that needed special care. After years of research and experiments, scientists were able to figure out how to keep some trees from Earth alive on Mars. Since childhood, Elara’s favorite greenhouse to visit was the one that held plants and insects from Earth. They both walked toward the immense glass structure that was the Earth greenhouse. They entered one at a time into a chamber, then inside. They walked along its outer path.

“How’s Rain doing?” Thorne asked.

“She’s... to be honest with you, I don’t know. But I’m worried about —.” Elara began, before Thorne continued over her.

“What do you mean?”

“We split up,” technically not a lie, Elara thought.

Thorne came to a halt, “Sorry to hear that. Well, that’s less distraction. So that’s good, right?”

Elara stopped, too, and looked down as she responded, “Yup. More time to focus.” Again, not a lie. Elara walked over to an incubator which held a caterpillar cocoon, “When we got back from Earth, I went home, and she was gone. She hasn’t been back.”

“Is she alright?” Thorne asked.

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to figure out.” Elara looked at Thorne. Rain was right, she did have a weird vibe to her.

Thorne turned to give her back to Elara and continued to walk, “Well, that explains your missing report. Don’t think I’m here to cut you any slack.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I’ll do better next time.”

“Look, I wanted to meet with you today because there’s a high-risk mission I want you to lead.”

“What is it?” Elara crossed her arms as she walked next to Thorne. Something was coming.

“We need a soil sample from a foreign planet.”

“What intel have the drones brought back?”

“We haven’t sent any drones.”

“A rover then?”

“No rover.”

“Then you want us to send them?”

“No. Actually, the exact opposite. I’m sending you. And some others.”

“Major, how are we supposed to go get a soil sample from a planet we have no information about. What about protocol?” Elara crossed her arms a little tighter.

“As I said, this mission is *high-risk*. The information we do have is that this planet’s atmosphere resembles Earth’s.” Thorne began to walk a little slower now.

“If that’s the case, then why not send a drone? Or a rover?” Elara sped up to walk in front of Thorne.

“Tech would take too long to prep. We need a team to get in there, get what we need, and get out.”

“We function as a team, Major, as an entire unit. You said it yourself. We’re only able to do our job because of the intel we get from Tech. Without Tech, we might be risking too much. What happens if we get there and the atmosphere isn’t—”

Thorne cut Elara off, “If I’m not mistaken, it’s what you signed up for, isn’t it? Didn’t you go off on your own, without your team, to make a call to your girlfriend?”

“I was checking the systems.” Elara swallowed.

Thorne put her hand on her hips and looked down at her boots before she continued, “Your father used to send my crew and me on missions like this all the time. I spent enough time with him to know your excuse is bullshit. And honestly, that’s why I’m asking you to do this. He had the same curiosity you do, and I think that’s what this mission needs.”

“Why haven’t I heard of this before? Breaking protocol for a soil sample?” Elara asked.

“The only people who know are the people involved. It’s kept under wraps,” Thorne put her hand on Elara’s shoulder and squeezed it firmly, “you understand, right?”

Elara turned her head to look at Thorne’s hand, and then at her eyes, “Yeah. Sure do.”

“One more thing, Elara Osborne. Do your job, devil dog. Get it done and get it done right. Don’t worry about anything else other than what I need you to do. I wouldn’t want us to run into any problems. Would you?”

Chapter 13

After their talk, Elara made her way to Mango's. He cleaned a spot on the bar for her.

"Hey kid, how goes it?" Mango greeted her in his distinctive raspy voice. Elara, on the other hand, only greeted him with a nod as she untied her hair which was held in tight, low bun.

"Damn kid, that's all I get? A nod and stinkin' hair on the floor? You ungrateful little..." Mango hobbled away toward the kitchen, mumbling insults under his breath.

"Don't forget the drink!" Elara shouted at him once he'd already disappeared. She put her head down on the cold, damp, counter, and gave an audible sigh.

"Well, it's a good thing I got your back, huh? Get your ungrateful forehead off my counter so you can eat and tell me what's wrong with you." Mango walked back moments later with a bowl of rice and curry, and a glass of something that smelled strong, and tasted even stronger. Elara looked up at Mango through her thick black hair that covered the sides of her face. She scrunched her red-marked forehead and thanked him, "Thanks, Mango. Sorry. Long day. A lot on my mind."

"You know kid," Mango began, "My curry can cure a lot of shit, but it's never been able to cure that attitude of yours. I'm all ears, what's up with you?" Mango jokingly turned his head and cupped his ear toward Elara.

She smirked, pushed her hair behind her ears, and shoveled a heaping spoonful into her mouth, "Thorne. Fucking Thorne," she spoke and chewed at once, "wants me to go on some mission," she leaned in closer to Mango, "a mission that breaks standard protocol. Go to a planet, which we have no intel on, get a soil sample, and get out. No drones, no rovers, nothing. We're going in blind. Said my dad sent her on missions like this before, and supposedly I don't know

anything about it because they keep these missions tight under wraps. Only intel we have is that the planet's atmosphere might be like Earth's or something."

"Kid..." Mango began.

Elara took a few more bites and settled back into her chair. She stared blankly at the bottles of alcohol behind Mango, "I don't like it. I don't fucking like it. But I have to do it."

"E. Listen to me... your pops, well, he never seemed to me like the kind of guy to throw a huge middle finger at protocol. Not my place to say, but maybe your gut's right. Shit, I ain't even heard of that kind of thing around here, and I know a lotta secrets." Mango crossed his arms.

"I mean, I know he wouldn't... at least I think I know he wouldn't. But how could I really, really, know? It's not like he would've told me. Not like he could've told me." Elara put her spoon down and looked at Mango. His arms were still crossed.

"So, you gonna do it?"

"I have to, Mango. Gotta do it for dad, at least."

"So that's what this is really about, then? Your pops?"

"Well, yeah, why wouldn't it be?" Elara spun her bar stool around to face the stage, a jazz singer moved and sang smoothly, and immediately caught Elara's attention, the same way Rain had.

"What's her name?" she asked Mango. Even though Elara's personal life was no secret when it came to Rain, their breakup was. The only person who knew was Thorne.

"Don't do it, kid. What about Rain?" Mango asked.

Elara ignored him and hopped off her chair to make her way to a closer seat. When the jazz singer finished her set, Elara made the quick decision to meet her backstage in the dressing

room. She walked toward the singer who stood in front of a beauty mirror taking off her earrings. Elara, thankful for the confidence the strong drink brought her, grabbed the singer's face and gave her a kiss on the lips, then pulled away. The singer kissed her back.

"Jana," the singer said.

"What?"

"My name. It's Jana."

"I'm Elara."

The next morning, they woke up in Elara's bed, a white sheet covering them both. It was a typical easy-going morning with typical easy-going small talk. Elara asked Jana about jazz music and how she came about being a singer. She thought it might be some sort of hobby, but to her surprise, Jana knew a lot about jazz and its beginnings on Mars. Years ago, when NASA sent some astronauts to Mars, each person on the mission got to bring a form of entertainment with them. One of them brought a disc with jazz music, and it survived the years ever since.

Reluctantly, Jana got up from the bed. She had a party gig in a few hours. Elara let Jana borrow some clothes, and while she got dressed in the walk-in closet, Elara scrolled through conversations with Rain, the ones where they talked about the excitement of maybe starting a family together and deciding what color to paint the spare bedroom. Elara's eyes watered, and as much as she wanted to wake up to Rain, the truth is that might never happen again. Jana walked out of the closet and Elara turned to see her, putting her phone away underneath the pillow. Jana wore a pair of jeans, and one of Rain's old shirts she wore when she took some time on the weekends to paint a canvas or two. Jana walked around to the front edge of the bed and began to strap her heels on. She noticed Elara's black combat boots.

"How do you do it?" Jana asked.

“Do what?”

Jana pointed at the boots, “That. How do you do it to risk your life for a bunch of strangers? Aren’t you afraid of dying?”

Something in Elara snapped. Rain would have never asked a question like that, and she couldn’t help but respond with an upset sarcasm, “I have a job to do, and I will do whatever I need to do to make sure I do that job well. And why do you care if I die? You don’t even know me.”

“I didn’t mean to...”

“Oh, I know you didn’t. You’re just a curious civilian like everyone else.” Elara’s tone grew increasingly sarcastic. She wasn’t the person who’d woken up with Jana minutes ago, she was someone else.

Jana walked over to the nightstand and grabbed her purse, “Ok, first, I don’t know what your problem is. Second, fuck you. I was just trying to make conversation.” She walked out of the room and left.

Elara agreed, she didn’t know what her problem was either. Her apartment was a mess, but she needed to dig deeper into what happened with Rain. If the scattered notes around the living room didn’t give insight to her state of mind, then she didn’t know what did.

Chapter 14

Jana leaving meant the day's online probing would commence. Stanton Marsh's words were stuck in her mind, "Ruse and Rinko, that has a nice ring to it!" Between pacing from the living room to kitchen, and kitchen to bedroom, pondering new information she found out about The District, a high or two was necessary to even begin dismantling things she'd never known to be true about the MM. She walked over to her freezer where Rain left a few tubes labeled *Crypt High*. A legal, but questionable substance, meant to be swiftly inhaled. She grabbed a tube, popped the top, and gulped a strangely thick vapor. Rain used Crypt High once and a while when she painted, and Elara could see why. In an instant, she felt clear minded and energized. It occurred to her how bizarre it was to have gone all this time knowing nothing about what was really happening on Mars. Was this Rome's plan? To keep her disconnected from reality? No. It couldn't have been. But, it was the only explanation that made any sense at all. It's impossible to stress over the unknown, and impossible to have an opinion about things that didn't exist within her world. Yet another gross parallel between Earth and Mars was blatant oppression.

Elara woke up on the living room floor with all her guns surrounding her. She ran to the toilet and emptied what felt like her entire stomach. Was it still today? Was it tomorrow? A quick look at her laptop after stumbling back to the living room floor indicated it was, indeed, still today. The smell and taste of her own mouth made her gag, but she couldn't afford to be sober for this. She went back to the freezer for another fix and continued her search. She found a document deep in the heart of a less than popular conspiracy website, adorned with the MM's official crest, signed and authenticated by Major Thorne, General Tass, Lieutenant Colonel Osborne, and someone else.

CLASSIFIED

Transitional Autonomous Tactics and Delivery Study

Martian Department of Defense

Proposition 311.1

The Martian Marines shall hereby comply with planet Morado in its targeted experimental manipulation of autonomous subjects with the aim to foster more efficient and effective forces on either party, otherwise known as the Transitional Autonomous Tactics and Delivery Study (TATDS). The Venus Entering Relocation Program (VERP), as a Martian entity, as outlined by Proposition 311.0, will voluntarily forfeit any and all information as necessary and related to the proposition's trials on planet Venus in relation to VERP studies, including both men and women subjects. TATDS will be executed in a matter of five stages outlined as follows.

- 1) Collect VERP impregnation data, including but not limited to, all subjects both men and women, as related to TATDS and its aim.
- 2) Receive recruits via necessary means, where working and low-class individuals, provided by The District, will be the first avenue of receiving.
- 3) Consecutively, and as necessary, receive participants aboard Arial II Spacecraft for TATDS study and reproductive surgeries.
- 4) Conduct trial to review the effectiveness of transitioned and de-autonomized subjects.
- 5) Deploy subjects.

Method of TATDS study is as follows:

- 1) Receive RNA and utorial assets aboard Arial II Spacecraft.

- 2) Inject RNA through the spine and medulla, as well as replace reproductive organs.
- 3) Subjects will undergo rigorous trials aboard Arial II Spacecraft's Pod Analysis Sector, where each subject is studied for a period of time (TBD), before moving on deployment.

Oath of Commitment

The Martian Marines and planet Morado acknowledge Proposition 311.0, outlining experimental trials on planet Venus, and 311.1 outlining its proceeding steps. Processes and deployment are subject to change and/or be altered by either party. Commitment between both parties is true and genuine as confirmed by the signatures below.

MM Signed:

General Tass

Lieutenant Colonel Osborne

Major Thorne

Morado Signed:

(Illegible markings)

End OF DOCUMENT

No, it couldn't be real. He signed that? Elara's blood boiled but there was more to read. The comments under the post asked questions like, "Where's prop 311.2?" "What happens now? What about The Revivalists?" "Justice for Earth! Justice for Revivalists!" and, "What about that spy in The District?" "That District spy is on their side, it's no secret Tass goes down there.

She's probably in on it too." "I saw that spy on base before, but she doesn't hang around there anymore. I wonder what happened to her."

Opinions. All of these were just opinions, right? But what about the document? Elara shot out of the room and on to the balcony for air. A spy, was that Rain? There were so many scattered pieces to put together and she just couldn't do it. It was too much. Was she too consumed with all of this? What about her job? What about Thorne? It was too much too fast and there was nothing she could do about any of this. Mars, Elara thought, wasn't a second chance. Mars was a trap.

Chapter 15

After a whirlwind of a weekend, Elara found herself on base stuffing freeze dried meals into her pack. There was food on the ship, but considering everything she knew, there wasn't room for a precautionary missed step. Her crew, at least that's what they technically were, even though she knew none of them except for Jag, packed alongside her. She didn't trust Jag to fly Arial I, but what other choice did she have?

Thorne approached the group, Elara pretended not to see her, "Osborne!"

Elara glanced over, zipped her pack, and walked over.

"Osborne, I know this isn't the usual crew, but just trust me on this one, ok?"

"Who are they?"

"You know Jag."

"No, the rest of them. Who are they?"

"They're in training for a different company. They're here to help you get the job done."

"What company? What training?"

"Come with me." Thorne walked off toward the crew and gestured Elara to follow, "We've got Ryan Han," she pointed to a tall, lanky Marine whose face was somewhat distorted on his left side, "Wes Recot," an oddly scruffy looking Marine who, like Ryan, had the left side of his face distorted, but less so, "Mariana Kapp," who displayed a messy low bun and one silver eye, "And Jade Hedberg." Thorne turned back to face Elara, "This here is Elara Osborne, who you will answer to over the course of your mission, and your flight command, Jag. I expect you will have a quick and safe trip with no bumps along the way."

"Osborne, eh? Rome's your daddy then" Ryan gave Elara a dead stare.

“What’s the problem?” Elara’s attempt to assert any hint of dominance over the misfit crew.

“No problem here, ma’am. Just heard a lot about him. You know, the things he accomplished, missions he was in charge of, that kind of thing.”

The crew seemed to ignore Ryan’s comment, but all responded in their own inaudible way. Smirks and nods made their way around the group as they continued packing. Jag took note of the room, and then at Elara before being the first to board the ship, walking up the boarding ramp mumbling something nobody cared to decipher. Thorne looked over at Jag whose pack was carelessly unzipped and gave a loud sigh of embarrassment.

“Hey,” Ryan said, looking at Thorne, “What about Gunner? You said she—”

“Gunner backed out. Don’t worry about it.” Thorne cut him off quickly.

“Ma’am,” Elara threw Thorne the same hard glance Ryan had given her.

Thorne gave the rest of the crew a reassuring nod, gesturing them to follow Jag into the ship. The misfits grabbed their packs, fist bumped each other, and headed inside.

“Introducing them to me doesn’t answer my question, and it sure as hell doesn’t tell me who they are.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Why do they look like that? They’re a mess. Wouldn’t even know they’re Marines.”

“That’s because they’re not.”

A strange warmth rushed through Elara’s body and distributed an eerie sensation, like thick glitter running through her veins, “What the fuck are they, then?”

“They’re part of the VERP.”

A frustrated Elara tugged at her ear lobes and paced back and forth, “Mind telling me what that is?”

“The Venus Entering Relocation Program. Dishonorably discharged Marines given another shot at helping the MM.”

“Venus? Help how?”

“Yes, Osborne, Venus.”

“Still doesn’t tell me what their deal is. Help how?”

“Developing and testing experimental weapons and tactics before they’re ready to head down here to be used as an MM resource.”

“You’re sending me on a mission with a bunch of scrappy Marine dropouts?”

“I’ve been working with them for a while. There’s hope for this group, Osborne. The MM needs to know VERPs can do more than be test subjects. I’m sure you noticed their faces.”

Hypocrite, Elara thought, what a hypocrite, “Test subjects, huh?”

“I’m trying to make a difference down here.”

“So, you want us to show them the ropes.” Elara pivoted to play along.

“Exactly. Remember when I said this was a high-risk mission? You can become a good leader like your dad. And Jag, for as dull as he is, he’s gotten a hang of Arial I, more than the rest have.”

“Jag’s a good Marine. Weird, but good.”

“I know, I know. And so are these VERP’s, but just like Jag, they could be better. Sharper. They’re your only obstacle here. Other than that, you should be fine.” Thorne reached her hand out to Elara, a handshake that invited her to claim a clean slate with Thorne, “We good, Osborne?”

“Yes ma’am. We’re good.” Elara, though reluctant, made the smart move of accepting. On the exterior, sure, they were good. But Elara knew better. Proposition 311.1 was still a go, it had to be, and Thorne was at the center of it.

Chapter 16

Mariana, the silver-eyed one, spent her time in the Biology wing where she was responsible for preparing test tubes, beakers, chemicals, and everything else needed to collect the soil sample they set out for. The place they were going to was unnamed and unknown, but Elara noticed Mariana label each component with a capital M. Presumably, Elara thought, M for Mars. While Mariana tinkered in Bio, Wes and Jade took care of the ship's environmental controls in the deck below. Elara noted their quick-moving response to her steps descending the ladder.

"Everything's good here, soldier," Wes explained, answering a question that hadn't been asked.

"Soldier?" Elara responded.

"Yeah, military style."

"Wes, the best way to piss off a Marine is to call them a soldier. The VERP didn't teach you that?"

"Sorry, cap. Ok, everything's good here, Marine!" Wes gave a sloppy salute, then stood at attention with the biggest smile he could manage.

"Jade," Elara said, dismissing Wes, "what do you know about this mission?"

Jade looked over at Wes, "Well, Kapp is preparing some tubes and stuff to take for when we get there. For the soil."

"Wes, and you?"

"I'll be straight with you, we don't know more than you," Wes responded.

"We're just here doing what Thorne told us to do."

"And what's that?"

“To, um...” Jade looked over at Wes again, “to get the soil. And we need to make sure the ship’s parts and all that stuff are functioning. We’re called *engineeeers*.” Jade smiled as the words came out of her, and once again, looked at Wes, but this time for reassurance. Wes nodded in approval.

“Han’s got the big job,” Jade continued, “He’s supposed to help Jag up there. He’s flown this plane, I mean, this ship, a whole bunch of times.”

“No, he hasn’t,” Wes said, visibly annoyed, “It’s only been a few times. Look, remember, the first time was when—” he continued, but not before Elara interrupted his flow.

“Where? Where did he go during those few times?” Elara crossed her arms.

“Why don’t you ask him?” Jade shrugged her scrawny shoulders

Elara began to making her way to question Ryan Han when it all happened. Loud sirens sounded. She darted to flight command where she found everyone else, except for Jag, looking at the nav controls.

“What the fuck is going on!” Elara rushed for Han, “What did you do!?” She grabbed the gun at her side and pointed it at him.

“Wow, is this any way to lead? Just like your daddy, huh? Thorne knows all about that.”

“Where are we going?” Elara grabbed the neck of his shirt. He was taller than her, sure, but she could take him on. His thin lanky frame made him clumsy.

“Morado,” Mariana interjected.

Jag walked into flight command with a gun in his hand, “What in the moon cow’s crap is going on?” Who changed my nav?”

“Jag,” Elara began, “where did you set the nav to?”

“I was only given coordinates from Thorne. Why?” Jag waved his gun around while he talked.

“For fuck’s sake, Jag, don’t wave that thing around. You even know how to use it?” Han laughed.

Jag began to tremble as his eyes got wider, “Sure do, Han. Want to see? I bet you’d like that!” Something in Jag snapped. He pointed his gun at Han.

“Jag, stop! Han, shut your mouth! Jag, you need to tell me where we’re —” Elara yelled, losing patience and composure.

“Are we... are we going where I think we’re going?” Jag continued to tremble and looked over at Mariana.

“Yeah bud. We are,” Mariana said.

“No, no, no, no. Han, you dirty liar. You told me—”

“Yeah, buddy. I lied. But what did you expect?”

“I hate you.” Still pointing his gun, Jag shot a bullet through Han’s shin.

“You fucking freak! You should’ve been dead already! You’re useless!” Han was on the ground. His bone showed through his bloody leg.

“Han. Get a hold of yourself. You’ve been through worse. Go ahead, Jaggy,” Mariana said, “tell the nice lady what you know.” Elara was amazed at how Mariana remained calm throughout the whole thing.

“Elara. I’m sorry. I didn’t know any of this was going to happen. I promise you I didn’t know we were going to—”

“Going where? Tell me, Jag. Listen to Mariana and tell me what you know.” Elara dropped her gun and put her hands up.

“I can’t. You don’t know what they’ve done. You don’t know what they can do!”

“Jag, just put the gun down. You can trust me.”

“It’s the VERP. It’s the damn VERP. You only ever die!” Jag cried, “After Venus, they said I could have another chance to go through training. Start on a clean slate, you know? I thought I was done with all of this, and then...”

“And then what!” Elara yelled.

Another alarm sounded as the ship was preparing to land. Elara pointed her gun at Mariana, who was still unphased. She was, after all, working on soil samples. And her duties were to no one but her lab on Arial I. She, another placeholder, did nothing more than mind her business and get to work. Unlike the others, the VERP had worked out for her. Sure, she’d gone through a few gnarly experiments, but in the end, all she wanted was a lab of her own, and thanks to Thorne and Morado, she’d gotten it. She even had her own greenhouse pod at the MM gardens.

“I’m honestly not the one you should be worried about. Frankly I don’t care about you or anyone on this ship. What I care about is right down that hall.” Mariana put her hands up to surrender playfully and pointed down the hall to her lab.

A loud noise sounded near the airlock. Elara walked closer to it. Mariana and Jag were now out of her sight. As soon as the airlock opened, she heard a shot fire from behind her. She ducked out of instinct but ran back to the command deck where she found Jag on the floor with his gun still in his hand.

A smoke grenade flew into the ship and detonated, hindering Elara’s vision. In the distance, she saw a few hazy dark purple figures. They were tall and accompanied by a few average sized figures.

“Ryan! Get your ass over here!” A muffled voice yelled.

“My leg!” Han yelled.

Elara fired as many shots as she could before passing out.

Chapter 17

The conception room was lined with tall glass tubes that housed Morado's wombs. Attached to the tubes was a large copper device hovering in the center of the room with thin to medium sized rods at the bottom. Thorne supervised the development of the room's systems, operations, and procedures as they pertained to the prized piece of machinery in the room. The device, as she thought about it simply, carried one form of life and gifted it to another.

The Medulla Reproductive Reclamation Mechanism, or MRRM, was Mars's best advancement yet, and she was in charge of it. Thorne marveled at the machinery the first time she saw it in action and recalled one of the first recipients to participate aboard Arial II. They lay face down suspended in a metal frame in somewhat of a conscious state. Extending down from the mechanism above came the numerous spider-like copper rods, which were more flexible than they looked. One of the rods slithered its way down to the recipient and began slicing around the middle portion of their back with a thin laser to expose the spine. There were no screams, and the recipient seemed to have no discomfort at all. After exposing the spine, another rod came down. It was thin and hollow to accommodate the RNA injection. The thin rod inserted itself within the base of the spine, where it made its way up into the medulla and injected the liquid there and throughout the spine as it slid back out. Still, the recipient seemed to feel no pain. Thorne walked around to see their face and found a blank expression. There was moisture which ran from their eyes, to their cheeks, and on to the floor where it created a small puddle. The MRRM then stitched the flesh back over the exposed spine and flipped the recipient on their back. This was the moment Thorne had been waiting for. The real deal. The moment of truth. The same laser from before made an incision on the lower abdomen to expose the organs inside. The one of interest, the uterus, was lasered off. The other rods above slid down to work together on

swabbing blood and stitching where necessary. From above, one of the glass tubes released a pulsating purple organ, which was then carefully delivered by a few rods over to the recipient. Again, the rods worked together to implant the organ, rearrange others, and ultimately stitch the recipient back up. Thorne didn't have the same organs as the recipient, but she wondered if she would ever see her time under the MRRM.

As Thorne stood in the room waiting for the next expected delivery, she thought about Rome and wondered what he'd think off all of this. It was hard to tell with him toward the end. Whether he wanted to back out or not was never clear, and that's what posed such a risk to everyone. A swift and deliberate pain was, in this case, the best and only way to accomplish a painful task. Whether the MM believed her or not, she didn't like the process, and she didn't like to see the women in pain. But the incentive to the risk was beyond her, and so much more important and valuable than any one life. It was about the collective, and the idea that killing a few for the greater good was better than complacency.

Thorne made her way to Arial II's observation deck. The distinct yellow pods below had so much work ahead of them still. She sat down, in awe of it all. Rome wouldn't have come this far. There's no way. And in a moment, just when she was getting to feel so grateful, Ryan hobbled into the room to interrupt her. He looked fine, maybe paler than usual, but fine.

"How's your leg?" Thorne gave the same courtesy to Ryan she learned from Rome. Whether he cared about his Marines or not, Rome always asked how they were doing after an injury.

"It's almost like you can't see my crutch." He responded, annoyed at her, and at himself. No wonder Jag shot his brains out.

"Have you seen this?" Thorne dismissed him as she often did.

“Seen what?”

“This.” Thorne gestured Ryan to come look at her screen, which was not only a screen but a screen and one-way mirror combo that overlooked Arial II’s pod sector, where Thorne could select any one pod to simultaneously monitor. All were empty now, of course, except for Elara’s.

“I checked on her a while ago. I’ve never seen anyone last this long.” Ryan said.

“Rain.” Thorne said.

“What about her?”

“She lasted this long, too.” Thorne responded.

“And what happened? Where is she?”

“She’s alive but close to transitioning. Her time’s coming soon.” Thorne stared at her screen the entire time Ryan stood next to her.

Ryan hobbled over to leave, “When are we going back?”

“Where?” Thorne’s focus broke to answer Ryan.

“What do you mean? Back home. When are we going back?” Ryan threw his one unoccupied arm in the air.

“I don’t know. Not soon.” Thorne’s response accompanied a sarcastic tone and smile.

“What the hell, you said we were done!”

“I said we were done. I never said we were going home. I’m surprised you made it this far. I half expected you to put a bullet through your head like Jag. He was probably the smartest of you VERPs.”

Chapter 18

Elara woke up lying face up in a yellow capsule. She tried to crane her neck forward, but her stomach and back ached. From what she could feel, she'd been stripped of everything except her MM issued basics, a tank-top and a pair of cold-weather tights. There was a small window to the left of her view. She could see other capsules, also yellow, with labels on them. What was on the labels she couldn't decipher, but if she had any idea, she could imagine hers said her name. Were The District women in the other pods? Elara thought back to the last thing she could remember but it was all so hazy. She remembered blood, a gunshot, someone was dead. Smoke, yelling, Ryan, Jag... Jag. Poor Jag. It was his blood she saw, and Ryan's, too. A name was stuck in her head. Marada... mordana... Morado. Morado, that was it, the name from Prop 311.1. Shit, was she on Morado?

Water suddenly began to fill the capsule and the discomfort in her stomach was more intense now. She brought herself back to Phase 1 where she was stripped of everything she knew and hounded day after day in preparation for a high stress moment like this. Panic didn't exist right now, only survival. Elara took a deep breath as the water quickly swallowed her neck, stopping just below her chin. The water, which was initially about room temperature, got warmer and warmer, then hotter and hotter. Her skin tingled from the heat and the tingling turned to a pricking pain all over. Moments later, the water was scalding and sent her into a searing pain. Could she panic now? Elara's face was bright red, and her breaths went from long and audible, to short and whiny. She couldn't do it for much longer. Her breaths turned into screams and her body writhed. She kicked and punched the capsule in the little space she had, only hurting herself in the process. The hot water splashed onto her face, mouth, and eyes. This, she thought, would be the end of her. She'd be boiled to death. As the moments of desperation grew longer, the

water suddenly began to cool. Relief followed for a few moments until, just as the hot water, the cool water became colder, and colder, until the droplets on her face began to freeze. Elara's lips were blue, her cheeks pale, and her body shivered fiercely. She wanted to keep kicking and punching her fists from top to bottom, but her stiff arms hugged her sides desperately in search of any sliver of warmth. She wanted to let go, to let the water take her. She couldn't decide what was better between being boiled or frozen to death. She imagined her dad's warm embrace during the moments of their final goodbye.

Everything was dark and silent when Elara woke up. There was no water, no pain, and no stomachache. Was she still in the capsule? How much time had passed this time? It was a solemn moment of whatever solace she could cling to. Somehow, she was alive. A soft glow began to hum straight above her sight. Yes, she was definitely still in the capsule. The glow got brighter and brighter until it became a blinding fluorescent yellow. Elara clenched her eyes tightly and covered them with her pruned hand. What was this? What would happen now? Yet again, water began to fill the capsule. The thought of enduring the hot and cold made her question again how she'd prefer to die between the two. In which would she let herself go? To Elara's surprise, the water didn't change temperature at all. Also, to her surprise, the water didn't stop, and instead, filled the entire capsule. A tiny inhale was all she could spare.

During Phase 1, she and her fellow recruits spent a lot of time in water. They trained to hold their breath and tread water for long periods of time. She'd prepared for this kind of thing, but there was no telling how long it would last. There was a new factor to consider, would she prefer to be drowned instead of boiled or frozen? A strange slither writhed through her stomach. It didn't hurt, and it didn't feel sore anymore, but it felt like an intense wave of nausea for a second or two until it was gone. A memory came to mind. It was she and Rain on a regular day

doing nothing in particular. Elara wasn't even sure if it was a memory, for all she knew it could've been a fantasy. They sat on the couch saying nothing at all and only looked at each other. They didn't hold hands, they didn't touch at all, they simply existed in that moment and nothing more. A searing pain grew stronger in her lungs. This was it. This was the moment. Death, and even life itself, was still an anomaly to her. Since her days visiting Marines, either dead or alive, the idea of existence was something she hadn't yet figured out.

After Earth, nobody should've lived. Nobody should've survived, and nobody should've gone to Mars. For what? For it to come down to this? The more she thought about it, existing seemed like a selfish thing, and something nobody really asked for. Elara felt another slither in her stomach, but this time it was accompanied by a soft voice inside her head. She imagined it to be her mother's voice if she'd had one. *Breath. Breath.* No, she couldn't. Why was it telling her to breathe? *Breath*, it said. But how, she thought, how can I do that? Elara's lungs burned with an unbearable pain and she began to panic, *breath*, she kicked and punched the capsule like she did before. *Breathe!* The voice was louder now and the overwhelming slither in her stomach made her nauseous. She looked outside the capsule window. A person wearing an MM uniform lay on the floor. Someone else stood over them, giving them a nudge with their MM issued boot. What was going on? Who were they? Elara shook her head uncontrollably out of pain and desperation. Maybe it was worth listening to the voice. She was going to die anyway. A brave inhale sent water rushing into her lungs, then she felt nothing. Almost normal. Again, somehow she wasn't dead, and the slither died down, too. Another quick inhale, and still, she was alive. She was alive.

Chapter 19

Elara inhaled and exhaled deeply now. Breathing, or whatever she was doing, not only hurt less, but was working. She felt completely fine, strong even. It was time to get out, and it was weird to think, but brute force seemed like the only way to do it. The slither in her stomach came back softly, and a feeling of rage came over her. How could someone do this to her? Where was Rain? What about The District? Elara's next exhale came in the form of a muffled yell. Bubbles rushed out of her nose and mouth. There was something innate within her that motioned her to hit the capsule violently. The unfairness of it all fueled her rage. Elara looked out of the capsule's small window again where the standing Marine now backed away, and the other on the floor began waking up. Without a single bit of pain, Elara continued to kick and punch the capsule, denting it in the process.

She made out a muffled voice from the standing Marine, "We got a problem here, Buck! A big problem! Get up!"

The other Marine responded as he scooted away, "What's that? What's happening!"

The sitting Marine was grabbed by the other and dragged away. Their panicked voices became distant. They could have been arguing, Elara wasn't sure, but she did know this was her chance. Finally, the capsule cracked, and the water drained. She choked as air replaced the water in her lungs. Finally, the reward came. The top of the capsule flew off. She gasped, sat up, and quickly looked around in a panic. There were rows upon rows of yellow capsules like the one she'd been in. She crawled out, soaking wet, but without a scratch. The sitting Marine's gun lay on the floor which was clearly embossed with the letters V-E-R-P. Looking around for an exit of any kind, Elara noticed an empty open capsule in front of hers. Leaning over, she read a decal that said RAIN PATEL, SUBJECT 201. Damn it! Not Rain! Where was she now? Where did

they take her? Elara felt another slither, then the voice came back. *Go*, it said. Go? Go where? She looked around again, spotting sliding doors in the distance, but then, a fluorescent light above the doors began to pulse brightly between blue and red. An alarm sounded, the doors slid open, and a handful of Marine VERPs came rushing in. Elara quickly wiped her salty eyes and hid the gun in her waistband, noticing a long scar across her lower abdomen. Her back still ached a little, too.

Each of the Marine VERPs took on an aisle of capsules to search. Elara closed her eyes, trying to think about her next move. The harder she thought, the tighter she clenched them in frustration. What was she doing here? Suddenly, the capsules around her shook loudly. Her hands began to burn and turned a bright red. The slither came back again and so did the voice, *Go!* Elara screamed with a surge of energy and extended her arms in front of her, quickly motioning in the direction of the Marines. The capsules surrounding her lifted from their bolts and crashed into each one of them. What had she done? How did she do that? She touched her stomach, and like her hands, it was red hot, almost glowing.

Elara made her way to the doors and came to a long, dimly lit hallway. As she walked, the dim lights behind her began to turn off one by one. Her instinct was to run. The lights shut off closer to her as she did, until she was left completely in the dark. Coming to a halt, Elara pointed her gun at the nothingness in front of her. She heard another voice, but this time it came from the walls.

“Closer, Osborne. You’re almost there.”

“Thorne? Is that you? Where am I!”

“Keep walking. You’re almost there.”

“Where’s Rain!” Elara begged.

“STOP!” Thorne’s voice echoed loudly.

A small light shone in the distance. Elara walked toward what she came to find was the ship’s cockpit, which was made completely of glass from top to bottom. She took her first step onto the glass, melting the icy areas around her feet. Her footsteps behind her, she found Thorne standing under another glowing light, with the galaxy’s stars behind her.

“Welcome aboard Arial II, Elara.” Thorne said.

“Where’s Rain!” Elara demanded, pointing her gun at Thorne.

“Your recovery is going well. Actually, much better than we expected. Nobody’s had any of these... side effects yet.” Thorne shot Elara a sinister smile.

“What recovery? What do you mean?”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed your scar. Well, you were in surgery some time ago, and now you’ve started your transition.”

“What are you talking about? Where’s Rain!” Elara pointed her gun at Thorne.

“Not a good idea, Osborne. Don’t try it.” Thorne advised, “Marines, bring her out!”

Elara looked back over to the entrance she’d just walked through. A sickly and emaciated Rain was brought out and taken to Thorne’s side. She wore a black hospital gown. Her arms and legs were thin, and her face was drained of any radiance. Elara and Rain shouted each other’s names as the Marines walked past. More Marines came out of the shadows along the walls behind Elara. They held their rifles at the ready. The Marine who brought out Rain joined them.

“Let her go!” Elara still pointed her gun at Thorne.

“They’ve been instructed to kill both of you if you try to do anything stupid.” Another slither in Elara’s lower abdomen forced her to hunch over.

“Interesting symptoms of your transition. You and Rain have had a major organ transplant as part of the MM and Morado’s reproductive trials.” Thorne informed her.

“Reproductive? Is that what...”

“Yes, Osborne, and it looks like the little partner inside you is extremely resistant to high-stress and extreme temperatures. Congratulations on breaking out of incubation, by the way. Wasn’t expecting that.”

“You! You’ve been taking all those women! And Rain!”

“You should be proud of your father’s legacy, Osborne. You’re carrying our future.”

“No, that’s not me. That’s not who I am! I am not my father!”

“Oh, but you are. Both just as naïve and weak. That’s why I had to take care of him.”

“It was you. You’re the reason...”

“Let’s just say his goals weren’t in line with ours.”

“Fuck you and your Morado bullshit. I know all about Prop 311!”

“Then you know Rome was in charge of everything you see here.”

“It’s not about him anymore. This is about you! You took him from me!”

“No, Osborne, this is about legacy. It’s the only way to continue the search for so much of what’s out there. Even he knew that. Morado gave us chance to be the best we could be!”

Thorne extended her hand as if to greet Elara to the stars behind her.

“You think taking innocent civilians against their will and impregnating them with, who the hell knows what, is the best we could be? How could you?”

“The womb you’re carrying inside you makes you the best you can be! You should be proud!”

“Rain was right. There was something weird about you from the start, and I should’ve listened.”

Elara’s stomach glowed again, and her hands were hotter than before. Thorne began to speak, but was caught off guard when each of the guard’s rifles began to shake in their hands, just like the capsules. Again, a surge of energy came over Elara. Screaming, she dropped her gun, and motioned her hands out to her sides. Each of the guards let go of their rifles, which by now, they were unable to control. Elara heard the voice whisper, *kill!* Quickly, each rifle turned on each Marine, emptying their magazines into each of them. Pools of blood formed, melting the ice on the floor around them.

“Well done.” Thorne clapped.

Elara darted toward Thorne, her feet leaving a trail of melted footprints behind her. She plunged her body into Thorne’s and they both fell to the floor, rolling over and over, trying to gain control of each other. Thorne pinned Elara to the floor and shoved her face to the glass, which melted the ice just as her feet did.

“That’s all you’ve got, kid?” Thorne said, “Come on! Fight me!”

They both huffed and struggled, each taking turns overpowering the other. Punches to the face led to a bloodied floor. In another surge of energy, Elara finally found herself straddled over Thorne’s back, burning Thorne with the heat that radiated from her body. Thorne was pinned down and tired, while Elara pushed Thorne’s face harder into the glass. A slow and audible cracking sent Thorne into a fit of screams. The backside of her body burned, while her face froze onto the glass.

“You’re not going to hurt anyone! I won’t let you!” Elara said.

“Osborne,” Thorne winced and gave a deep laugh, “Killing me won’t stop anything.”

Elara spent what was left of her energy, “Maybe not, but I’ll feel a hell of a lot better.”

She grabbed Thorne’s hair, peeling her face off the glass, leaving a large chunk of bloodied flesh stuck to it. Elara quickly snapped Thorne’s neck and smashed her head against the glass which cracked it a little more. Elara was angry. She was sad. She was frustrated. She was all of the above. Thorne was dead now, but it wasn’t enough. Elara continued to smash Thorne’s head on the cold glass until she felt all the energy drain from her body. Thorne’s face was bloody and unrecognizable. What had she done? This, Elara thought, was the *everything, everything* Rome didn’t want her to know.

Chapter 20

Elara rolled over to take a breather. She huffed and touched her stomach. *Thank you*, she thought, hoping the other voice would hear her. She expected a response, but when it didn't come, she remembered Rain. Elara got up and stumbled back on the floor, making her way to Rain. If ever there was a time in her life she didn't want to exist, this was it. Elara took hold of Rain in her arms. She was cold and fragile.

"I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" Elara pleaded for some kind of forgiveness, "This is all because of him!"

"E, none of this is your fault," Rain said in a low, raspy voice, "You're nothing like Rome. You didn't know about any of this."

"This is all my fault. I'm so sorry!"

"I'm sorry, too. I never meant to hurt you."

"No, don't say that. None of this is your fault. You..."

"It was me, E. I'm the one they had spying on the MM. I needed to get close to you... but I never expected to love you."

Elara held Rain closely and cried. They were both used, and Rain had probably gotten the worst of it, "What did they do to you?"

"The same thing they did to you, I think. Do you remember any of it?" Rain coughed.

"No, I don't. Our ship landed and was overrun. Jag killed himself. I saw some weird things, I don't know what they were, but they moved really fast. They were tall and... and then I woke up in the capsule, and then—"

"The Purps. That's what's going to happen to me."

"But... but how? You won't be like me?"

“No, E. Thorne was right when she said they didn’t expect your transition to go the way it did. You’re the first one.”

“What about everyone else?”

“They want to turn us into those things and use us as weapons. Those Purps you saw were fully transitioned people from The District. It eats our bodies inside and out.”

“I can’t let that happen to you, Rain. What do I do? Where do I go?”

“It’s already done.”

“There’s got to be a way—”

“Listen to me,” Rain coughed again, but this time a purple liquid dribbled from the sides of her mouth, “I don’t want to turn into one of those things,” Rain began to cry, “I’m scared, E, I’m scared.”

“You’re going to be fine. You’ll be ok. I’m sure there’s some way we can reverse it.”

“There’s one thing you can do for me...”

“What is it? I’ll do anything.”

“I need you to kill me... There’s no chance for me...” Rain’s cry was accompanied by a sad whimper, “I can’t do this. I can’t let them do this to me. Please...”

“No! Look at me. Hey, look at me!”

“I’m begging you,” more liquid came out from Rain’s mouth, and then her nose.

“I love you,” Elara began, “I love you!”

“I love you too,” Rain’s voice was weaker now.

Elara’s body no longer melted the ice around her. Her hands faded to blue as she tried to wipe away the purple liquid seeping out of Rain’s mouth, nose, and now her eyes. She held Rain

tightly, rocking back and forth. Rain coughed lightly as Elara cried, and whatever was inside sat still, not even the voice could be heard.

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Vita

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