

## **Incident, 2485**

**[Timestamp: 13:49, 1 Minute After Cascade]**

*Damien:*

“Fuck, fuck, fuck—Ellie, stay with me!” I yell into the radio, my voice breaking. Silence answers me.

She can’t be dead. She just can’t be. I’d never forgive myself.

I round the corner to the maintenance lift, my boots sliding through a pool of blood. My breath catches in my throat.

“Fuck!”

There she is—crumpled on the ground, a growing pool of crimson spreading beneath her. My heart stops. I drop to my knees beside her, my hands trembling as I press two fingers to her neck. A pulse. Weak, but there.

Relief hits me like a punch to the chest, but panic follows immediately.

“Ellie?” I rasp, barely able to get the words out.

Her eyes flicker open, unfocused and glazed. “Viper?” she murmurs weakly. “Where are you?”

“I’m here, my angel. I’m here,” I say, choking on the words. Tears blur my vision as I brush blood-soaked hair from her face. She’s alive. That’s all that matters.

“I... I can’t feel my legs,” she says, her voice shaky, strained. “What happened?”

I force myself to look her over, even though every part of me screams to look away. A deep gash crosses her face, blood pooling in her eyes and matting her hair. Her left hand—what’s left of it—is shredded, tendons and sinew glistening where muscle has been torn apart. But it’s her legs that churn my stomach. Burned. Shattered. The upper thighs are mostly intact, but below that—nothing recognizable. Just jagged remnants of bone peeking through what used to be flesh.

She’s dying. If I don’t move fast, I’ll lose her.

The lights overhead flicker. Backup power is failing. Once it goes, the ship will depressurize across most compartments, and there’ll be no getting her out. I reach for the radio on my shoulder, switching to the main crew frequency.

“This is Lieutenant Commander Damien Thorne,” I bark. “Is anyone still on board the USS *Chara*? Respond.”

Static crackles before a familiar voice cuts through. “It’s good to hear your voice, sir,” Lieutenant Adrienne Wolfe says, steady as always.

“Wolfe,” I say, relief washing over me. “Do you have anyone with you?”

“Yes, sir. Fifteen total. Engineers, technical, a couple medical staff, and a frigate in the hangar bay. The pilot says he’s leaving in five minutes with or without us.”

“Tell him to hold position. I’m coming up from the engineering deck, and I’m bringing Keener. How long until backup power fails?”

“Fifteen minutes, maybe less,” Wolfe replies. “Secondary power bank’s barely holding. What’s her condition?”

I glance down at Ellie, my heart clenching as her eyes flutter shut again. “Severe. Massive blood loss, avulsions on her head and legs, and her left hand’s shredded. Is Dr. Calder there?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll give her the sitrep.” Wolfe’s voice stays calm, but urgency creeps in.

“Good. Tell Calder to get ready. We’ll need everything she’s got.”

“Understood, sir. Meet you at the hangar entrance,” Wolfe says. “Keep her alive.”

“I’m trying,” I mutter, pulling a coagulant pen from my med pack. I stab it into Ellie’s thigh, just above the worst of the damage. The bleeding slows slightly—not enough, but it’ll have to do.

The mag-lev shaft ahead looms in the dim light. Debris floats within, shards of twisted metal reflecting the faint glow of emergency lighting. The shaft isn’t gravetized, leaving an open space perfect for navigating—but treacherous in its jagged chaos.

“Hold on, Ellie,” I whisper, securing her limp body against my chest.

I push off the edge of the mag-lev platform, letting the zero-G take hold as we drift upwards. My arms tighten around her as I maneuver through the shaft. The hum of my breath inside the helmet and the groan of the ship’s structure are the only sounds. Every second feels like a lifetime.

“Viper,” Ellie murmurs weakly, her head resting against my shoulder. “Don’t... drop me...”

“I’d never,” I say softly. “You’re stuck with me, Keener. No way I’m letting you go now.”

## [Hanger Bay]

### [Timestamp: 13:52, 3 Minutes After Cascade]

The hangar is a war zone—scrap metal and bodies are strewn across the floor, and fires burn in pockets where fuel has ignited. The frigate, *Argos*, looms in the distance, its ramp lowered and engines humming, ready for a quick escape.

Wolfe and Calder rush to meet me halfway across the bay. Wolfe's usually calm demeanor cracks as her eyes land on Ellie. "Fuck," she mutters, hurrying to take some of Ellie's weight. "Glad you found her. She wouldn't have lasted much longer."

"No time for pleasantries," I grunt, shifting Ellie into Wolfe's arms as I adjust my grip. "Let's move."

Calder steps in, her face pale but determined. She jabs Ellie's arm with a yellow auto-injector, muttering something under her breath. The blood flow slows further, but Ellie's breathing remains shallow, her face ashen.

We push through the wreckage, every step a struggle. The *Argos* looms closer, its engines roaring as the pilot prepares for takeoff. Inside, the space is cramped, filled with wounded crew members—engineers and technicians mostly, their faces etched with pain and exhaustion.

Calder and Wolfe take Ellie from me, laying her carefully on a stretcher. I linger for a moment, watching as they work, before stepping back to check on the rest of the crew.

"Is everyone accounted for?" I ask Wolfe, who is already shouting orders to the remaining engineers.

"All we've got," she says grimly. "No one else answered the last call."

I nod, my gaze drifting to the viewport. The *Chara*'s remains hang in the void, a twisted skeleton of steel and fire. The secondary power bank fails as we breach the initial debris field, and I watch as the hangar's containment fields collapse. Debris and bodies spiral into the vacuum of space, a grim ballet of destruction.

I turn back to Ellie. She's pale, barely clinging to life, but alive. For now, that is enough.

"You're safe," I murmur under my breath, more to myself than to her. "You're safe, my angel."