**Chapter 1**

Fifteen hundred credits. That’s all I need before I’m off this rock and shuttling back to Earth.

I risk a glance up from the sidewalk. The streets are usually empty this late in the circadian cycle, but a clique of four ice miners approach from down the block. They’re just off the clock by the looks of it, with their puffy orange jackets unzipped down the front and synthetic nicotine sticks hanging loose on their lips. Heading home to one of the rat trap apartment complexes, gambling dens or grime bars in this neighborhood. I keep a steady stride as I pass the group, tilting my head away so the streetlight casts a shadow across my face. The man in front whistles at me, followed by a rumble of laughter from the others and the coarse imitation of a dog bark. I ball my fists and dig them down into the front pockets of my hoodie. It takes all my willpower to keep from slapping the salt from his mouth. But if I pressed them to stop gawking at my chest and look me in the eyes, they’d see I’m the same girl on the holo-board they just strolled past. Or the one who’s been streaming on countless vid loops throughout the city. One look at me and they’d see a pile of bounty credits worth twice their salary.

“Slag head,” I mumble, unwilling to completely shrug off the rude gesture.

“What did you call me?” the man growls, his leisurely attitude breaking away. His friends ease into a rousing, rowdy laughter. He rounds on me with a chest bump, looking for a fight, so close I smell the ash on his breath.

I don’t flinch. I can’t afford to. Any sign of weakness and dogs like this will bite. Alone on the streets, there’s no one to help. No one who cares. I was twelve years old when men started giving me furtive glances. I remember naïve unease turning to embarrassment like there was something wrong with me. Then fear. In the following years, I learned to act numb to the threat but anger swells with each encounter. And still, that tiny seed of fear in my gut never dissolves.

One of his friends places their hand on the slag head’s shoulder and pulls him to continue along with the group. He mutters a curse and walks away, unware I just picked his wallet. I keep my pace, head down and sight glued to the spider web cracks of the sidewalk.

I reach my destination outside an abandoned storefront. With several aluminum panels tacked over a shattered display window, the store façade looks no different than any other ramshackle unit on this block. I climb up its crumbling stoop to a rusted steel door, yank it open and step inside the city’s only criminal haven. The floorboards creak and groan under my weight, while a pungent aroma of smoke and sweat fills my nose. Two ragged, tattooed men play cards at a small table littered with credits. The door clanks shut and both men look up. I’ve seen them around, but neither warrant remembering a name. They recognize me immediately. The man on the left leans over the table and whispers to the other.

Most of the boss’s men don’t care for me. They see a scrawny, olive-skinned girl with an upturned nose who, in her first year, made the highest profit margin in the organization. Like those who can paint a masterpiece or play a piano sonata before they even learn to speak, I was born to thieve. I turn to the camera hanging in the upper corner of the room. Its red-light flashes like a beating heart. I peel my jacket’s hood back, brush my long black hair behind my shoulders and pose for the camera.

I haven’t been in here sixty seconds, and the two men are already scheming to rat me out and collect the Arbiter’s bounty. “Think you could pull it off without anyone finding out?” I say. Organized crime trumps law here in Bleeder’s Row, and snitches are the lowest of the low. Anyone who violates the natural order ends up tossed down a mine shaft. Their eyes narrow with contempt, but their lips stay sealed.

“Welcome, Mira DeGray,” a synthetic voice crackles. A green projection of a holographic woman materializes in front of me. Her mouth moves, lagging behind her audio projection. Static ripples up and down her body. Not high tech, but the digital secretary is worth more than anything else in this neighborhood.

“Mir—Mir—Mir—” Her green face twitches, caught in a loop.

“Mira,” a gruff voice bellows from the next room. “You’re late.”

I shuffle through the open door and into the boss’s office. He’s acquired a new statue since last week—a bare-breasted lady carved from ebony. She stands prominent against the dingy, brocade wallpaper.

“Like it?” my portly boss asks, perched high in his leather-bound chair. It’s a beautiful statue and no, I don’t like it. Not so much the statue itself, but the fact it’s a condescending token to remind everyone just how much money and power he has. “The import tax alone nearly scalped me, never mind the cost of finding authentic ebony.” A cloud of smoke swirls above his head, a fat cigar pressed between his even fatter lips. I scrunch my nose at the stench. The office door hisses shut behind me.

Last week I was in here looking for work. Despite my desperation to scrounge all the credits I can, he made it painfully clear he didn’t want me around. Not with all the Arbiter’s in the city looking for me. For him to invite me back, his circumstances have changed. He must have a job suited just for me that’s worth the risk. I nudge the leg of an empty chair with my steel-toe boot, and slide it away from Mr. Yoo’s desk.

“Don’t,” he says. “I don’t want you here any longer than necessary.”

He needs me for a job, but apparently not enough to act cordial. I smirk. “Funny, I didn’t think a girl with a bounty could leave you shaking in your loafers.”

He frowns. “No amount of payoff to the Arbiters will have them turn cheek on this matter. One of their own is dead by your hand. And it’s been eleven days since you slipped custody. They’re angry and embarrassed.”

“I’m innocent,” I say in an unexpected growl. I must have said those words a hundred times since I was arrested. And no one believed that scuzzy excuse of an officer attacked me. No one believed he became overzealous with a knife while squeezing me for credits. No one believed if I didn’t fight back he would have taken my life. Not the Arbiters, not the judge, and now not even Mr. Yoo. The only difference is Mr. Yoo doesn’t care if I’m innocent or not. But he’s right, of course. Despite how irritating it is to admit. With the Arbiter’s relentless search, I’m a danger to have around.

Mr. Yoo pulls the cigar from his mouth and stubs it in a chipped porcelain dish. Then he slides a data pad across his desk, tapping its silver edge with his pudgy finger. “Everything you need for your next assignment.”

Without further explanation, I can only assume this is my standard job: break into a facility, lift the goods and, most importantly, get out undetected. That’s the only reason he’d want me for this one. Most of his boys are meat-headed goons who wouldn’t recognize stealth, subterfuge or subtlety if it snuck up in front of them. Besides, who cares what the job is. I need the credits. “Payout?” I ask.

“Seven-fifty.”

That’s the low end of a reasonable offer. “Fifteen-hundred”

“No.”

I hold the curse on my lips and remind myself this is all part of the game. I’d like nothing more than to collect fifteen-hundred for this job and buy my way off this trash heap of a planet.

Each passing day, there’s more vid loops flashing my face, more Arbiter’s on patrol, more greedy eyes looking to claim my bounty. If I don’t get these credits, I will be caught. And I will hang for that Arbiter’s death.

Considering Mr. Yoo called on me despite the heat from the Arbiter’s, maybe he’ll bend. “If anyone else could do this job, you’d have brought them in on it.” I turn for the door. “Send for me in the morning after you’ve slept on my price.”

“One thousand. If you don’t like that I’ll collect your bounty myself to compensate my losses.”

I stop a half-step away from leaving as I process his threat. “The big boss turned canary? The boys would never look you straight again.”

“The first boy to glance crossways,” he says, picking up the polished, gold cigar cutter from his desk and snapping it like a guillotine, “will lose both his thumbs.”

My stomach twists as I weigh the odds he’s bluffing. Worst case scenario, he’s not and I end up back in custody. The Arbiter’s would tie a noose around my neck within the week. But even if he’s bluffing, he’d black mark me at the least. I wouldn’t see another job for months. And I can’t walk away from those credits. Not when I’m so close. “One thousand,” I say reluctantly. “Agreed.”

A grin splits his face.

I swipe the data pad off the desktop and leave without saying another word. I brush past the holographic woman and make for the exit. Mr. Yoo’s lackeys glance up from their card game, mutter something quiet, and share a snigger.

“It must sting seeing a stack of credits like me walk out the door. And all you boys can do is sit there and twiddle each other’s units.” They scowl, which puts a smirk back on my face. I flip my sweater’s hood over my head and pull my hair down to hide my profile before heading back out into public.

#

I’m surrounded by a grid of steel-framed warehouses. It’s quiet here in industrial sector 13-A. The streets desolate except for the occasional box truck plowing ahead to meet the next shipment’s time-stamp. It’s a far cry from the cluster of dilapidated apartment buildings and cardboard-house vagrant communes of Bleeder’s Row. It even smells different with a thick mix of grease and chemicals hanging in the air. The only commonality between the colony’s many sectors is the dark, cavernous thing we call our sky. Earth has several off-world colonies spread throughout its nearest, habitable solar systems. Some colonies are terra-formed oases to relieve the overpopulation of Earth, while others are simply meant to supplement Earth’s dwindling resources. And of course, it’s my luck to be stuck on Caspia, a cruddy hydro-mining colony and the only one built below its host-planet’s surface.

I cut down a narrow alley between two warehouses. Swirls of soot and grime paint the metallic side paneling of each building. I glance to the plasma UI of my wrist-pad to review Mr. Yoo’s intel, which I’ve cross-referenced with my own. My objective is to lift encrypted research files from a bio-tech company, Moirai Industries.

At the end of the alley, I come out to a wide causeway, lit with rows of bright, nanotech streetlights. A large, white building lies across the causeway. Tall chain-linked fence surrounds the building, barbed wire coiled along the top. Several black trucks sit out front and a small guard station blocks the only entrance. Strategically placed cameras and the occasional drone monitor the perimeter.

This is my mark.

According to my intel, the next shift change will be in—I glance to my wrist-pad—nine minutes. I’ll have roughly one minute and thirty seconds before eyes are back on the cameras.

Longer would be better, but I always expect less.

As I crouch down, gravel crunches under my boot. I’m careful to remain concealed in the shadowy ingress of the surrounding warehouses. An overturned water bug carcass lies at the tip of my boot, it’s body wedged between two pieces of gravel. Black spindly legs stick straight up and pincers jet out from its head. As I continue scouting the facility, the front gate opens and a black truck pulls out. It shakes both my insides and my black-carapace companion as it roars past. The company’s logo stamps the driver’s side door—a white triangle atop a black circle. It turns the corner and disappears. I wait, rubbing a dull ache from my bad hand. A jagged scar runs along my right palm from a wound that never quite healed right. The intermittent discomfort and occasional numbness in my fingertips forever remind me just how harsh life can be.

Thirty seconds to the next shift change and I rise to my feet. Two guards man the front gate but no drones fly above. I dash out from between the warehouses and across the street. I’m out in the open. If a single guard or drone catches me I may have time to run, but the job is over.

I pull my hot-knife from the toolkit in my waistband. It only takes a second for the blade to heat and I burn through the links in the fence. The stench of melted metal fills the air. I crawl through, run past a row of trucks and climb up a service ladder to the roof. A security camera points at me. An odd feeling prickles through me as my reflection hangs in the lens like a distorted Picasso painting.

I check the time. It’s been one minute and six seconds.

I jump into a sprint towards a chemical ventilation duct, take out a filter mask from inside my jacket and stretch its elastic bands around my ears. The decoder from my toolkit pops open the duct’s digital padlock in record time. I tear the lid off and slide down. No guards yell and no alarm rings out. Triumph swells in me as I’m in without even a close call. This place doesn’t stand a chance.

Following a digital schematic, I emerge in a dimly lit room. Shiny metallic walls and a silvery floor emit a clinical sterility. Four glass-walled cells surround me, two located on each side. Three are empty with nothing but a steel framed cot, chair and metallic toilet. I take an unsettled second glance at the fourth cell. It’s too dark to tell what’s inside. With any luck, its light is just burned out.

I sweep the room for any hidden cameras and come up nil. Then I remove the protective covering from my sticky-encrypt and slap the thin metallic sheet to the underside of the room’s only computer console. With a few keystrokes across my wrist-pad’s UI, the sticky-encrypt begins infiltrating the security defenses. I take a step back from the console as the upload percentage rises on my UI. My heart pumps with the usual rush of a break in as everything goes according to plan.

A sharp smack pierces the room.

I turn and my eyes settle on the dark cell. A pale palm and five fingers press against the glass. A man’s hand. A series of nicks and cuts run across his fingers. Some scabbed over, some freshly split. I don’t like this.

I take a cautious step closer and a voice whispers from behind the wall of darkness, low and scratchy. “Nighty night.”

I glance to my wrist-pad. The encrypt is only half-way there.

“Nighty night,” it repeats.

I scan the cell, making sure it’s completely sealed, but there’s no keypad or obvious locking mechanisms. It must be controlled through the console. I pull the shock gun from my toolkit, gripping it tight.

“Nighty night, close your eyes tight.” There’s a brief pause followed by shallow breath. “The Sandman comes but he is no white knight.”

I step back, a tremble running through my fingers.

His hand slides down the glass and slowly pulls away, disappearing back into the shadowy confines of the cell.

I stare into the dead space.

My beeping wrist-pad snaps me back to attention. The sticky-encrypt has infiltrated the facility’s defenses. I turn the video feeds to still frames while I track the live feed on my UI, keeping the dark cell in the corner of my eye.

A deafening crack rips through the room. And another as a chair bounces off the glass pane without leaving a scratch. The racket is loud enough to alert every guard in this place, all my security hacks be damned. I search my UI for a cell control prompt—sound dampening, gaseous sedatives, anything to quiet this guy.

Double doors slide open to a man dressed in the white smock of a lab technician. “I’ve warned you,” he says, face red and spittle flying. “Keep it up. I’ll flip those lights and let you burn.” He points into the dark cell. “One more time and you’ll—”

As he spots me, I’m already halfway toward him, shock gun poised to strike. He jumps back and gets half a yell out before I plug him in the ribs. He spasms silently, volts passing through muscle and sinew. He crumples to the floor and I nudge him with the tip of my boot. He’s motionless, eyes shut and breath shallow.

The chair lies at the base of the glass wall. The man in the cell remains hidden.

I hurriedly search through the nearest camera feeds on my wrist-pad. No guards alerted and no internal alarms set off. But this just went from clean to messy and if someone stumbles on the unconscious tech, it could jump to red level in a microsecond. I give the tech another nudge. He’ll be out for at least a half hour.

I step through the double doors the tech came through, monitoring the live camera feeds and following the schematic from Mr. Yoo’s intel.

Each twist of these halls is the same: white floors, white walls and silvery metallic ceilings with strips of fluorescent light. I expect a patrol or another lab tech, but I make it to the pin drop on my schematic without a single encounter. This feels a little too easy.

The room labeled Biological Processing opens with a swipe of a finger. I walk through a sally port, another door opening as I approach, and into an empty chamber. The walls are textured in a way I’ve never seen, almost liquid or melted metal. At the far end, the floor curves up like a ramp to a small platform and a computer terminal. I expected an office or lab with microscopes and glass vials. I double-check the schematic, ensuring I’m in the right place. I am, and I’m making good time.

I shrug and crack my knuckles.

As I head for the terminal a glow pulses from inside the walls. The liquid texture swirls like an ocean. I pause, my breath catching.

A female computer voice emanates from above, “Initiating organic molecular scan.”

Organic what? I try to take a step but stumble, a wave of dizziness hitting me, along with an immediate queasiness.

This isn’t right.

I turn back toward the room’s entrance, slapping at my wrist-pad to re-open the door. It doesn’t respond. I must have tripped something when I came in. I stumble toward the terminal. If I can only shut it down at the source….

But I don’t make it three steps.

I start to panic as the room pulses, a fluctuating rise of violet and white lights. My head burns from the inside out, pain worming from ear to ear. I fall to one knee as a tingling sensation rushes through my arms and legs.

I’ve never felt a hurt so bad in my life. My heart pounds like a sledge hammer. If I don’t do something my brain is going to leak out of my ears.

I struggle to lift my head. The ceiling and walls move in waves with a kaleidoscope of colors beaming through.

I press my palms to the floor to keep from falling and paralysis takes over.

**Chapter 2**

Light from the liquid walls radiate through me. A wet, warm trickle crawls down my lower lip. My head throbs and adrenaline screams.

I’m crouched, palms pressed to the glossy floor and legs locked. Unable to move. Unable to breathe.

I want free. I have to fight.

Struggling to lift my arm, I reach for my wrist-pad as if I were wading through quicksand. With every ounce of my strength, I swipe the UI and cut the power.

The penetrating lights go dark. The fluid motion of the wall comes to a stop.

My elbows buckle and I fall flat on my face, pain and relief coursing through me. I lift up to one knee and scan the chamber. The room is silent, walls dull and static. The only light is the glow from my wrist-pad. A nervous, shaky edge grinds in me. I’m not sure how to explain, but I feel almost brittle.

*Take a breath, Mira. Calm down.* I have to clear my head if I want to get out of here.

I wipe the blood from my upper lip and glance to my wrist-pad. Armed guards line the outside hall. Ten total, with two prying open the doors. Here so quick, it’s like they knew I was coming.

*Scumming hell.*

I close my eyes, and draw in a slow, deep breath. I need to think quick. *Complete the job. Collect the credits.*

I step up onto the console platform, and plug my data pad directly to the hard drive for a magnetic copy. I look to the vid feed. The guards are in the sally port now, and the download’s not halfway done.

I need more time. And I need them not to shoot me on the spot.

I lay down on the floor, hair covering my face, playing dead, with my finger on my wrist-pad.

The doors slide open and four men step in, guns drawn. I flip the power back on. The doors slam shut and the vibrant lights continue pulsing where they left off. I’m safe on the pedestal but each guard falls to their knees. They struggle to aim and I take cover behind the console. Their painful groans cause me to draw up in a tight knot of discomfort. I know their hurt, but I can’t stop it. The guards outside pound on the door. The room is locked down.

I endured thirty seconds, tops, and it felt like I was going to die. I wait two minutes before I cut the power again. Each man drops. I search them over, finding an array of non-lethal weapons. Even their bullets are rubber. They wanted me alive.

Transfer now complete, I grab my data pad from the hard drive.

Six guards are left outside. They’ve fallen back, signaling a plan of attack with hand gestures. Their masks glow green with night vision and I have an idea. Through my wrist-pad UI, I power the doors of the sally port, while leaving the lights off. When the doors slide open, the guards take point. Looking up, throat tight with nerves, I pray to the stars this works. I grab two flashbang grenades off the vest of the nearest, disabled guard and roll them like a pair of dice down the hall. I duck back into the room, shut my eyes and cover my ears. Two deafening pops and my ears ring. I run through the sally port, barrel past the dazed guards and in seconds I’m clear.

This feels too much like a trap. There’s no way I’m leaving the way I came in, so I run full tilt for the facility’s basement. Halfway down the stairwell, my wrist-pad’s hack goes blank. They’re rebooting the system, the only way to undo my sticky encrypt. Which says I have roughly three minutes before they’re back in control. I descend two and three steps at a time, panting and chest burning from the rush of cold air.

Five exhaust shafts in the basement lead down to abandoned mining tunnels. A smart ventilation system for a subterranean colony, and an excellent escape route. I remove the metallic mesh cover from an exhaust, and drop down past idle fan blades. My feet hit the ground and as I look back up, I see the lights in the facility turn back on. The fan blades spin back to life. Another ten seconds and I wouldn’t have made it.

These tunnels snake through the entire industrial sector, with a hundred different ways in and out. I take off, safe in the knowledge they can’t catch me. Not now. But agitation grates at me. The guards were ready for an assault. Non-lethal weapons to take me alive. And that scan, I’m not certain it was an accident.

#

Graffiti in hues of pink, green and blue line every inch of my apartment building’s stairwell. The elevators break down more often than not, and getting stuck isn’t worth the risk. After a fourteen-floor climb and my head already dazed from whatever that room did to me, I’m ready to collapse. I trudge along the gritty concrete floor to my apartment at the end of the hall. It’s rare I see any neighbors—more than a handful are busy sleeping off some drug binge. And the fact I pay rent each week in hard credits to avoid leaving a digital trail helps to cut the risk of my wanted status. There are advantages to living in squalor, otherwise the Arbiters would have kicked in my door days ago.

I fiddle with my busted keypad and the door to my one room flat opens. My brother snaps to attention at the sight of me. He’s leaning against our only windowsill, arms crossed and midnight black hair hanging down. His almost skeletal frame creates a silhouette against the neon lights beaming in. In the split second before he asks me about the job, I decide not to tell him the whole truth. He’d insist I never do another job for Mr. Yoo.

And maybe he’d be right. Mr. Yoo risked bringing me in for this job. Why? He could have set me up to get nabbed by the Arbiters, but there are a hundred simpler ways to do that without setting a trap inside some science facility. I suppose one of Yoo’s boys could be a rat. But that just doesn’t sit well. The guards with non-lethal weapons. That weird scan. The pieces don’t fit. I’d ask Mr. Yoo who hired me for the job, but I’d have better luck getting the pin to his bank account.

“Is it done?” he asks. “Did anyone see you? Are you okay?”

“It’s done,” I say. “And I’m not in cuffs.”

“Is that…?” He approaches me, cups my chin in his palm and inspects my face. “Is that blood from your nose?”

“Yeah, but it’s not a deal.”

“Mira Shan DeGray,” he says in the tone of a scolding parent.

I bristle, hating when he does that. “Orion Kai DeGray.”

“Stars above. Was that Yoo? If he hurt you, I swear I’ll kill him.”

“It wasn’t Mr. Yoo, just a botch in the job. But I’m fine and it’s done.” Already more than I wanted to tell him, and I hope he doesn’t press the issue.

He sighs, deep and long, and returns to his position against the windowsill. I kick off my boots and make for the bathroom—if you can call it that: a sink and toilet in the back corner of the one-room apartment. Pipes moan as I twist open the faucet and splash cool water on my face.

“Was it the last one?” Orion asks.

“I haggled a thousand out of him. I’m sure another job will come up in the next week.” Assuming Yoo didn’t intend for me to get caught.

“Rubbish,” he snaps. “Look at you. You look so worn you could pass out standing. Any one of these jobs could be your last. One misstep and you’re back in custody, if they don’t shoot you on the spot. And do you think Mr. Yoo gives a damn?”

I sigh. It’s been too rough a day, and I’m too exhausted for this. “Just one more and we’ll have enough to get off this scumming planet.”

“Let me make the difference. I could hit the streets, move some product for—”

“For your old dealer?” I interrupt, irritation swelling. “Slinging ice rock for thirty credits a gram? What in the blue hell makes you think I’d go for that?”

“Any dolt desperate for a pinch could spot you for the bounty.”

“And you’re six months clean.” I shudder at the lingering reminder of the damage he inflicted—injected—on himself. We’d been living on our own just over a year. I’d spend my nights picking pockets in the business district just to get us by. Orion, I think, took it harder than me. We lost Mom to an accident in the mines, and Dad couldn’t handle it. We lost him too. I came home one early morning from a long night working the streets. Orion wasn’t there. I waited up and he eventually strolled in pale skinned, dilated pupils and a serene, almost dazed, look. And stars above, he smelled like a mangy, piss-soaked rat. I’d seen it before in ice rock junkies. He didn’t even make it to bed; passed out slumped against the wall. That scared the blue hell out of me. The next morning, he swore it was only a one-time taste. And I believed him.

“The only way you’re going back near that venom is over my dead body.”

“Mira, you don’t always have to go it alone. For once, trust me.”

Trust him anywhere near that stuff? He’s kidding me? That’s the other half of the reason we need out of Bleeder’s Row and off this planet. I want him so far away, falling off the rocket isn’t even a possibility. “Look at the track marks down your arm. They’re just starting to heal. Scum off, it’s not happening.”

He paces to the kitchenette corner of the apartment and pulls a barstool from the counter; he sits. “If it wasn’t for you, I’d have died with a needle in my arm. And if something happens to you now….”

“You’d keep on the straight.”

“I’d slip and you know it.”

My sight trails to the floor, unable to look him in the eyes and see the truth of the matter.

“I’m the older one,” he says. “It should be me taking care of you.”

When we were little, before we were on our own, we’d bicker about every little thing. *She got sixteen pieces of butterscotch bites. I only have fifteen.* *Why does he get to sit between you and daddy? She picked the robot movie last time.* *It’s his turn to clean Mr. Squibble’s cage.* Mom would huff and grumble. He’d whine, *but I’m older*. I’d get mad, push him down, and then he’d cry.

I flash him the devil’s grin as if I’m about to push him down again. “Three minutes doesn’t count.”

“Still older,” he mock grumbles, smiling slightly.

I plop down cross-legged on the floor in front of my computer, power it up and plug in the data pad. “Look, my head is splitting, it’s late and I’m hungry. How ’bout some grub?”

“If I’m useless on every other front, I’ll at least feed you.” He lifts himself from the stool and cracks open two ration unit tins. I exhale with relief. Hopefully with one more job to go, we won’t need to have this conversation ever again.

“Spiced lamb?” I ask, noticing the distinctive aroma filling our flat.

“Nothing but the best synthesized meat for you.” He scrapes the contents of each onto a plate, the meat sizzling hot straight from the tin. He adds a flour cake to each plate and fills two glasses with water.

As the monitor flicks on, a blue glow fills the room. I open the stolen file. Pages of brain scans, genetic code and 3D structures of chemical compounds clutter the screen.

“The first thing I want when we get back to Earth,” I say, scrolling through the lifted data, “is natural food.”

“Lamb?”

I give him a pointed look. “Maybe an apple to start.”

He snorts. “You’ve never had one. How do you know you’d even like it?”

“How do I know I wouldn’t?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. It just seems so… meh. I want real chicken. No more of this synthesized waste.” He sets the plate on the floor next to me, then the glass of water. He drops a daily vita-pill in and it disintegrates, spreading the yellow haze of nutrients that most of our food doesn’t contain—the most important being vitamin D to counter the effects of living in a subterranean colony. “What are we looking at?” he asks, peering over my shoulder to a multicolored, magnified section of a brain splayed across the screen.

“No idea. But it was worth a thousand credits for me to steal.”

Orion returns to his plate on the kitchen counter.

“You ever heard of Moirai Industries?” I ask.

“Sure haven’t. Now peel your eyes from that screen and eat before it goes cold.”

I swivel around toward Orion, set the plate in my lap and take a bite of the paste-like lamb. “I spoke to Indigo this morning. She’ll have things lined up for a shuttle by the time we’re done scraping together the credits. She just needs to know what names to put on our new ID chips and transport cards.”

Orion tears off a piece of the flour cake and pops it into his mouth. “Any name we want?”

“We can’t be Mira and Orion anymore.” I find the idea of losing my name both sad and liberating at the same time. “But whoever else is up to us.”

“Julius Priece?”

“High Councilor of EarthCen, Julius Priece?”

Orion’s face splits into a grin.

“Yeah, that’s keeping it low key,” I say, spooning a glob of meaty paste and flicking it across the room. It splats against his shoulder.

“Mira,” he barks. We burst into laughter. Once he catches his breath and dabs the paste clean from his shirt, he says, “Kai was never put on my birth registration.”

“Our heritage names?” Grandma Zhu used them for us. Every year we’d visit her in New Beijing for the Spring Festival. We’d clean her house to sweep away any ill-fortune from the past year, allowing only for good luck. And the reunion dinner. Stars above, I can still taste the gangou potatoes, the Tuckahoe pie and her family famous dumplings.

The idea of taking our grandmother’s name is comforting. It’s an opportunity to erase the mess of our lives here in Bleeder’s Row and start new. Both Orion and I could make the memory of our family proud for once in our lives. “I could get used to Shan.”

After we finish our meals, Orion turns off the lights and lays in his bedroll. I continue browsing the stolen data. Aside from walking into a trap tonight, the crazed man in the cell has left me curious what goes on in that lab. And better yet, what was up with that scan?

Unable to make heads or tails of any of these med scans or chemical compounds, I open an EarthLink search portal and type in several variations of Moirai Industries and scientific study.

The top articles outline the controversy of the corporation’s advanced AI research. Those who argue pro-tech claim it’s the future, those against say it’s our destruction. Three months’ past, a pro-humanism terrorist group firebombed one of the research facilities.

Has the world gone mad? Or has it always been like this?

I lean back, spread the fingers of my scarred right hand then close a loose fist to stretch the stiffness. In the apartment, I’m always careful to make sure Orion isn’t looking. It’s my burden that he doesn’t need to share.

I append Moirai Industries with brain research in my search parameters.It returns some articles on abnormal brain growth and development, pictures of brain scans like the ones on the data pad, and several photos of old men and women in lab coats. Unable to keep my eyes open any longer, I power down the computer, strip off my pants and crawl into my bedroll. It takes a minute to find the un-lumpiest section and get comfortable. As my eyes fall shut, the image of the pale prisoner in the pitch-black cell lingers in my mind.

I’m glad that job’s behind me.

#

I wake early, before the first shift of ice miners are on their way to work. Orion is still wrapped in his bedroll as I slip on my boots and step out. I drop off the data pad at Mr. Yoo’s, collect my credits and make a deposit into my alias account.

I stop by the convenience store a block away from our housing unit, hood pulled tight around my face and head down. I consider grabbing two bottles of pomegranate juice for our breakfast, but ten credits per bottle is too much—scumming import taxes. EarthCen should be delivering this for free with all the water our colony exports. Instead, I grab two cups of coffee—black—and drop four credits on the counter without missing a step.

I turn the corner onto our street and nearly choke at the sight of several black trucks haphazardly parked outside our building. Bright blue light pulses from their back windows and headlights. Arbiters in their gray tunics, heavy black boots, and gold visor helmets, swarm in every direction. A crowd has gathered to watch.

I approach the back of the crowd for a closer view.

Are they here for me? Did someone rat? There’s no other way they could know where I live. I’ve been careful, exceedingly careful. Maybe they’re here for someone else. Half the people in that building could be arrested for one charge or another.

Four armored Arbiters step out from the lobby. A man in cuffs struggles behind them, trapped by four more suits at the rear. I squint, trying to make out the figure, but the shadows cast from the streetlights are too sharp. The Arbiters are rough with him, jerking him left and right toward one of the trucks. And when the flashing lights sweep over the man’s face, I see it’s not a man at all.

The two cups of coffee crumple in my tightened grip. Scalding liquid splashes down over my hands and I don’t even feel it.

The boy in handcuffs is Orion.

**Chapter 3**

Third year of grade school, Orion and I had class with a boy named Rooney. Curly red hair, face full of freckles and he hit an early growth spurt shooting him a head and a half above everyone else. He was a bad kid from a cruddy home—looking back, I feel sorry for him. He’d come to school with bruises over his chest and back, welts crisscrossing his legs. And he was always so, so angry.

From day one, he didn’t like Orion. Maybe because Orion always had clean clothes, plenty to eat or a mom who picked us up from school every single day while Rooney walked home. Why he’d set his sights on Orion, and not any of the other boys, I don’t know. Maybe Orion has just always been vulnerable, an aura he can’t shed. It started small, Rooney taking Orion’s crayons or calling him names. Then Orion would come out of the boy’s bathroom with a raspberry, hair mussed, and crying. I’d had enough the day he pushed Orion from the top of the playground. Orion couldn’t defend himself, and the boy was too big for me to fight. Though, I would have given him two black eyes if I could.

During recess, I snuck back into our classroom, swiped the teacher’s touchpad and stuffed it into Rooney’s backpack. When they searched our bags, Rooney cried he didn’t do it. They sent him to another school—one for messed up kids—and he never touched Orion again.

Seeing Orion in cuffs, I want to run out into the street, scream and thrash and fight with the strength of a thousand-man army. I want Orion free.

But if I charge the swarm of Arbiters, I won’t win this fight. Just like I couldn’t have beat the crap out of Rooney. I’d end up in the back seat of that truck alongside Orion. They’d send me back to prison and come the end of the month I’d hang for the death of an Arbiter.

Instead, I begin what I do best—formulating, scheming, calculating. I’ll fix this. But it will take every credit I’ve earned.

#

Three loud knocks. My fist pounds on a reinforced steel door at the bottom of a dingy stairwell. It’s hidden down a side alley, smack in the center of Bleeder’s Row. A worm-sized camera jets out of the wall above the door, arcing downward toward my face.

“Open up, Geoff.”

“I told you to call me Cyber Samurai,” a voice crackles through a speaker.

“Cut the crap and let me in. Orion’s been caught.”

With an electric buzz the door pops open. I brush in past Geoff, who’s hastily buttoning his floral print shirt and smoothing out a scraggily pony tail. “What happened?” he asks, pudgy legs straining to keep up with me as I storm though his network of computer banks. Geoff is Mr. Yoo’s tech guy, and this room contains all the top-end gadgets and gizmos—such as the tools in my thief’s kit.

I plunk down in front of a monitor and navigate through an EarthLink search window. Geoff leans over me. His man breasts brush against my shoulder and his crude, peanut butter breath grazes my ear—uncomfortably close as per his usual creep factor.

“I need your help hacking the Arbiter’s server.”

“Whoa, whoa. Back it up there, girl. Does Yoo know about this?”

“Three hundred credits to keep a lid on it?”

“How about you take me out for drinks next week? And after, we go back to my place and—”

The thought is repulsive. “Not a chance.”

He frowns, shot down for the umpteenth time. Geoff has this notion that because of his Japanese heritage, we’re somehow compatible. Never mind he’s a sleaze.

“Then five-hundred,” he says, a grin stretching across his round face.

“Fine.”

I search through the Arbiter’s arrest files and confirm Orion’s arrest is due to my wanted status. They’re grilling him at a local facility, and after they’ll transport him to Rimeview Detention Center. Once he’s in, there’s no getting out. I open up one of Geoff’s specialty executable files and the command prompt window. He watches my every keystroke and just before I run the file he clears his throat in obvious fashion.

“Spit it out,” I say.

“Your trying to alter their transport route, yes?”

I nod.

“Then change the directory you have listed. It will be harder for their virus bots to detect the intrusion post hack.”

While Geoff is a digital alchemist when it comes to hacking—and my old mentor when I first started working for Mr. Yoo—I have zero trust for anyone in Yoo’s employment. I only change the directory because I know he’s right.

“I’m going to need to hack the surveillance for that quadrant too,” I say.

“You want to bust him out during transport? Can’t be done. Not by yourself, at least.”

Maybe, maybe not. But I trust my odds alone way more than having to rely on someone like Geoff or any other of Mr. Yoo’s meat-head thugs who’d turn you in for half a credit and a shot of whiskey. If I’m going to fail, I’d rather fail on my own instead of getting turned on for the bounty… or worse, going down due to some hired hand’s incompetence.

“You know the equipment I need. And you’ll have to write me a patch-in for the hack.”

“I’m afraid five-oh-oh credits don’t cut it for this one.”

“I know,” I say, aware I’m about to blow every single credit I’ve saved. I have no idea how we’ll get off planet now, but it doesn’t matter. If I can’t get Orion out first, I’m not going anywhere.

“You’ll still need some hands on the street.”

He’s right, of course. I don’t know how I’m going to do this alone, but I will not put Orion’s life in anyone’s hands but my own.

A single loud knock echoes through the room. My attention snaps to the reinforced door.

“Mira,” Geoff says, “I wanted to tell you sooner but….”

“Who is it?” My pulse quickens. “The bounty? You ratted me out?”

“No, no. Absolutely not,” he jabbers. “Mr. Yoo told me to buzz him if you showed up this morning. And to keep it quiet.” With the push of a button, Geoff opens the door and my stomach drops.

Two men step through. One garbed in a ratty, pinstriped suit and wearing a wide yellow-toothed smile. The other with muscles so big they swallow his neck.

“Mira, righto?” the smaller one in the suit says. “Boss needs a word with ya.”

“Tell him I’ll come by this evening.” A weak attempt to shoo them away.

“Now,” the big man says.

“I’m afraid we must insist, little miss.”

#

With the thick one’s sausage fingers wrapped around my neck, they aren’t giving me an opportunity to cut and run. I’m quick on my feet and know how to sneak, but when it comes to physical confrontation, I’m trash. Not that it makes a difference anyway. If I managed to get away, then what? I can’t go back to Geoff and orchestrating Orion’s escape without his tools is impossible.

Back at Mr. Yoo’s office, they sit me down at his desk then exit, leaving me in the company of the bare-breasted statue. I spend the next several nail-biting minutes brooding. I need to speak with Yoo about the setup last night. But given Orion’s arrest this morning, I can’t shake the feeling it’s no coincidence Yoo’s yanked me in here.

With a chirp, the office door slides open and Yoo strolls in like it’s a lazy Sunday afternoon. He’s carrying a squat glass of brandy, amber liquid sloshing with each step. He slides into the leather-bound chair and sets his glass on the desk’s edge.

“What’s this about?” I ask. When he doesn’t respond, I bristle with irritation. He’s wasting my time when I should be planning for Orion. “You know what happened this morning. I have to find Orion—”

He lifts his hand, cutting me off. “An opportunity has arisen that will benefit us both.”

“You don’t understand,” I say, articulating each syllable as if I were speaking to a child. “I’m going to help Orion. If it’s a job you need out of me, consider it done. Credit free, even.”

“Don’t speak again.” He sips his brandy and sets the glass back down on the edge of the desk.

My chest tightens. He gives me more leeway than most, but if I try to walk out he’ll have one of his meatheads cuff me across my head and drag me back in.

Silence falls over the room like a poisonous gas cloud. I stare at the mechanical clock atop his desk, the second-hand tick, tick, ticking. Each revolution, my grasp on Orion slips further away. I feel every bit as helpless as the times I’d come home to find Orion passed out on the floor. He was dancing the edge of death and no matter what I did he’d always find more. I’d hide our credits; he’d make an arrangement with his dealer. I’d flush his stash down the toilet, he’d pull more from his boot.

Mr. Yoo lights a cigar, takes a long drag, passing the time without a care or concern.

At the top of the hour, the office door slides open and a well-dressed man walks in; narrowed jaw and eyes set with a business-like glare. He nods to Mr. Yoo and extends an open hand to me. “Miss DeGray, I’m Mr. Wright of Moirai Industries.”

I look from Mr. Wright to Mr. Yoo, confused and ignoring the offered handshake.

Mr. Wright retracts his hand, unbuttons his jacket and takes a seat in the empty chair beside me. A holstered gun lies over his ribs, previously hidden under the gray, pinstriped cloth of his suit. It makes me uneasy.

“What do you want?” I ask. “The data I stole? Mr. Yoo paid me this morning. Take it up with him.” But as the words spill from my mouth, I know something else is going on.

“The data is inconsequential. But I did hire you steal it.”

My train of thought freezes, and like flipping a switch, I know Mr. Yoo set me up. He must have wanted me to get nabbed last night. But why sell me out to these people and not the Arbiters?

“Allow me to be direct, Miss DeGray. Before you escaped Arbiter custody, you received a standard medical intake evaluation: blood test, genomic screening, neuroimaging. Dr. Gall—chief science officer of Moirai Industries—specializes in neural augmentation. He often uses these intake evaluations as a screening process to flag potential research candidates.”

I shift nervously, waiting.

“Mr. Yoo’s intelligence report directed you to Biological Processing. There, you experienced a partial organic molecular scan, which was enough to confirm our preliminary data.”

I can still see the bright lights from the walls, feel the paralysis taking hold, the disorientation. I clench the wood arms of my chair against my rising anger.

“You have a rare neural anomaly, which makes you an ideal candidate for Dr. Gall’s current line of research.”

The results from my EarthLink search bloom in my mind: abnormal brain growth and development, along with all those stuffy looking scientists. He can’t think I’m actually some specialized brain case that should be studied in a lab. That’s absurd.

“You’ve made a mistake,” I say. “And I’m not interested anyway.”

“No mistake,” he says. “And I’m not asking.”

I open my mouth to speak, but I don’t formulate words. The lump in my throat threatens to choke me. I remember the Arbiters clipping the cuffs around my wrists. The electronic beep as the glass door of my cell slid shut. His words make me feel as helpless as my first night in lock up.

“Mr. Yoo was reluctant to assist, and we leaned on him pretty hard, but in the end credits swayed him. And as for your brother, he’s safe so long as you don’t pull another stunt like last night.”

At that, I cannot hold my calm. Not when he’s threatening Orion. My whole body draws tight and I glare at Mr. Wright with murderous intent. They wanted to take me alive. And now, they’re using Orion as leverage. As a jumble of isolated thoughts all slide together in perfect synchronization, I turn to Mr. Yoo. He’s the only one here who knows where my apartment is. It wasn’t an anonymous tip or bounty seeker who led the Arbiters to Orion this morning.

“You scum sucking bastard.” I rise from my seat and lean over his knotted oak desk. “You told him to use Orion as leverage, didn’t you?”

“I’m losing my top earner,” Mr. Yoo says. “Mr. Wright has provided an opportunity for us both to recoup our losses.”

“Credits! You sold Orion out for credits, like a filthy fink.”

Mr. Wright’s voice cuts through the tension, “We’ll erase your criminal records.”

A tingle reverberates through my chest: disbelief, caution, worry. I tilt my gaze to Mr. Wright, hands still pressed to the polished desktop. “What?”

“A cooperative patient is of greater value to the company than a resistant one. If you submit, make this easy, we’re willing to offer a clean slate for both you and your brother. A chance at a new life. After testing, we’ll relocate you off-planet to any other colony or, perhaps even Earth if you wish.”