

She comes around the corner irritated until she stops dead in her tracks, eyes on the hole. The membrane has grown fast, now covering the hole like the head of a drum. Dark red veins slither through the fleshy substance.

Something happens to Fig. A pulse goes through her that makes my hairs stand on end. The white lines on her skin throb and her flesh ripples, and then subdivides to thicken until it looks like the scales of a lizard.

Her slender pistol appears in her hand.

I hear wet thumps behind me and turn to see dark shapes emerge from the membrane. They fall on the floor dripping with viscera like stillborn babies.

But they aren't babies. And they aren't dead.

If anything, they look like they are sleeping.

## LYRIA

*Monsters*

S OON THE ROOM IS filled with armored men and heavy weapons as Fig summons our escort of Sol Guards. Human faces become metal screaming suns as their helmets slither closed. I only just remember I'm naked. I shove on the clothes and shoes Paxton set out and let the guards push me over to Volga. She stands dripping. The guards didn't undo the cuffs or take her out of her jumpsuit for her shower.

Figment approaches the sleeping intruders as the Sol Guards fan around them.

"Backup inbound," a Sol Guard growls to Fig.

"Are they dead?" Paxton asks.

"Zilch on thermal except respiratory exhaust. They're barely breathing."

"Obsidian?"

"That one's too small. It's like a baboon. And look at the size of their heads."

Six long men and one powerfully built, but shorter even than me, lie on the floor completely naked, with long, pale leather packs strapped onto their backs.

No, not men.

There's something wrong with them. The dark, earth-red skin that covers them looks more like hide. White scars make intricate lines over it. Amphibian-like folds cover their eyes, ears, and nostrils. Their heads are unnaturally large and shaved except for long black tails of coarse hair. Grease from the membrane shimmers on their skin.

The small one shows the first signs of movement.

He looks up at us through the steam with a flat human face, though his passive black eyes are as big as eggs. There's a soft crack and he begins to chew. Blood pours out his thin-lipped mouth. Bits of glass tinkle on the floor. He shudders in ecstasy.

"Shoot it if it moves," the lead grunt barks.

Paxton toggles his sights. The light in the room spasms off, then back on. A low whine goes through the ship.

"What was that?" Fig asks the soldiers.

"Electronic surge."

Fig tilts her head at the small creature. "Fuck this." She shoots it in the chest. The creature is kicked back three meters by the blast. It lies with a hole in its guts, as if the skin parted itself for some invisible wedge. There is no burning scent.

Never seen anything like that gun.

It made the light in the room bend. The soldiers glance sideways at the weapon, but Fig's already dialing the big bitch.

"Madam Julii, a situation is developing on L22Z2. We have a breach party. Do you have that White's shuttle on your scopes? Nothing else? Definitely not Vox. Maybe Core deeplabs. Sending visual. No suits. Perforated the hull without tripping thermal sensors. That's right. Vacuum with no suits. Breach is somehow pressure sealed—a membrane. I recommend you perform a hull integrity test. Might not be isolated." A beat. "Copy." Fig shuts off her com. "You two." She points at me and Volga. "I'm not getting paid enough for this. On me. You boys got the ball. She's sending a squad of Peerless."

A low, horrible sound comes from the corpse of the smaller intruder.

Fig turns. It isn't dead after all. It is laughing. A deep laugh, like the one you'd hear from a monster in the deeptunnels of Lagalos. Like the laugh of a nightmare.

But the nightmare just deepens.

The creature pulls itself up, entrails hanging from its open gut. It licks its lips, its eyes like that of a waiting crocodile.

The Julii Sol Guards aren't slagging with this.

"Medici can inspect the pieces," the officer drones. "Put them down."

Then the lights go out.

"Null G's!" Paxton shouts.

I feel it myself. A slow lightness as gravity disappears and I drift upward. But there is no upward in the shower block. I feel like I'm floating in an endless gulf, in a darkness so deep even my cave-born eyes can't see my hands in front of my face.

A deep, manly voice bellows, "*Nag ag ak, berserker!*"

Light erupts from Sol Guard weapons, showing the horror in stuttered frames.

The small intruder scuttles along the floor like a demon crab as the soldiers float upward.

Fig zips away from them as if by magic.

The six larger intruders lunge from the ground toward the floating soldiers.

Bloody mouths.

Black eyes.

Huge metal weapons with runes painted upon them are pulled from their bags. Guns puke fire. I pinwheel aimlessly in the drift as carnage swirls around me.

The Sol Guard captain fires, the force sending him into a backward spin across my path. A crooked spear tipped in something shimmering whizzes past my ears through his low back, out his belly, and into his forearm, hurling him out of sight. I hear a metal *thunk* as he's stapled to the wall, screaming.

Spent cartridges float past.

An arm.

Globules of blood.

Shards of tile.

Then a big intruder.

He cruises past me, naked and bleeding, carrying horrible, jagged weapons. Both covered in gore. His feverish eyes meet mine. There is a manic joy there. He is at peace in the zero gravity, coasting toward his next target. To strike me is to ruin the pattern of his hunt. But his eyes say: *soon*.

Darkness. No guns fire. There's a wet hacking sound.

Then a screech.

A blaring gun illuminates the room as it fires a stream of energy at the wall. The metal glows molten. The man's arm is pinned by a spear to the floor or the ceiling or the wall, I can't tell. It's Paxton, I realize just as the smallest intruder embraces him like a child hugging its father.

"It's eating me..." Paxton screams. "It's eating..."

His voice gurgles away as the intruder gnaws into his throat and it goes black again.

*I gotta get out of here.*

My heart hammers in my chest so hard I can barely breathe. My mine-born eyes and my weeks in unreliable gravity save me this time from rebounding poorly off the wall. I push off with intent toward the hallway behind me, away from the slaughter block. I drift on my course, everything black, hearing only gnawing sounds, gurgles, whimpering, and shearing metal.

I slam into the wall and scramble to hold on.

I can't find anything in the darkness. Then I grab at a shape, encircle my hands around it, and feel a foot. Then another leg encircles me, bringing me close.

"It's me," Volga says. Her voice is husky and even. "Quiet. I need you to get me out of these cuffs. Tap my leg if you understand."

A man screams nearby.

I tap Volga's leg.

“Climb up me.” I climb and with shaking hands listen to Volga’s instructions. “There is a knife in my thigh.”

“Which pocket?”

“In my thigh.”

I search blindly for it and find a cold hilt. I hesitate to pull it out until Volga wrenches her leg away herself. Warm blood spills over my fingers as I slide the thick blade out. Volga doesn’t make a sound. I feel the weapon’s edge. It cuts my finger. *Gods, it’s sharp.* Following her instructions, I manage to remove the finger cuffs one by one.

By the time I cut through the cable around her waist, someone is laughing in the darkness. Blue light emanating from her tattoos reveals Fig cornered on the wall opposite the breach by five of the laughing intruders. Slaughtered Sol Guards float around them. The smallest intruder uses the bodies to navigate the null G. Looks like Fig has killed one of them. His body floats above her, missing its head.

If anything, the intruders look intrigued by her, and eager to test Fig themselves. They line up one by one. The little one gets to go first. His knotted arms pick up two axes. He sticks out a tongue implanted with a circle divider and hisses through the hole in the center.

Fig just sneers.

“Night vision. Berserker psychoactives and pressure-sealed skin. Someone had a fun time making you ugly fucks.” Fig smiles. “How’s it work in vacuum if you got a wound?”

Something blinks on the wall behind the monsters.

“*Bihd am’drah zürk FÁ!*” the smallest says, lifting both axes above his head and closing his eyes. The others echo the call and lift their weapons.

Volga shoves me hard out of the shower block and into the hall.

Something inhales. Then a flash.

A force slams me into the opposite wall of the hall hard enough for me to bloody my tongue and dent my skull. I drift senseless, wailing in my ears.

Everything aches.

When I open my eyes, the hall is filled with broken tiles. Volga blinks, dazed from a wound on her forehead. Spheres of fire writhe in the null

gravity behind us in the shower block. One of the intruders floats in the middle of the fire, wheeling its arms in vain to escape.

Then there's a secondary explosion from Fig's bomb and the sound of warping metal.

The wall of the shower block caves outward. A window opens to space.

Time stands still.

Colossal metal towers with glowing windows whip past. Inside the windows, tiny forms stare out at us, so close we can almost see the color of their eyes as the *Pandora* races along the shoulder of Phobos. The city moon glows in the darkness, and then she is gone.

Time resumes.

The shower block becomes a drain out into space.

The intruders are whipped out of sight.

We're pushed down the hall by the decompressing ship.

I ricochet against the wall. My head slams into something rigid. My ribs bend around metal, pushing the air from my lungs. The whole world is spinning.

I grab for anything. Nails shearing off until I find a jagged lip of metal to grip my fingers around at the inner edge of the breach. My legs dangle down a funnel of bent metal leading to empty space. Cold grips my bones. The water on my tongue boils off.

I feel more than see something white drifting to my left. I snatch at it and look back as my shoulder joint pops. Pain stabs through the rotator cuff. I've got a handful of Volga's hair in my hand. Is it my hand? It's *expanding*. Volga stares up at me, her eyes beginning to swell in her head. My grip is all that's keeping her and us from spinning into the void. She uses me as a ladder to climb back into the ship. Hand over hand.

Bitch is going to leave me. I consider letting go, but I'm distracted by a glowing shape in the ruins of the shower block.

Figment.

Somehow she survived the blast to crawl on the wall like a salamander. Her fingers secure her to the metal. I shout at her, but nothing comes out. She glances over her shoulder at us, and then continues along the ceiling

into the hallway to make her own escape. Eager to catch her, Volga crawls more quickly. I lose my grip, and we lurch toward space before she somehow stops herself and grabs me by my hair this time.

My vision warps. Blood boils in my eyeballs. Intense pressure pushes at everything. But I can see the outside of the ship. The hull stretches for kilometers.

There's more of *them*.

Shadows float against the *Pandora*'s jade-green hull, attached by cables, sawing their way in. They look like insects from the distance. They have no ships, no metal space suits. There's hundreds. Maybe more. One by one they disappear into the *Pandora*.

I'm going to die.

I don't want to die.

I can't leave Liam without anyone.

Has it been ten seconds or thirty? Pressure pushes my urine out. Bile rushes up my esophagus and gushes out my mouth. Something moves outside the hull, large panels of metal moving like puzzle pieces to cover the breach. Volga sees them and jerks on my arm, pulling me forward. The flow of pressure from the ship has stopped, it seems. And I fly back in through the hole just before the scale armor seals the breach. Volga flies in just behind me.

*Thunkathunkathunka.*

The breach seals.

Emergency lights bathe us red. There's still no pressure, still no oxygen. Darkness is melting the world away. Volga gestures at one of the Sol Guards. The captain still impaled on the wall—the only one not to get sucked out. She pushes her way to him, and then goes limp before she reaches him. She collides violently with the hull, unconscious.

I wait for her to wake up.

She's not going to.

If we die, it's on me.

If Liam is an orphan, it's on me.

I kick off the wall for the corpse and feel the world dimming.



# 49

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## LYRIA

### *Run*

**V**OLGA PANTS LIKE A bear in the null G. Oxygen finally fills the room. There in the emergency lighting of the destroyed locker room, she looks almost as monstrous as the intruders did. Her pale calves are thicker than my thighs and corded with muscle and thin white hair. They flex as she pushes herself up to the level of the impaled captain. His limbs float around him like a child making a dust angel.

Volga is not as gentle as in her letters as she scavenges weapons from the dead.

I flex my hands around the breath mask I hold. I don't remember how I kept us alive until the oxygen came back in. Volga says she woke up with me pressing the oxygen mask to her face. I must have taken it from one of the corpses. It must be the lack of oxygen or the vacuum slugging with my memory. Maybe that's a side effect.

Whatever happened, I did it. *Me*.

I feel numb from the killing I just saw. Body trembling from adrenaline, from the boiling blood. I dry-heave, sending me into a spinning motion that I only stop by catching a locker.

My head is all a-jumble. My hands are not much better off. Several fingernails are missing at the root. The fingers of both hands are torn to the bone between the first and the second joints. My skin feels sunburnt.

“That was scary,” Volga says.

Words come out slowly. “Do you know what those—”

“They looked like...” Was she about to say Obsidian? She blinks. “Whatever they are, they must have hit the AGG first.”

It takes me a moment. “AGG?”

“Sorry. Artificial gravity generator. Fig just left us,” she says, breaking the fingers of the dead captain to loosen his grip on his rifle. How is she not fazed by this? “Did you see?”

“I saw.”

“She’s such a bastard.”

“Personally, I’m a mite more worried about the monsters.”

She looks at me over her shoulder. “If Ephraim taught me one thing, it is not to stick your nose in other people’s business. They are here for Julii. Not us.”

Finally managing to free the rifle, she does a series of technical motions followed by the clicking of the weapon and a *whaaaamp* sound as green lights flicker on its screen. She grins and pets it. She grimaces as she catches me watching her. “Guns like me. But I do not like the Julii. She has been cruel.” She looks at the walls. The blood boiled off in the vacuum has left brownish stains. “Time to go.”

“No shit.”

“So?” She wipes the blood from her eyes. “Where to?”

“You’re the gangster, you tell me.”

“Gangster, gangster, gangster. I am a—”

“Freelancer. Yeah, whatever. I’m neither, so...”

She tilts her head at me and her entire body begins to rotate. Stupid null G. “Yes. You would be a worthless judge of this situation. Sorry.” She hesitates. “I will lead.” She starts pushing her way toward the hall.

“Where are you going? Do you even have a plan?”

She catches herself on a bent locker. “This is not our war. We must find the hangar.”

“You can fly?”

“Sometimes.”

She pushes off down the hall without me. I glance back at the dead captain. His pistol is still in his holster. I take it and follow Volga, not at all reassured.

The ship is quiet as we float through the pulsing corridors. Sirens wail as a calm voice instructs all Sol Guards to meet at their rally points, and all support to report to their safe rooms. An enemy is aboard. Code Black, whatever that means.

More sounds of gunfire and close-quarters combat echo down hallways the farther we go. Bodies of men in robotic armor strew the floor. Few if any are burned. Most were victims of spears and axes. The monsters didn’t seem to bring a single gun aboard, but with the way they moved in the zero G, I don’t think they need any.

I can’t shake the feeling more will appear from the shadows.

Or from around the corner.

My heart won’t stop throbbing.

“Where are we going?” I ask Volga as we float in the center of an intersection. I feel as though someone is watching us. The bodies of murdered Yellow civilians float far behind us. She squints at the air, incredibly calm.

“Can you see blood?” she whispers. “I lost Fig’s trail. My eyes are not good in low light. Sorry.”

Have we been following her trail the whole time? I thought we were just going at random. Volga might look stupid, but she’s done this before. Well, maybe not fight monsters from space, but the other stuff. Seeing how comfortable she looks with the rifle in her hands, I remember what she did to Kavax. How many people *has* she killed?

“Why are we following Fig?” I ask.

“She knows her way better. She’ll be going for a ship too.”

“Not to kill her...”

She looks over at my pistol. “Do you want to kill her?”

“Yeah,” I say, surprised at how natural it feels. “Yeah, I wouldn’t mind.”

Volga glances at me before going back to her search, her face unreadable.

I squint and search lower than Volga. Sure enough, I find blood droplets floating just over the floor, seeming to head off to the right. We set off in pursuit.

The ship grows eerily quiet except for the blaring alarms. It worries me how silent our movement is without gravity. Anything could be waiting for us around any corner.

A mechanical roar greets us at the next intersection. We scramble to reverse as a big Gold in gravBoots and a nightgown tears down the hall toward us with a bloody razor.

He locks eyes with Volga as he passes.

His voice trails down the hall. “Run...”

We look at what lies in his wake. The hallway stretches like a pulsing red throat, bending a hundred meters down. Shadows move.

“Oh shit...” I mutter, and push off the wall after the Gold faster than Volga. I’m numb. Vision constricted. Don’t even know if I *should* follow. But Volga is right behind me. And that gives me some comfort. Still, we’re not going fast enough, but we can’t look back without throwing our forward motion off. Volga shouts for me to grab her. My instinct is to trust her. I snag her leg and she fires behind us with the pulseRifle. We accelerate with its recoil just as the hall stutters black again. A mournful horn echoes down the hall like a whale song.

“Catch ’em!” someone shouts.

Two armored men in gravBoots zip forward to collect us. They bring us to a cluster of heavily armored Sol Guards led by two Golds. They form a defensive circle around the hall where it meets a gravLift station fed by multiple levels.

Blue light from the lift illuminates the soldiers. There’re more than thirty, not all armored, about a dozen sailors amongst them. Some look like they’ve just woken up. Though they know who we are, they make no effort to take our weapons.

Not reassuring.

The leader, a huge Gold man, hangs upside down looking at a Gray's datapad. "Thermal is bunk. Go motion." A heartbeat comes from the device as white waves ripple over the image in a circle. He moves a wand about. "They've stopped."

"What's—" I begin.

"Silence," the Gold snaps. Aside from his nightgown, he wears only gravBoots. His eyes flick to Volga. "Might need your help, Obsidian. I hear you know how to use that." He looks at her rifle. She nods and he motions everyone to be quiet. "I hear them down the hall. Lucia...secure our flank in case they come from the vents. If they reach the central gravLift, they can spread through the ship. We hold them here." Lucia watches him evenly, speaking in a private, silent language I don't understand. "Backup is imminent." Lucia nods and departs.

I try to get the Gold's attention again. "Sir—"

"Shut up, girl," he snaps. "Germanicus, I need you to take the hostages to Madam Julii in the—"

"Listen to me!" I shout. The Gold wheels, dark with anger. "They're already in the rest of the bloodydamn ship," I say.

His eyelids flutter. He knows what I mean.

"How do you know this?" he whispers.

"I saw them from outside. There were hundreds all over the ship."

"It is true," Volga says. "She was far enough out."

"Tongue," the Gold commands. I stick mine out. "Boil burns," he says, and goes still. He knows I've been in vacuum.

"Expect hostiles," he tells the group.

*Ping...*

The motion sensor displays a single dot traveling down the hall toward us. A Gray shoots a flare. The red light illuminates a single warrior. He swims down the hall like a shark, using what looks like a grapple gun to build velocity. "Germanicus, at one hundred meters, bring him down."

But the alien warrior stops. He swims back and forth between the walls. "*Naka, rheket zü FÁ!*" he bellows. A stunted metal crown seems to be fused

to his naked head. “*Naké, rheket zī Uud.*”

A low groan rolls down the throat of the hall from his fellows.

“*Fáaaaaaaaaa.*”

*Ping...Ping...Ping. Pingpingpingpingping.*

Dots swarm the motion sensor, coming from all directions. “The ducts!” a wolfguard grunts. They shift their defensive position.

“They’re too big,” the Gold corrects. “They’d never fit.”

“They have small ones,” Volga says.

Even in panic, the Gold is impressive. He wheels, face absolutely still. “How small?”

Volga puts a flat hand above my head, and lowers it to my clavicles.

The Gold’s lips tighten and he draws his razor and pushes toward the ducts. Then blue light bathes us as the gravLift doors open from behind. No lift presents itself from inside the shaft. Only a single warrior floating in the blue dark.

He is the biggest human I’ve ever seen.

A long white tail of hair writhes like a pale snake over his head in the null G. His armor looks too heavy for any man to use in gravity, even him. It is weightless now—thick, rough, and jagged, festooned all over with spikes that are almost as long as those that make the crown atop his skull helmet.

“He’s real,” Volga whispers, gripped with awe. The dark fairy tale of her letters appears. “Volsung Fá.”

His voice is a deep vibration. He’s looking right at me. No. Through me to Volga.

**“Volga. I offer you these Stains.”**

He springs through the gunfire into the Gold leader. He bats aside the Gold’s razor with a long spear. Then they collide. Four of the spikes of his helmet pop through the Gold’s head like needles skewering a strawberry. Two from his shoulder punch out the man’s lower back. He slashes at the Gold’s neck with a crescent fist-blade, half severing the strong bone of the Gold’s spine. Using the man’s body as a shield, he pushes off the floor to

find his next prey, his helmet spikes crowned now with the decapitated head of the Gold.

The giant kills everyone.

Some with his spear, some with his fist-blade, others with the spikes of his armor. And those he kills or wounds on his armor, he carries with him like a screaming crab shell made of the dying.

Volga fires her pulseRifle in quick bursts. The pulseblasts that find him sizzle on the armor, and send him ricocheting to kill more. The gun isn't powerful enough. The monsters swim now down the main hall coming not to help the spiked man, but to watch him kill and drone that horrible sound. Volga shoots three in the head with blinding speed, but more are coming.

***“Fáaaaaa.”***

Volga and I run as soon as the second Gold is killed. Fá tries to come after us, but his own slaughtered victims weigh his spiked armor down as gravity returns to the ship with a downward jerk. Julii's men restored it.

Not just Martian standard, but something far surpassing Earth's gravity.

*Clever.*

It's agonizing to run. I feel leaden. Volga stumbles with me, tearing through the maintenance corridors, until we reach a manual transit chute that runs between decks.

Volga grabs me before I slide down it. Her eyes survey the level-map beside the entrance. We've lost Fig's trail. We'll have to find our own way. Gods, she's cool as ice. “Those are Ascomanni,” she says as she studies the map.

“Ascomanni are just pirates.”

“These are real Ascomanni. Far Ink,” she says. “What else could they be?”

“Could we talk about this later?”

She nods and jams a finger on the map. “Pilot ready room. Ten down.”

I go first down the chute. Gunfire and explosions echo as we descend between levels. Or ascend. I'm not sure which way's up in space. Is there even an up? The more I think about it, the more disoriented I get. The

*Pandora* is a floating city. With districts, maybe a dozen fire departments. How many others will be rushing to the hangars?

There's no time to think about it.

We blur past little worlds of slaughter. Julii soldiers kneeling and firing out of a communications room. A scalped Silver sitting very still at a doorway holding his intestines as shadows make grunting sounds inside. Two Golds in business apparel being hacked to death by blood-covered maniacs. The maniacs won't stop laughing. They're massacring a ship, and they act like they're at a fucking party.

I pinch my legs on the ladder to slow above the ready room. I come to an easy stop. Volga bowls into me from above, kicking my face and sending me sprawling. "Sorry. Weird gravity."

The ready room is quiet. Lockers opened, gear missing. Pilots must have been fast to the hangars. "How did he know you?" I snap at Volga as she peers back up the chute, wondering if we were followed.

"I don't know," she says, looking back with wide eyes.

Not so calm now, eh? Her monster knew her.

"How the bloodyhell did he know your name? Why does he want you?"

She shakes her head, at a loss. I leave her, whatever she's hiding will have to wait. I'm not going to die like those soldiers. I head to the pilot chute to take it down to the hangars. Volga stops me.

Her eyebrows crawl upward. "What?" I ask.

"I dropped...something." She acts with incredible conviction as if she's searching the ground for something. Her path takes her to a metal EVA suit locker. Volga steps back and then lunges forward to kick it. The metal crumples inward. I hear a grunt and a familiar gunshot. The top of the locker divides. Light bends in the room. A half meter of bulkhead parts like butter pushed apart by two fingers.

Volga kicks the door until it falls off its hinges and crumples into the person hiding inside. Volga shoves her hand in and wrenches out a translucent ghost. The translucence ripples over Volga's arm until the arm itself disappears. Volga grabs something with her other arm and the ghost materializes, revealing Fig dangling from her throat at the end of Volga's outstretched arm.



“Figment!” Volga growls. “We meet again!”

“Ogre. Broke...my...ribs...” Fig tries to bring her gun up, but Volga grabs it and tears it from her hands, almost taking her fingers with it. It drops to the floor. I reach for it.

“Don’t! Coded for her.” I pull my hand back, and use a towel from the broken locker to wrap it up.

“You left us to die!” Volga slams Fig against the wall hard enough to dent it. “You shot at Ephraim at the Adonis Casino!” She slams her again. “You stole the Crown of Cortada! You stuck a needle in my chest!”

“And mine,” I add.

“And Lyria too!” Volga slams her the hardest for that one. “I’ll pop you like a zit. Justice for both of us.”

Fig clenches her jaw. Something pops. She spits it at Volga. Volga twitches to the side. A stream of green spit slashes across the floor and melts through it. Volga laughs. “I know your tricks, Fig! No calibrated acid this time.”

Apparently, she doesn’t know all of Fig’s tricks. The white lines on Fig’s skin throb. Volga starts to convulse. Her hair stands on end. Miraculously, she holds on. Then Fig presses down on her middle finger’s nail with her thumb and a long needle jumps out from her middle knuckle. I press my own pistol straight against Fig’s head just before she plunges the needle into Volga’s shoulder.

Maybe it’s the soldier gore on my face. Maybe it’s my race’s habit for bad tempers. Maybe it’s the muzzle digging into her skull, but Figment freezes. “Soft head, hard bullet. Bad combination, bitch.” I twist the muzzle. “Drop it.”

“I...can’t,” is all she manages with Volga squeezing her neck. Her face purples. “Fused...onto...metacarpal.”

“Drop the hand then, ya dumb slant. And stop...whatever you’re doing to Volga.”

Fig’s hand drops to her side, and whatever her skin was doing stops. Volga whimpers a little in pain, then snaps the needle off with a grunt.

“What was that?” she asks, relaxing her hand on Fig’s throat.

“Nerve agent.”

“With the skin.”

“NEDS.”

Volga’s eyes narrow. “What is this NEDS?”

“Nanotech emergency defense system.”

“Really?” Volga’s eyebrows do a little dance. “*Slick.*”

“I know, right? I had it installed in—”

“Quiet.” Volga squeezes her throat tight as the public address system crackles to life.

Lady Barca’s voice comes over the coms.

*“All factors and clients of House Julii-Barca, this is your patronus, we have been boarded by an unidentified enemy force of unknown strength. While they share traits with Obsidians, their skin appears to be polyextremophilic: resistant to vacuum, radiation, low-velocity rounds, and thermal imaging. They are also under heavy psychotropic influence. Pain does not register, but headshots do. They have penetrated the core lifts. We have zero containment. They are climatized to null G, so I have retaken the gravity generator personally. We cannot hold it, but the gravity will give you a chance.”*

She takes a deep breath.

*“The enemy appears to have limited working knowledge of our systems. Thus, I am ordering total evacuation of the Pandora, to be followed by a purge protocol. In ten minutes achlys-9 nerve agent will be dispersed. You have until then to get to your pods. Victra out.”*

The *Pandora* is a legend. The Julii twice as famous. She doesn’t just abandon her family flagship.

It feels like the world is upside down.

Volga looks bewildered. “What do we do?”

“Still looking for orders,” Fig says with a laugh. “Poor puppy needs a—*ack.*” Volga squeezes her throat.

“Should we find the pods?” she asks me.

“You gonna kill her or not?” I ask.

“To be determined.”

“Well, if you’re not, I reckon she’s our best chance of getting out of here. Maybe put her down?”

“Why not. I will kill her if she is shifty.” Volga releases Fig. The small woman falls to the floor hacking for air. “Without her pistol. It is much easier.”

“I can help you...” Fig says, massaging her throat.

“Can you fly a ship?” I ask.

“Of course I can fly a ship.” I raise an eyebrow at Volga. “But you do not want to go to the hangars,” Fig says. “I just came from there. It’s a slaughterhouse. Trust me.”

Volga and I both laugh.

“You two are part of my contract. I don’t get paid my second half till I hand you over to Sefi.” Her eyes flick to Volga. “What did the monkey mean when she said one of them knew your name?”

Volga shakes her head.

“You don’t know? Of course you don’t know. I fucking hate Mars,” Fig mutters. “All the weird shit happens here. *Makes no sense.*” She makes that same distant expression she made in my cell, almost like taking a step out of the physical world. When she reverts, she says one word. “*Xenophon.*”

“What’s a Xenophon?” I ask.

She ignores me to wipe blood from the needle hole in her hand.

“Where are the escape pods?” Volga asks.

“You want to die? The pods will become murder pens.” Fig sighs, irritated she has to explain to us idiots. “The small ones are moving through the maintenance tunnels like they built them. Big ones prefer the halls. They’re not driving *to* objectives. They’re *hunting*. What do you want to bet they know where the prey will go? It’ll be a massacre.”

“Then you have a backup plan,” Volga says.

“Doll, I’m a freelancer. I always got a backup plan. There’s an emergency escape craft beneath the bridge level. Which is *not* in the schematics. If our luck holds, the freaks won’t know it’s there. I’m headed there myself, after a little detour.” She grins at us. “So, ladies. Whaddya say?”

## LYRIA

*Parasite*

THE *PANDORA* IS A HIVE of corridor fighting. A mass exodus flows through the ship. It isn't just Julii's soldiers on the *Pandora*. It is her entire household from Luna, which she was moving back to Mars. A miniature civilization of cooks, academics, researchers, accountants, and horse trainers floods to the escape-pod levels. I watch in wonder as a dozen of the beasts are herded through the corridors by old Obsidian women.

Fig's detour took us to her stateroom, where she grabbed a backpack and a more peculiar item, a glossy black globe that contorts over the back of her neck to attach somewhat like a tick or a parasite. I've no idea what it is, but it makes her look like a hunchback. Volga stares at it in awe. Obviously she's given up the pretense of Fig being our captive if she let her have that.

"Can I have my pistol back now?" Fig asks as we float upward toward the bridge through a maintenance corridor.

"No," Volga says. "It is ours, for damages."

"Takers keepers," Fig says, giving the pistol a longing glance.

The closer we get to the bridge, the more sounds we hear. Twice, Fig saves us from running straight into one of the roving Ascomanni or whatever they are. We wait in the shadows of an armory amongst dead Grays as a pack passes.

When we hear them call to each other in joy, we know they've found their next victim. Fig motions us into the hall. It is empty. The gravity reverses as we run, growing lighter and lighter until we reach a security door marked with radioactive symbols. Fig reaches for something on her belt and pulls out a thin plastic container. Inside is a small gelatin disk. She inserts it into her eye. It expands and turns her irises Gold. A scanner appears in the door. Blue light flickers over her eye. The door opens.

"Retinal forger," Volga mutters. "This is Julii's personal escape craft?"

"Does it matter whose it is? Woman's gonna pop with a baby yesterday and she's off fighting. The maniac."

Volga takes hold of her collar and pushes her through the opening door. It dead-ends in a maintenance closet filled with cleaning robots.

"*Welcome, Madam Barca,*" a nasty, manly voice says as Sevro au Barca's face appears in a hologram. A reinforced door shields above us. Weapons appear on the walls. Expensive weapons. The Julii's personal stash. Volga looks like she's gonna faint from joy. "*I don't want an escape craft, she says. Ha! I told you you'd need one. Now scurry home and we'll hunt whomever you pissed off together.*" He waves and disappears. The panel on the far side of the room slides back to reveal a dark tube. I shove Volga to make her stop drooling after the guns.

"No, no, no," Volga says as Fig heads to the tube. "I go first."

"What if the ship is already gone? And this leads out into space?" I say. "Let her go first."

"Or she could get in and shut us out," Volga says, thinking.

"Slag it." I dive into the tube.

Its gravity seizes me immediately, hurling me up the chute. It twirls a dozen times. My breath seizes in my chest. Metal whips past. My head grows heavy. Then gravity slows. My stomach whirls at the new sensations. The chute's circular door opens and I fall into a plush leather chair, safe and sound. That was one hell of a slide.

I give a little whoop.

I find myself in a lounge, and it is already occupied. More than a dozen heavily armed Sol Guards and several bloodied Golds carrying heavy rifles turn to stare at me. And sitting directly across from me in a leather chair, in green metal armor with a weeping sun on the swollen abdomen, is Victra au Barca.

She tilts her beautiful head at me in amusement and then punches me in the face.

—

Reality returns in stuttering frames.

*Not again. Not again.*

The cabin is spinning. My stomach lurches. Sunlight rushes through a hole in the hull. Victra stands there holding on to the wall, firing out of the ship with a huge gun. Something punches two hundred miniature holes in the hull. People around me disappear in a red mist. Two tubes shoot out of my chair and jam into my nostrils. Volga wails somewhere behind me. Wind and light. A great huge roar. Victra is gone. Whipped out the hole in the hull. Trees through the windows. Then a hiss as my chair swallows me up in a cocoon of darkness.

*THUUUUUUUMM.*

We hit the ground. Rolling. Rolling. Rolling. A metal spear pierces through the dark cocoon. It stops an eyelash away from puncturing my eyeball.

Silence.

Oxygen comes through the tubes into my nose.

“Volga!” I murmur. “Volga...”

My arms are pinned to my body by the cocoon. My legs won’t budge. I feel some sort of knob by my right hand. I jiggle it to see what it does. A great farting sound releases the liquid from the crash pod and the darkness around me sags. Light pours in and I forget to breathe.

I’m dangling over the edge of a Martian fjord.