

Jillian

Book 2

from the Tykhe Universe Series

by Glenn Roush

Chapter 1

Day 1

Jillian

“...Find a seat—an *ACTUAL* seat—or you’ll be sorry.”
The girl warns over the intercom with a sinister chuckle.

Jillian Kahr has no intention of testing the consequences. She hangs suspended like a mermaid underwater, her flowy dark hair floating at untamed angles. These past four days are the most time she has spent in space, but she is getting the hang of it.

She has figured out the drinking vessels and weird suction-toilet...utilizing the velcro strips of her flight suit to secure items instead of setting them *down* on surfaces—since space doesn’t give a damn about *down* and everything likes to wander. She’s learned to hook the toe of her boot on a handhold to control her *drift*. *Yeah, she’s got this...*

Jillian pushes off the nearest scuffed polymer bulkhead eager to demonstrate her skills.

“*Shit...*”

Just when she thought she was becoming good at this zero-g thing, she overshoots her intended target and flails for any available hold before sailing past the high-back racing seat. *Thank god the other four passengers were too preoccupied with their own clumsy maneuvering to notice!*

Fingertips hook the worn headrest of the seat. *Just enough.* Jillian uses her athleticism to redirect the momentum, twisting around in air until she snags a strap from the seat’s harness. She pulls herself into sitting before fastening the same five-point harness around her.

Bothering with the harness was overkill. *The braking thrusters are more noise than violence.* But she's glad she was in a seat instead of floating upside down when deceleration restored the sensation of gravity. *Falling on your head was still falling on your head—even if it was only half of what she was used to on her home planet's surface.* The congestion in her sinuses and vertigo at her temples sluffs away. Yet her limbs are filled with sand.

The passengers are given the all clear to move about again. *Six hours before reentry.* Jillian forces herself to walk around and acclimate since things are about to become a lot heavier. Before long, she's exhausted herself and her destinations. *There are only so many places to wander on a shuttle designed for cargo first and people second.*

Jillian remains standing to engage her muscles and enjoys the view of her destination planet growing larger on the hi-def screens—in place of conventional windows. She has been mesmerized by the foreign wonder of the Cerise system ever since she folded through the relay two days ago. *It is her first time through!*

Tykhe is all of the variety of brilliant blue oceans, vivid green jungles, black snow capped mountains, warm brown savanas and rich golden deserts. Gray and white clouds swirl. *With so little of man's presence to ruin it.* Most spectacularly, *Tykhe* is orbited by an exploded moon and a dusting of lesser fragments that catch the red spectrum of the Cerise sun. *A thousand shards of pink glass dangle in suspension around its host.* Breathtaking.

“Attention everyone, we will make entry in one hour.” Intercom Girl informs. “Start wrapping things up. Finish eating. Secure any loose items.”

Thirty minutes later... “Hey, it’s me again. Last chance to pee. Then find a seat and strap in...”

As Jillian is trudging to her seat to comply, the ship is rocked by a violent jolt.

Jillian and the other passengers are thrown to the deck. She tastes copper, her head dazed. *If the late warning was the pilot’s idea of a practical joke, she hardly finds it funny!*

Then a claxon erupts with hazard strobes and Jillian realizes this is no joke. She grabs the aluminum frame of the nearest seat to brace against the new disorienting spin of the craft. Her knuckles whiten as she clings to the seat-frame. Her legs and body flail about like flag flapping in the wind. The shuttle jerks again. She accumulates more bruises, colliding with another surface whose padding disintegrated years ago.

The pilot makes a strained announcement.

“—Hold on!”

No shit! Jillian groans. Pain shoots from her hip to her elbow.

“...*We’ve hit some debris...*”

Probably one of those pink rocks. Beautiful bastards. Jillian strains against the g forces, the veins bulging in her forearms as she tries to pull herself into a seat.

The pilot rights the ship’s trajectory. Jillian clicks into the harness. She gulps deep breaths and swallows the acid in the back of her throat.

“...sorry for the turbulence folks...”

Turbulence?! Jillian strains against her harness expecting to see smoke or fire or a gaping hole. Nothing. The whole event never happened after the pilot kills the warning sirens. *Minus her split lip and throbbing ribs.*

The hatch opens at the end of the cabin. A bowlegged pilot in a gray jumpsuit and bubble-visor helmet appears. His mag boots clunk with every step.

“How you doing?” Zhen squeezes her shoulder.

Jillian gives a reluctant thumbs up.

“Will look at your lip after entry.”

“*Should I be wearing a helmet too?*”

“No, you’w fine.” Zhen bats the air. “Impact hit aft.”

“*How’s the ship?*” Jillian asks.

“Hull intact. Life support stable. Don’t worry, she will hold togetha’.”

Jillian’s grip on the armrest loosens...*something about his calming tone.*

“If you have problem, key in to flight deck.” The pilot continues to the other four passengers. Jillian twists in her seat. A man’s head is leaking red down the inside of his nose, pooling under his eye. The others are rubbing and gesturing to their war-wounds. Even so, Jillian can’t help thinking they all got lucky.

The pilot announces that they will be re-entering in five minutes. *Shit, they haven’t even entered atmosphere!* Not in the clear yet...

Zhen returns with a cotton gauze. “Here, use this.” He points to her lip. His eyes disappear as he smiles and gives her a big thumbs up. “Will be fine. Don’t worry.”

Jillian dabs the cut that has already clotted. “How are the others?”

“A few bumps and bruises. No biggy.” Zhen walks away with broad steps.

“Mind if I join you on the flight deck?” Jillian slips out of her harness before he can protest. She takes a few wobbly

steps before remembering to activate her magboots. She follows through two sets of auto-hatches into the flight-deck.

It's not so different from the cockpit of an airliner, two control seats at the front, plus several other stations with screens and appropriate electronics. This is the only place on the ship with actual windows.

Jillian pulls the curtain on the snarky voice. Intercom Girl is busy piloting the shuttle from the left seat. Jillian can't help her concern over the swarm of red flashing alerts on screen. This pilot is also wearing a helmet with an enclosed visor.

"We have a situation on—*what's she doing here?*" Intercom Girl notices Jillian. She doesn't wait for a response. "Nevermind—we don't have time—find a seat. Strap in, we're about to hit atmosphere."

Zhen directs Jillian to one of the empty crew seats and returns next to his partner in the front. The two pilots chatter away like a pair of excited squirrels trying to come to a consensus. *No, not two squirrels—one squirrel interrogating a wise turtle.*

"Excuse me, should I have a helmet on?" Jillian asks the backs of the pilots. She can't stop looking at the flashing lights.

"Listen lady, if you're going to be up here, keep quiet and let us do our job." Intercom Girl snaps. "*Everyone, brace for entry.*"

The nose of the ship orients up to the stars as they descend belly-first towards the planet. The Zhenbao shakes again as they transition from vacuum to the resistance of air particles and all the heat associated with velocity meeting density. 1600 degrees C of first pink, then orange to red and finally white light fills the cabin as auto-darkening corrects.

The female pilot comments about “...*this is the moment of truth...*”

Jillian is too busy trying to keep her teeth from rattling out of her head to ask *what the fuck?* She hasn't made enough space hops to feel comfortable with the re-entry experience. For as much as she *didn't* pay attention to science in school, she imagines a hole in the hull during this stage would turn anything inside to ash. *It should be a quick death, right?*

“Rotate your head around slowly in all directions.” The pilot advises over coms. “It'll help your brain readjust to gravity.”

Jillian follows the advice as she's already laden with weight. It is a useful distraction if they are about to die...

The violent stage of entry passes. The nose levels out to the same trajectory as their descent and once again the shuttle becomes an aircraft instead of a hurled brick. They pass through several white clouds. A mountain range appears below.

“Good news everyone, we're alive! Whoohoo! But keep your asses in your seats for the remainder of the flight.” Intercom Girl keys in. “ETA for landing is thirty minutes. Thanks!”

The red warnings on the front screens have reduced to amber. The shudder in her new armrest remains but Jillian assumes they have survived the worst of the flight.

“How ya doing?” Zhen removes his helmet and fixes it to a hook next to his seat. He wipes a sweaty forehead with the back of his hand and scratches a bald head.

“Swell.” Jillian fiddles with her screen for a view of the outside terrain.

The side cams are a nauseating blur of coniferous treetops. She opts for the nose-cam, duplicating the view out

the windshield. So far, she has seen a lot of wilderness: mountains, hills, trees, streams, even a lake—but nothing inorganic. No buildings. Not so much as a road. The latest census put this planet at 150 million homo sapiens. Where are all of them? *Then again, 150 million people spread out across a planet a little smaller than Earth would seem sparse.*

The shuttle banks for its final approach. She catches the bright glint of a solar panel array. A small outcropping of buildings rests at the base of a mountain rise. She counts three massive domes stepping down a gradual hill. The lower two domes are intact and are surrounded by a town of lesser structures. The highest dome is the skeleton of a past life. All its framework is bare and exposed.

Jillian loses her vantage when the shuttle's nose lifts towards the sky. Forward momentum shifts again in defiance of conventional aeronautics before the craft levels and begins an elevator descent onto a paved landing pad.

“Well folks, we have arrived at the Espial Research Station. You may remove your safety restraints,” Intercom Girl makes her final announcement. “Local time is 14:15, meaning you're almost halfway through your day.”

Oh yeah, Tykhe has a 30 hour day, Jillian remembers. That's going to screw with her.

“You are now at 1600 meters elevation, and I hope you brought your sunscreen...they are experiencing a bit of a heat wave at 44 degrees Celsius. Enjoy it while you can, winter is right around the corner.” The whining engines are cycling down. “At this time feel free to grab your personal belongings and head to the cargo-hold to disembark. *As always, thank you for flying Air Zhenbao.*” She adds with a snarky chuckle.

Jillian slips out of her harness and is bludgeoned by full gravity. If her arms were sand earlier, they are lead now.

The pilots suspend the craft's onboard functions before they climb out of their seats.

“Welcome to desolation.” Intercom Girl pulls off her helmet. Jillian was not expecting the burst of bright pink hair and teenage facial features. *She's had limited interaction with the girl over the past few days, knowing she was a crew-member, never expecting her to be a pilot!* She doesn't look old enough to be out of secondary school—let alone flying an interstellar transport shuttle—and nowhere *NEAR* old enough for her snippy attitude. Crisis or not.

The girl's baggy jumpsuit hides most of her physique, but she seems to have the tall lanky build distinct to those growing up in low gravity: one of the space stations or colony planets. *Not an Earther, and definitely not a Kyrio.*

“Don't worry, your legs will return.” The girl squeezes Jillian's arm and glides past her without a gram of difficulty.

Jillian's knees ache already. *Like sitting cross legged for too long and standing too quickly. She's not used to feeling weak.* She grits her teeth and follows behind the pilot, showing no signs of strain.

Along the way she retrieves her backpack and a sea-bag from the musty locker next to her sleeping coffin. Jillian squeezes with her things between the narrow space of the bulkhead and the netted mountain of hard-wall plastic crates stacked in the middle of the cargo hold. An airlock hisses followed by the slow moan of hydraulics. The dim bay is overrun with natural light and an invasion of sweltering heat. The smell of ozone and synthetics now churns with a delightful wafting of warm mountain pine.

“Mag boots here.” Zhen stands at the crest of the loading ramp, directing the four passengers to a shelf with sixteen other pairs of footwear.

Jillian and the four others remove their boots on-the-spot. Zhen then douses the insides with an aerosol disinfectant.

Jillian scrunches her nose at the smell and the thought of how many sweaty feet have been in the same boots she was wearing. She is already switching over to shoes.

“We will need flight-suits too—” Zhen lingers “but not right now!” He booms as if waiting to see the concern appear on their faces.

“Good thing, because I’m not wearing anything under this!” One of the passengers unzips down to his bare sternum.

His name is Chris or Jake or who-cares. He tried hitting on her minutes into the flight, striking her as a peacocking frat-boy. He’s attractive enough that his charm must work on most women he flirts with. She’s guessing he’s an Earther. Maybe a Martian. Naturally tall, *not* low-gravity tall like the spacers. Cute but not Kyrios modified cute. And definitely not big enough to be a Gath.

Her InfoLink could feed her a whole biography on any person she looks at. *Facial recognition is a wonderful thing.* Unfortunately, she lost her network connection as soon as they departed Kyrios and suffered through learning all his credentials the old fashion way. *Four days is an eternity to cohabit with some people.*

Frat-boy was supposedly an engineer that spent time working on both the Earth relay *and* the 3rd Tykhe relay currently under construction. *Apparently he was indispensable to the project and logged over 200 hours space-walking,* which

was meant to have her creaming her panties. She didn't have a reference to gauge his boast, and appeared unimpressed enough that Frat Boy moved on to impressing someone else for the remainder of their journey.

“Return flight suits before we leave.” Zhen stipulates.

“That might be a while!” The female pilot yells up to him from the tarmac.

“Come on.” They follow Zhen down the ramp.

The temperature increases with every step. *Straight into an oven!* Heat waves radiate from the concrete landing pad. *She's sweating before she reaches the tarmac!*

Once outside they are able to visualize how close they came to death. One of the vertical stabilizers is gone. It is a football goal post missing an upright. Not to mention several significant holes in the outermost hull.

“Fuck!” The pilot's complexion fades out of her already pale face.

“You're a good pilot.” The Chinaman gives her a little squeeze.

As long as they made it, Jillian won't dwell on it. Besides, it's too hot to think.

A welcoming party is already waiting.

“Oh my! Rough flight ya'all?” A big flowy dress and wide brim hat greets them. The hostess could have stepped out of a painting from the 19th century—minus the sunglasses. She begins shaking hands with all the elegance of an American Southern belle. *Jillian wonders if this is a prank.*

“*Ouch that looks like it hurts.*” The Earther American pauses in front of the man with a sizeable gash scaling his forehead. “Don't worry, we're heading to medical first.” She continues down the line.

“That’s a beautiful dress.” The only other woman compliments.

“Thank you.” She curtsseys.

The arrival of their new hostess sends Jillian’s InfoLink into a spasm. Several networks are registering in the windows of her bionic vision but she still doesn’t have authorization to any. An orange box blinks erratically on and off around the woman’s face. *Her mirrored sunglasses and hat are throwing it for a loop.* Finally, the box turns green and produces a floating script: *Faith Bennett.* Considering Jillian’s lack of connectivity to the network, her InfoLink would have searched for about ten more seconds before declaring her *unidentified.* It produces a name only because Jillian hard-loaded the bios of all staff members who have been on site any time during the past six months. That candidacy pool amounts to almost 100 people.

“Name’s Faith. I’ll be your tour guide. That’s a nice grip ya got there, partner.” She shakes *Frat Boy’s* hand. “You must be the cop?”

He stutters confused.

“No actually, that’s me.” Jillian corrects. “Detective Kahr.” Gazes whip towards her. *What?* No one bothered asking what she did during the flight.

Faith looks her up and down before covering with a smile.

“Nice to meet ya, Detective.”

Chapter 2

Day 1

Jillian

Jillian doesn't bother with theatrics; she shakes Faith's hand like she would anyone else's. The woman's age is more apparent up close. Jillian puts her in her early 50's. Untreated UV-damage on her chest bears the testament of decades of outdoor living. She's guessing her cheeks would match beneath the makeup. *Is this presentation a daily ritual for her?*

"Beep-beep." A barn-of-a-man in a bright floral shirt on an electric forklift interrupts the introductions. "*Hey I hate to be an ass, but would you newbs mind moving the fuck out of the way?*" He drives the vehicle up to the bottom of the ramp. Everyone makes room for the vehicle.

"That's Kanoa." Faith gestures to the Polynesian driver. "I'll introduce you to the whole crew later. First, let's head over to medical and get everyone patched up." Faith directs them to an electric SUV waiting on the side of the tarmac.

Everyone loads into the vehicle. Faith tosses her oversized bonnet onto the dash and thumbs the electric start. They pass through the gate of a chain link fence before proceeding down a paved road flanked by fire-prone grasses and sage brush. They then pass through a pine forest.

"Welcome to the Espial Research Station." She says a kilometer later. "This is Camp Alpha."

Faith Bennett narrates the details as they approach the gate of a 4-meter-tall fence encircling the entire camp. Jillian looks past the camp to the ruined dome looming in the background. Most of the external paneling is gone, as is half the

thick metal framework—*fingers of a fallen titan clawing its way to the surface from the underworld.*

According to Faith, Alpha was the first site. Stair-stepping down the hill are the Bravo and Charlie camps.

“*Whew Charlie was nice!*” Faith laments. “We reconstructed the dome. It had everything, labs, on the first level, a shopping mall and amenities, and housing above. You should have seen it during the heyday. And Bravo...ya know Bravo wasn’t bad either.”

“Then why are we in Alpha?” Frat-boy asks from the back seat.

“It’s the smallest. Requires the least amount of maintenance and power to keep running. There just aint that many of us here anymore.”

An automated gate rises to their proximity.

“What’s up with the fences?” Frat-boy asks.

Complete with razor wire, Jillian notes. She counts six automated gun turrets along this one length of the fence, each watching from tall poles like patient birds-of-prey. The barrels plus the thick black power cord slithering up the pole indicates energy weapons. *Not ballistic*. Probably non-lethal. Another layer of fence and she would swear they ripped off a prison schematic. The consolation is that the barrels are oriented outboard...

Faith answers before Jillian can ask. “Keeps out the trespassers.”

“There’s trespassers out *here?*” Jillian can’t withhold the question. This is the only spec of civilization she’s seen on the planet.

“Sure. Sometimes the four-legged variety.”

They pass through the main gate continuing down the only paved road.

A neat grid of polymer walled trailers stretch the length of the right side. Waist-high aluminum scaffolding keeps them out of the weeds.

The opposite side of the road is a collection of zero-atmosphere units—more machine than building—also elevated on leveling legs. A four-story tower rises from the center. Otherwise the units are single-level and connected to one another with glass-tube walkways. She's only seen *HABS* used on lunar or asteroid colonies where permanent air-tight structures would be too challenging to construct. Air-drop the desired *rooms* to a location, anchor them to the surface, and voila, fully functional colony.

Tykhe has been no-vac-suit-required habitable for generations. None of these buildings are older than nine years. *Sending a HAB to an oxygenated planet is excessive and expensive. Oh wait—she remembers who's funding the project...*

“This is the *HUB*.” Faith directs to the network of buildings on her left. “It's the center for everything except sleeping. Workstations, command, labs, the cafeteria...”

A minute later they're parked and passing through auto-doors labeled: *MedBay*. Inside smells of antiseptic and plastic. Jillian can hear the faint hum of an AC system and celebrates the pleasant drop in ambient temp, finally comfortable.

Faith blows past a check-in kiosk and leads them to an open bay with ten vacant beds. A man in blue scrubs looks up from his computer terminal.

“You’re early.” He barks, approaching the group. “They’ve already gone through orientation?” His well manicured eyebrows furrow.

“They had a rough flight, figured we should tend to injuries first.” Faith explains.

“Shit, alright.” He scans the group, lingering on the traveler with the gash on his head.

“This is Dr. Mahawars—” Faith’s drawl manages to water-down his ethnicity.

“Or just Ayaan. It’s not like protocol matters two-fucks out here.”

Yet he’s still styling his jet-black hair.

Ayaan grabs a tablet. “I want to tend to *you* first.” He points at Gash, “unless there’s someone more critical that I should know about...?” He waits for no response. “Oh hell, these people aren’t in the system yet.”

“I can create temp files until I take them over to payroll.” Faith retrieves another thin-screen tablet.

“Already done.” Dr. Mahawars snaps a quick picture of his first patient and has him press his hand on the screen for a scan. “You take care of the other three.”

The facial scan and fingerprints are a redundancy. Every human in the universe is chipped at birth. *Not that chips aren’t removed or forged*, but anyone standing within this site has already endured an exhausting vetting process.

Jillian watches all her pertinent information appear on Faith’s screen.

“Everything okay?” Jillian asks after Faith lingers on the details. *She’s the one used to being on the nosy end of the info.*

“Peachy. Just tryin’ to figure out how to input your status since ya aren’t technically an employee of the site. We’ll put ya in as a *visitor* for now.” Faith explains.

“Feel free to add me to the payroll if you’d like. I’m sure it pays better than the force.” Jillian makes an attempt at lightheartedness.

Faith purses her lips. “Considering you’re *already* a citizen of Kyrios Kosmos...you might be surprised.” Faith neutralizes her frown with her big Southern smile.

Jillian retains her best sterile cop face.

“You’re all set. Wait for Dr. Mahawars to call you over.” Faith moves to the next person.

“Are we doing full processing, or just aid and vaccines?” The doctor clarifies.

“Full processing. Might as well. *Right?*” Faith shrugs.

“Sure. In that case, follow me.” Dr. Mahawars directs *Gash* into a private room labeled *AutoDoc 1*. Twenty-five minutes later *Gash* needs a new nickname with his injury reduced to a faint pink line. He has also ditched his *Zhenbao* jumpsuit and changed into civilian clothes.

“We’ll have some Hyalite Technology swag for ya shortly.” Faith intercepts *Gash* upon his exit.

Dr. Mahawars tends to all the Hyalite recruits first. Jillian waits a little over an hour to meet the wizard behind the curtain.

“Have a seat.” Dr. Mahawar’s nose is buried in her information on screen. A mindless palm smacks a panel, closing the autodoor.

Jillian sits on the edge of an articulating examination bed. The exam room is a little smaller than her apartment’s bedroom back home. It would be spacious if it weren’t also

housing a Gath-sized AutoDoc capsule and all the medical cabinetry. *She's back on the Zhenbao desperate for space.*

The doctor reads his tablet. “Sounds like you had a bumpy flight?”

“A tad.”

“Jillian Kahr...Would you mind verifying your date of birth?”

She does.

“Hmm, just turned 33. *In Sol years.*” He calculates.

Jillian nods.

He continues reading her file. “Oh, you’re a *Nikki*?” Dr. Mahawars is casual with his racial slur.

“Yeah.” Jillian clenches her jaw. The elitist citizens of her home planet Kȳrios Kósmos refer to one another as *Kyrio*—Greek for “master.” The rest of the universe refuses to perpetuate that subservience, so the *masters* are often slang-labeled as *Nikkies*—in reference to the children’s cartoon character and figurine toys.

Cartoon *Nikki* is a gorgeous, *self-empowered* trillionaire who slips into different occupations each episode. One day she is a doctor, the next a spy, the next a chef. In between wearing her various hats, she goes on grand vacations and adventures partying or helping the unfortunate souls of other worlds. All the while turning heads with long stylish hair and a superheroine’s physique. *The finest Kyrios propaganda.*

“Oh, but not an *actual* Nikki.” Dr. Mahawars flashes a pen light in her bionic eyes after assessing the cut on her lip. Her irises are a lovely coppery brown that could occur naturally were it not for an amber halos circling the color. Besides, the *dilation* of the pupils adjusts with mechanical swiftness, like the lens of a camera.

The only thing worse than a Kyrio being called a Nikki is not being Nikki *enough*. As if she isn't one of them or doesn't belong. Yet she knows exactly what draws the comment: *true* Nikki's don't have blatant bionics.

Every child of Kyrios Kosmos is genetically manipulated in vitro. Bionics denote a defect—even if their performance is superior. Kyrios society dictates any bionics remain discrete, lest you be viewed as an immigrant or the more unforgivable sin—poor.

“I *am* a native-born Kyrio.” Jillian follows the pen-light up and down, side to side, per his instruction. Her bionics have auto-darkened the beam to a muted white dot. The dot falls out of the sky.

“*Really?*” Dr. Mahawars picks his pen off the ground. His eyes blink rapidly, laboring to settle.

“Yeah.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Where from? *North or South?*”

For as much as off-worlders believe her entire planet is the land of opportunity, Kyrios Kosmos operates in two distinct realms.

The North is reserved for the elite natural born Kyrios or filthy-rich off-worlders who bought their estate in paradise. The southern hemisphere is occupied by locals and off-planet candidates who have *earned* citizenship through a points system. Most will spend thirty years trying to save for a modest plot to retire. *Chances are half the people on this project are working towards that goal.*

“Feronia. South.” Jillian says with the tight-jaw pride of a war veteran. *You're proud because you endured, not because*

it was wonderful. Living in the South—natural born or not—denotes a lower class.

“Ah, well that makes sense. Port city. *THE* port city as I understand it. Filled with all the immigrants. You wouldn’t even stand out there.”

Jillian wonders how many pointed comments she must endure before she can punch him in the face. Sadly, his stereotypes aren’t far off. Most people back home also mistake HER for an off-worlder because of her eyes, despite the rest of her looks.

“You don’t have a concussion, but I am going to run a full scan regardless.” The doc speaks-to-text into the tablet, adding his preliminary observations to her file. “Besides the lip, do you have any other immediate concerns I should know about?”

“I’m pretty sure I have a fractured rib.” Jillian’s hand protects her abdomen.

“Most people *think* they have a fracture when it’s only a bruise.” He mumbles.

“Considering I’ve experienced both before, I’m leaning towards the fractured side of the spectrum--especially given the shortness of breath and pain magnitude.” *You don’t know me.*

“We’ll see.” He concedes. “*Mind if I take a look?*”

Jillian unzips the flight suit to her waist and slinks out of the arms. She sits-up straighter, engaging her core, and delicately lifts the bottom of her T-shirt. An inky black bruise mars the otherwise sculpted torso muscles.

“I take back what I said about *actual*, Nikki.” Mahawars comments.

Too late, Doc. You’re on her shit list.

Mahawars isn't forceful, but even the slight increase of pressure on the spot sends Jillian wincing. She restrains her reflexes from breaking his wrist.

"Hmm. I may agree with your assessment." He adds more notes to her patient file. "I will run a full scan and find out soon enough. You can lower your shirt." The doctor approaches the AutoDoc and inputs commands. "If you don't mind me asking, *what is a Nikki detective doing all the way out here?* Hard to imagine you don't have enough cases to solve in *Feronia...*?"

Jillian wonders which aspect is most offensive to him, her home-world, or her profession.

"Investigating a crime."

"What crime?"

"John Parker's death." Jillian replies.

Ayaan shrugs. "John committed suicide. Tragedy? Yes. Crime? I hardly think so."

"There's evidence that would suggest it wasn't a suicide." Detective Kahr argues.

Dr. Mahawars faces her and folds his arms across his chest. "I was the first examiner on site. It was a suicide. No doubt about it. I'm positive I detailed that in my report..."

"You did." Jillian nods. "I read your report, Doctor. There's a few *irregularities* that I'd like to explore."

Mahawars puts up his hand.

"I get it. Fancy *Nikkies* on Kyrios are devastated that their sparkling son died and they need someone to blame, *hence*," he gestures to Jillian, "you. And I know you have a job to do. Visit the 'crime' scene," he air-quotes for emphasis, "talk to a few witnesses. But I recommend you be prompt about it. I'll be happy to speak to your flight crew, convince them to

lay-over for a night—*which they will*—and then you can catch a flight back out with them tomorrow and on your way home to your paradise and comfy bed. You will have done your due diligence, can collect your paycheck and everyone here can carry on with their shitty sentences without a cop sniffing up their asses.”

Was he hoping she was lazy enough to bite? His monologue only makes her more suspicious.

“You should know I *elected* to have these put in.” She blinks. “My eyes were perfect before the surgery. Then I realized that bionics could help me do my job *better*...see things in all varieties of light spectrums and distance, regardless of the stigma associated with them.” She lets her words sink in. “Unfortunately, the shuttle took a bit of damage during entry, and I imagine it will take a few weeks to make any repairs. That should give me plenty of time to take a good look at all the details.”

“Hmm.” Dr. Mahawars drums on his tablet.

At least she won the stare-down.

He opens the lid on the machine. “The AutoDoc will perform a full scan and treat any of your injuries. Since you seem convinced you will be here for a while, I will make sure you are up to speed on all of your vaccinations and boosters for the planet. Hate to have you catch anything worrisome while you’re here.” He makes little effort to conceal his shitty tone.

“Sounds good.”

Dr. Mahawars inputs the final commands on a panel next to the open lid. “After I leave you’ll need to strip down completely. No clothes, no jewelry. Lie flat on the bed, pull the lid and try and remain still unless the machine commands

otherwise—I'm sure you know the drill, especially if you can afford elective surgeries."

"Yeah." Again she holds her tongue.

"I'll have you cook for about an hour, that should bring those ribs back to tolerable." Ayaan is already walking away.

"Do you need a change of clothes?"

"Nope, I'm good here." Jillian toes the backpack resting next to the exam bed.

"Feel free to lock the door. Someone will receive you when you finish." He leaves.

"Thanks."

Jillian locks the door behind him, rummages through her backpack and pulls out a black polymer box. She presses her palm on the biometric scanner and the lid clicks open. Inside are two pistols, six loaded mags, and an auto-knife.

Jillian's pulse slows now that she's reunited with her weaponry. She loads a mag, and racks the slide of her full-sized KA-9 duty pistol, leaving the smaller secondary in the case. Detective Kahr breaks the rules by placing the pistol on the bed inside the AutoDoc. *Accessible should she need it.* Locks or not, she's always been paranoid of someone abusing the vulnerability of these things.

Jillian pulls a hair tie and releases a brown mane that's wavy when it hasn't been four days since her last real shower. *She's more excited for shampoo than her first meal!*

She slinks out of her flight suit, bra and panties before climbing into the bed. As soon as she closes the lid the automated voice welcomes her and summarizes today's procedures. She gives verbal authorization. A crisscross of blue beams runs over her body.

The machine's processor hums and an octopus of mechanical tentacles come to life. She receives an intravenous fluid line in her right arm, a series of vaccines in her left; one arm disinfects, applies local anesthetic, seals, cleans and starts a rapid healing on her lip, two others tend to her ribs. Ten minutes later, half the arms have retracted and those that remain aim their magical healing rays at her injuries. If she were anywhere else, she might feel comfortable napping...watch a movie or listen to music. Here, on this planet, under these pretenses, Jillian stares through the clear acrylic lid to the door, diligent to its opening, pistol in hand.

Chapter 3 Day 1

Jillian

Jillian touches the spot on her abdomen that an hour ago was a gruesome purple bruise too large to cover with her palm. It now matches the rest of her olive complexion. She applies significant pressure before evoking a faint tenderness in the ribs—*no worse than the day after an intense abs workout*. She takes a full breath without consequences and is satisfied to climb out of the AutoDoc.

Det. Kahr leaves her borrowed flight suit on the floor and dresses in her detective work attire.

She researched the region's weather before leaving home. It was extreme with short seasons. Unfortunately, she

was arriving during the hottest month. Seeing as she'd never been in a scorching 50 degrees celsius in her life, her closet was ill equipped to accommodate. So she made due and packed collared short-sleeves and blouses—but couldn't get away from pants without abandoning all semblances of professionalism.

"Whew! Black is not a good color around here." Faith is ready to receive her from the exam room. *"Wait until you step outside again. Yer gunna roast hun."* She's preemptively fanning her face. "I can print you off something better for this heat if you'd like? It'd be no trouble."

Jillian fixes her badge and her gun to her belt before collecting her backpack to follow her tour-guide. "We'll see." Jillian avoids.

"Until then, we'll stick to the halls." Faith leads them through the network of high-tech rooms and acrylic-glass tunnels.

Jillian nearly collides with an autodoor, expecting it to open at her proximity.

"They're set on a zero-atmosphere default...ya know, for space. Gotta press the button manually." Faith demonstrates.

It certainly feels like a space station, Jillian thinks. Except for a few skylights most of the units do not have windows and Jillian is claustrophobic.

"You'll get used to the maze." Faith shows her points of interest along the way. "Cafeteria's that way." She gestures through the window in a door to a long glass tunnel.

"We have a couple of AI droid chefs if you want something gourmet, otherwise the food synthesizers are top-notch." She shields her voice from unseen listeners, "stole them from Charlie before they shut down."

“Ah...” Jillian nods assuming she’s supposed to be impressed.

“Biggest rule around here is if you make a mess, clean it up.”

They pass through another glass tube.

“This is the command center—or *command*—the *hub* of the HUB.” Faith chuckles at her own joke.

The ceiling doubles in height. Natural light floods in from above. Jillian claustrophobia dissipates inside the large open room.

They pass by empty workstations towards the smell of synthetic nicotine. Several workers brew steamy clouds, too preoccupied with tasks to care about them. A younger guy with blonde hair is the first to remove earbuds and waves to the new arrivals.

“Hey Faith, *how’s it going?*” He rocks back and forth in his chair. “Who’s the new girl?” He grins.

“This is Detective Kahr.”

“Oh! Uh...hello detective.” He stammers, wide eyes honing to the hardware on her belt.

“Hi.”

The man follows Jillian’s gaze to the collage of nudes cycling on a vid-screen over his shoulder. He whips around to shut off the monitors.

“Uh—sorry, Detective—” He spills an energy drink on his keyboard. In his attempt to tend to the mess he then knocks several other gizmos onto the floor.

“You do you, buddy.” Jillian shrugs. *She couldn’t imagine a sexual harassment claim landing further than the tree-line around here.*

“Don’t mind that. You’ll learn to block it out.” Faith excuses the youth.

She already has. Jillian notes all the empty chairs. She expected a room this size to be...*busier*. The hum of computers and AC systems is louder than any of the four employees. “Where is everyone?”

Faith leads them towards a glass-tube elevator in the center of the room. It carries them up a level through the ceiling. “There’s only one hundred of us on the whole camp. Don’t be offended. It’s nothing against you. Most of them like to hide.”

The elevator deposits them in a short hallway with no exterior windows and five available doors. Jillian reads the name placard next to the first open door: *Executive Director William Thurston*. Her pulse flutters in anticipation.

This man led the renowned First Expeditionary Group that established this site. The charismatic leader was then launched into the spotlight thanks to the reality-documentary *Bending the Universe* and its sequel. Twelve episodes followed the day-in-a-life of several ERS members focused around discoveries and the first relay communication transmissions to Earth and Kyrios. *Jillian rewatched all those episodes during her passage through the relay.* And to think, that journey wouldn’t have been possible without the efforts of the man inside this room...

“Hey Bill, the detective is here.”

“So? Why do I care?” A grumble rouses from the depths.

Jillian gathers beside Faith in the doorway.

An overweight man falls out of his office chair. He flounders before picking himself off the ground to plop back into his groaning seat. “Come in, come in!”

As quickly as her anticipation built, her stomach twists in disappointment. *This is why you don't meet your heroes.* The handsome blonde champion of eight years ago has been devoured by this fat slob. She barely recognizes him from his TV spots. *Maybe this is why he fell off the radar after the sequel coverage of the first physical relay passage.*

He pushes errant hair out of his eyes—the one remaining feature of his past self—to give her a once over. Bill doesn't let her gun or her badge dissuade him from staring shamelessly at her chest. He licks his lips.

“Ms. *Kahr* you said?”

She corrects his fantasy with a bone-crushing handshake. “*Detective Kahr.*”

“Detective *Kahr*,” he puts up an apologetic hand, “Do I detect the accent of the mother-tongue?” He wiggles a chubby finger at her and smiles.

Come on Bill—that's not what you've noticed. “Yeah, I'm from Kyrios Kosmos.” She can't believe *he* is. “It's a pleasure to meet you.” She'll pay him that courtesy.

Bill gives an expected smile. “Please,” he clears clutter from a chair and dusts it with his palm. The office is as disheveled as its owner. *But he does have a nice view outside with a back wall of windows.*

“May I offer you something to drink?” A half-filled scotch glass is already nesting among the mess on his desk.

“Just water, thanks.” Jillian is reconstructing her opinion of the celebrity. *Bill must spend most of his day sitting right*

here, doing just this. She can't tell if that sour smell is coming from him or his mess.

“Not something I usually stock, but today's your lucky day...” he opens a minifridge behind his desk, “and mine it would seem,” he hands her a bottle.

Jillian is suddenly wishing hers was alcoholic. She cracks the seal. He toasts her.

“You have a first name, *Detective?*”

“Jillian.”

“Jillian—*Jill,*” he tries it out with a drunk smile, “whereabouts are you from?”

They hash out the details of their home-planet. Bill is a proud northerner who, despite his deterioration, still teases her about being from the south. In another setting she might have fought him over it. He seems like someone who needs the win today.

A woman arrives behind Jillian. Between her red ponytail and busty tank top, her defining attributes leave little confusion about identity: Stephanie Rosenthal. Even knowing she would be here, Jillian is caught off guard by her renowned presence.

“Hey Stef, another Kyrios southerner for ya.” Bill introduces. “Now you two can bond, *right?*”

Unlike the devolution of Bill Thurston, Stephanie Rosenthal is the same timeless beauty that captured hearts during *Bending the Universe* eight years ago. Even in a vintage HyTechCo top and aged cargo pants, she poised to steal headlines at any moment.

Jillian hides behind a stoic cop-face to keep from grinning like a fool in the presence of the most famous woman

in the universe. She merges her mental constructs with the real person and realizes it must look like she's sizing her up.

Stephanie doesn't smile. She mirrors Jillian's cold assessment, emerald eyes passing up and down--a standoff between two exemplar Nikkis. Both are attractive southerners in their early 30's. *The fiery redhead and the spicy brunette.* Feminine researcher versus athletic cop. Jillian imagines their doll versions on the shelves before ditching her mask for a smile, breaking the mirror.

"It's an honor to meet you." Jillian offers a handshake.

Stephanie ignores her hand, turning her scowl on Bill. "Unless you plan on working today, I'm taking the detective for processing."

It isn't a question and Bill answers with a pouty sip from his whiskey.

Director Rosenthal leads Jillian next door to her office. The room is as representative of its owner as Bill's is to him. Everything is clean, organized, and purposeful.

"I'm sorry we are meeting under these circumstances," Det. Kahr keeps her nerves on ice as she accepts the offered seat, "I'm a huge fan of your career." *It's not a lie.*

Stephanie Rosenthal is an inspiration to women everywhere. Eleven years ago, the 22 year old from the gutter class volunteered for the initial expedition to explore these abandoned ruins. Her discoveries alone would change the way of life for all humankind.

"I hope you don't aim to destroy it." Stephanie refers to her career.

Jillian shakes her head. "I am here to catch a murderer."

"I wish there was one to catch. John committed suicide."

“That’s what I keep hearing.”

“Because it’s true. *Occam’s Razor*. The simplest answer is often correct, Detective.”

Jillian shrugs. “I’m here to verify the truth.”

“The truth, Jillian, is that this place takes a toll on people. Isolation, boredom, inconvenience. Communication back home blows. You can’t exactly leave whenever you want...” Stephanie starts. “It was bad back when we had 5000 people working here. It’s worse now with 100.”

“*Why’s that?*”

“Fewer amenities. People get on each other’s nerves.” She shrugs. “It’s harder to find an escape.”

Interesting choice of word: escape, Jillian thinks.

“I’ve seen guys get really low out here.” Rosenthal leans forward. “If people are short with you, it’s because they don’t like seeing a badge. Some are medicating the only way they know how. I’ve tried to minimize the drugs and booze—but those things aren’t going away. There is a reason people are earning 1.8 daily KRP being out here. ERS is a rough motherfucker. Most of the time it sucks.”

Jillian is surprised to hear *her* say that. “Then why are *you* still out here? *Contract?*”

Stephanie chews on the end of a fingernail. “I can leave at any time. But the work isn’t done. Ever since those cocksuckers relocated command and operations...we used to control all the relays from here, *did you know that?*”

“No.” Jillian admits.

“Then they gutted Research and Development...except they forgot to actually continue development. Motherfuckers. Which is why I’m still here. To prove them wrong. *We will* perfect surfaced based relays. And then we can reach *it*.”

Jillian can't help thinking Stephanie sounds a little fanatical.

“What is *it*?”

Stephanie purses her lips and inhales through her nose. “Most people don't love this project like I do. To them, it is someone else's child.” She spins her chair around for a view of the vid-screen hanging to the left of the window.

Since Jillian has been in the room it has cycled through the same ten pictures twice already. One includes a *class* photo of the *First Expeditionary Group*. She recognizes many from the *Bending the Universe* miniseries.

Twenty-eight grungy people stand in front of a massive blast door leading into a rocky hillside. Shovels and equipment are strewn about in the foreground. All the people are either in shorts or cargo pants, sweaty T-shirts, tank tops, and a couple guys are shirtless. Everyone is young and fit. Many of the men have beards. They are dirty and haggard, yet every face glows with a sense of enthusiasm.

“I don't have any children. *Do you?*” Dir. Rosenthal asks.

“No.” Jillian replies.

“For almost a decade this has been my child. Like a parent, you take the good with the bad. The disappointment with the excitement. Just when you are about ready to throw in the towel—you discover new archives on native virology, or the gene sequence for an origin species...Or the technology that allows starships to pass through a relay and pop out 10 light years away like that.” Stephanie snaps her fingers.

Rosenthal settles against her seatback and pauses with a smirk. “I still remember that day like it was yesterday. We'd been here just over a month. Days after our first supply drop.” She points at the picture and pauses the frame. “Look at Bill,

back before he started drowning his sorrows in booze and calories.”

Jillian finds skinny Bill in the lower left with a cheesy smile on his face.

“Well, two divorces later, and nine years out here what can you expect?” Stephanie excuses. “I don’t even begrudge that they made him Executive Director—*even though he doesn’t do shit around here...* That title is about all he has left.” Stephanie lowers her voice. “He can keep it, so long as I can keep my project.”

Jillian moves past Bill to track across all reality *cast members* of *Bending the Universe*. Sovanna the dark haired nuclear/biological/chemical tech from Tykhe. The two brutish Gath brothers, *Tyson and Demarcus*, towering a head-height over everyone else. Efe, the loveable Tykhe boy made famous for his outdoorsmanship...The brave heartthrob Wes Robinson who completed the first trans-relay communication with Earth, to his mother—wetting panties throughout the systems.

“I’m sorry, I have to ask...” Jillian stalls on Wes’ dark face and brilliant white smile. “What was the deal with you and Robinson? Were you two actually involved?” Wes and Stephanie were seen as the power couple for years. He the daring military veteran, she the adventurous researcher. *The story wrote itself.*

“Oh god no.” Stephanie rolls her eyes. “Everyone thought so!”

“Really? The show makes it seem like you two...” Jillian trails off.

“I’m aware. *BUT* strikes again.”

“*But?*” Jillian furrows her brow.

“That’s what we called *Bending the Universe*—one of those stupid monicres that stuck. Just don’t say it around the director—she hated it.”

Jillian grins.

“Anyway, it’s all the magic of editing.” Stephanie shows both palms to the ceiling. “Spliced scenes where they wanted them. Create a narrative. The whole thing was a publicity stunt designed to attract investors. Back before HyTechCo was...well, what it is now. They needed money and images. I guess they found both...” Stephanie says.

Jillian recalls their similar canned denials in interviews. She’s not completely convinced.

“Wes and I were—*are* good friends. Nothing more. He was actually involved with Sovanna all that time.” Stephanie points to the pretty Asian. “She wasn’t the only one upset with the depiction.” She flicks the air. “A story for another time...”

“So the show was all bullshit?” Jillian braces for more disappointment.

“Most of it.” Stephanie isn’t afraid to admit. “Most of the scenes were staged. I made the first relay transmission—by myself—to Kyrios about a week before any camera crews showed up here. It was to a Kyrios orbital traffic controller.” She smirks. “I was sleep deprived and haggard. He was a nobody. Not nearly the glamorous depiction of a room full of enthused ERS employees getting in touch with the board of HTC.”

“At least they kept you as the focal point.” Jillian consoles.

“Yeah. I’m still on record as delivering the first words...which is more than I can say for that tech. Too bad Bill got in the way of my spotlight.”

“Trust me, no one gives much thought to Mr. Thurston. You and Wes were always the crowd favorites.”

“Yeah...well that’s because they don’t know.”

Jillian zeroes on the redhead in the picture. *Despite all the sweat and grime, Stephanie is a giveaway.* She is wearing a sports bra and cargo pants, looking like a carefree

teenager—albeit a well endowed one. She has since come into maturity with the marks of experience.

Stephanie stands next to a shirtless man in running shorts with amazing abs and a bronze tan. He has tattoos and scars. His left arm and part of his shoulder is a raw-alloy prosthetic. *Military grade.* Any Kyrio would have had that thing sleeved in synthetic skin and no one would be the wiser that it wasn't his biological appendage. *No, most Kyrios would have had a new arm grown, regardless of the debt.* Judging by the obviousness of his augmentation, he's an Earther choosing function over aesthetics. Which makes sense, considering he's holding a black rifle and is clearly a soldier.

“Who is that?” Jillian asks.

“Derek Roman.”

“I don't recognize him from the show...” *Which is naive because this picture was taken almost a year before the series aired. He could have left by then.*

“That's because Derek refused to be on camera.”

“Why?”

“Would you settle for me saying he doesn't like publicity?”

“Sounds like there's more?”

“There is. But I don't want to boost his fucking ego. I'm sure you'll find out soon enough when you meet him.”

“Wait, he's here?” Jillian doesn't remember anyone fitting that description in her files.

“Yup. Somewhere.” Stephanie turns to the screen on her desk. “I need to finish processing you, then you can annoy him to your heart's content.” She clicks on the appropriate options. “I need you to sign a few non-disclosure agreements before I can connect you to our services. This is a research facility. Any information you discover that is unrelated to the death of John Parker is property of Hyalite Technology Corporation. And as a keeper of the peace I don't think I need

to explain the legal ramifications if you choose to share that info outside the context of the law.”

“Not interested in that.” Jillian peruses a few lines before signing the virtual document.

Jillian’s InfoLink reboots in her vision. “Your connection on camp should be solid. Outside and in the House, not so much. Tykhe’s internet is decent...but it’ll depend on what satellites are in range. If you’re trying to make contact off-world we have about an hour block where we can live-stream data anywhere in the systems without delay. *They link a channel with the relays.* Otherwise, you’ll have to wait 30 hours for our orbit to sink up again. *It shifts an hour later every day.* No matter what, coms are shit compared to what you know on Kyrios.” Stephanie sends another document through Jillian’s InfoLink. “Technically this is for employees...”

It is a hazardous duty agreement. The form discloses pay and the KRP breakdown.

“ERS is a dangerous fucking place and we’d prefer to avoid a lawsuit. The House—as we call it is an eleven-story building constructed underground. The newest parts are two hundred years old. Other sections are much older and between time, nature and a battle that eradicated both species previously living here, the structural integrity has been compromised. Engineers fixed most of the problems. That doesn’t mean they’re *all* fixed.” Dir. Rosenthal pasuses. “You’ll notice warnings about weather, altitude, wildlife, and some of the other things we face out here. In short, accidents happen.”

Jillian signs. “Yeah, something like...42, *right?* Deaths that is?”

Stephanie purses her lips.

Whoops, that came off shittier than intended.
“Although I guess seven of those were missing people...”

Jillian had to dig to access the reports of those deaths. For all the excitement of Ms. Stephanie Rosenthal’s legendary expedition—heroes on a strange planet, surviving the elements and nature, *the discoverers of countless pieces of priceless technology*—there was little mention of the dead. Forty-two in nine years.

Many seemed reasonable given all the hazards Stephanie already mentioned. She wasn’t worried about the animal attacks. *That was just bad luck.* The murders and suicides on the other hand...

Reports chalked them up to isolation, depression, and general disagreement. Some people served multiple year rotations. Being alone was bound to fuck with the head. It might even explain some of the six murders.

But for as much as all of these deaths seem reasonable, the last one, John’s suicide wasn’t reasonable to his parents. And they were willing to pay for verified answers. She can’t help wondering if any of the other cases would have read differently if properly financed.

“Like I said, *accidents happen.*” Dir. Rosenthal emphasizes. She tries out a politician’s smile, “You’ve had a long journey, Detective. Space travel is exhausting. We’ll assign you a trailer. Give you a tour of the facility essentials. Feed you. *We have an amazing meal selection with tons of local, organic produce.* Rest tonight. Tomorrow I’ll happily assist you in your investigation.”

Director Rosenthal cues comms. “Hey Faith, where are you sending them to next? Security?”

“Naw, Roman’s still out. I’m over at the trailers already with the others.”

“*Where the fuck is Derek?*”

“Uh...out...”

“Jesus...” Rosenthal taps her toe three times. “Alright.”

Jillian offers to find her own way.

Stephanie stands, “No it’s fine. This building is a maze until you get used to it and I’m heading out anyway.”

Jillian stands ready to follow.

“Don’t take this personally, Detective, but I’m worried that you aren’t looking for the truth.” Stephanie is still gripping her hand.

“*Why else would I be here?*” Jillian almost scoffs.

“Because you need someone to blame.”

“And you think that’s *you*?”

“It falls under my watch.” Rosenthal shrugs.

“Technically doesn’t it fall under Bill’s watch?” Jillian tries to lighten the mood. *Besides, 41 other deaths haven’t caught up to you yet. Why would this?*

Stephanie chuckles. “You have a lot to learn about who’s in charge out here. The same reason that Bill can sit in his office and drink himself into obesity and still take all the credit is the same reason that he will NOT take responsibility for this death.”

“Enlighten me...”

“Because he has a penis, and because he’s from the north. And some things never change.”

Chapter 4

Day 1

Roman

Across the draw, a litter of bob-tailed wild cats plays with each other. The mother oversees her offspring biting each other's pointy ears, rolling around in the grass, jumping from rocks and low tree limbs.

Derek Roman is invisible. He is another bush in a forest of vegetation. A full ghillie suit conceals his form. Even the rifle barrel and silencer are painted and wrapped for discretion. The keenest of eyes couldn't spot his hide.

Roman watches the kittens play 700 meters away through the combined high-def clarity of bionic eyes and a Zeiss 1-40x smart-scope. *He can make out the whiskers on each cat's face.* Tiny numbers in the corner of the lens report the precise range of his cross hairs. He tags one of the cats and the sophisticated scope compiles ambient details for the vicinity. It registers the slight bend in the grass and flutter of leaves, computing wind velocity and direction, altitude and ambient temperature before illuminating a single dot on a mil-radian Christmas tree growing beneath the centerline crosshairs. *Roman is pleased that his mental estimation arrived at the same dot.*

Roman is already settled in with natural alignment behind a custom built Larue PRS Mk11 precision rifle. His boots are kicked out wide behind him, shoulder into the stock applying forward pressure to the bipod legs digging into the dirt. He stabilizes the illuminated dot on his target, steadies his breathing and touches off the 1kg trigger...

The rifle barely jounces in his shoulder. Roman follows

the arcing vapor trail of the 8.6mm ultra magnum as it cruises over the treetops.

The mother bobcat heard the muffled whizzing met by a thick *FWAP!* and is already counting her children. Her kin continue to play, unaware of the lurking danger.

Derek grins under his ghillie suit. *"You're welcome..."* Ten meters from the happy litter, a larger predator lays still in the bushes. Blood oozes out the crater that used to be its eye-socket. *He'd harvest a tooth if it wasn't such a hike over there.* He watches through his scope to make sure more wolves aren't lingering.

A jet interrupts his solitude.

Oh yeah, it's Tuesday. Meaning his fun is over...*back to work.*

The sniper stalks back through the woods, delaying actual responsibility as long as possible under the justification that he's maintaining his skillset. The jet's noise steadily increases before entering a decrescendo and finally silence.

Roman arrives at a black military-style truck tucked under the shade of the forest pines. He sheds his ghillie suit, unleashing the odors of damp muskiness. *God he needs a shower!* He puts metallic fingers through his short clipped hair, slicking away the moisture from there and his face while ventilating the collar of his olive green T-shirt with his organic hand.

As he is loading the rest of his gear into the truck, Roman notices a barefooted child standing amongst the trees. She clutches a grasshopper plush toy.

She smiles and waves when she sees him.

"Fuck you." Roman glares. "You aren't real." Her skin is too clean and without perspiration.

"I am real." She puffs out her lower lip, squeezing the grasshopper toy to her chest.

"You aren't *her*."

“Are you sure?” She continues watching him.

He ignores her, sucking on the straw of his hydration bladder, loading his Mk11 to the only empty slot of a six-weapon gun rack bolted between the middle of the two back seats.

By the time he loads into the driver’s seat, the child is gone, and with her, his concern. *He won’t mention the sighting to anyone back on camp. Sharing only incites panic. Or reinforces that he’s crazy. Best to avoid both.*

An *emergency* alert flashes on his InfoLink. He remains calm because he already knows there isn’t an emergency. Whenever he goes hunting, he reduces the notifications on his IL to *Emergency Only*.

The assholes back on camp deciphered this workaround, so now they send non-priority messages on *Emergency Status* so he won’t ignore them. The only way to avoid them is to travel further out of range. *Not far enough.*

The Link flashes a similar message from several different people, ‘*shipment arrived*’, ‘*newbees here*’ and ‘*where are you?*’. Roman ignores all the messages except a missed call from Jerome “Micky” McCune—an enormous Gath mechanic and good friend.

“What’s up?” Roman gets straight to the point.

“Making sure you’re still alive.” The deep voice asks.

Roman makes sure the woman hasn’t reappeared anywhere. “Yup.”

“Get anything?”

“Nothing worth taking today. Might go back out tonight.”

“Let me know if you do, I’ll join ya.” The mechanic offers.

“You’re always welcome.”

McCune’s stalking skills have a lot to be desired. At 150 kilos he’s not exactly light on his feet. What he lacks in grace

he makes up for in brute strength, and he's a good guy to have along when it comes time to haul big-game. *Besides, Roman keeps the man supplied in exotic military-grade weapons and hunting adventures in exchange for modifications on his truck.*

"The Zhenbao is broken."

"*What?* Anyone hurt? Cali? Zhen?" Roman is now wondering if any of those messages were actual emergencies. He thumbs on the electric engine and blasts the AC, waiting with doors open until the heat clears.

"Crew's fine. Passengers are fine. Bunch of newbs. They're being taken care of over in medical now." McCune explains. "The tail is in pieces...a few sections of the body. Fucked."

"Shit."

"Yup, hit some debris coming in."

"Can you fix it?"

"Doubt it. We could weld shit back together, but I dunno if it'd be safe. There's a big difference between puttin' together a wheeled vehicle for gravity versus somethin' that has to fly through space. We're speckin it out right now. Might be able to get lucky and find parts at Amadeus, otherwise we'll be a little while waiting for another shipment."

"Do you know what Stephanie wants?" Roman closes the driver's door and drives towards camp.

"Huh? No. I'd imagine she needs you to check the newbs in through security, *Chief.*"

"Right...Not like they're going anywhere."

"Nope." Someone else is engaging with McCune in the background. "Hey buddy, I gotta take care of this. When can I expect you?" McCune asks.

"Eight minutes." Roman watches the blip of his GPS on the dash.

"Cool."

Roman terminates the connection and blasts rock music

for the journey back. He arrives at the airstrip. Coasting through the fence across the tarmac. The *Zhenbao* has already been wheeled into a hanger barely large enough to accommodate it.

“Fuck...” Roman joins a cluster of mechanics inspecting the damage. One of McCune’s girls is on a scissor lift, the upper half of her body disappeared inside the damage of the hull. McCune is standing below the lift delegating.

“You weren’t exaggerating, were you?” Roman stands a head shorter than the enormous dark-skinned mechanic.

“I never do.” McCune spits local tobacco.

“Who drew the short straw?” Roman glances up the scissor-lift to the pair of legs.

“Akina. Only one that can fit.” McCune’s beefy arms are folded across his barrel chest.

The wiry Martian girl reverses out of the hole. She’s in a work-stained tank top, her coveralls lowered off her brown shoulders with the arms tied around her waist--either a function of the heat or an attempt to avoid snags while worming around inside the wreck.

Akina Herrero emerges shaking her head, “Oi! Jefe, esto no es bueno.” She yells in a thick Martian dialect of a Spanish accent. “*This is a fucking mess.* There’s a lot of connections up here...”

“Can you fix it?” McCune asks.

“I dunno, Jefe.” The girl rips out loose wires and drops them down below. “*Es una mierda.* I’m no aerospace tech.” She readjusts a messy black ponytail streaked with blonde highlights. “I’m not sure how this goes back together.”

“That’s saying a lot, because that kid can put *anything* back together.” McCune comments to Roman. “If anyone can fix it, it’s you Akina!” McCune belts up to her.

“Aye-yi-yi.” She wipes the sweat off her brow with her tattooed forearms.

“Might have to fly someone in to work on this.” McCune winks at Roman.

“Don’t you dare! Not until I get a chance to look at it!”

McCune chuckles to himself.

“That’ll be a month.” Roman comments. *HyTechCo is stingy about sending anything off-schedule.*

“Minimum.” McCune agrees.

“Remember when we used to keep all those techs on staff here?” Roman reminisces.

“I almost can’t remember that far back.”

Roman spots the familiar explosion of pink hair descending the loading ramp. *Still wild and untamed from zero-g.* He waves. “Hey you!”

A smile overtakes her narrow face. The tall pilot forgets her bags on the ramp and sprints towards him. She might look like a galloping giraffe if she weren’t wearing *Earl’s* old frumpy flight suit. She throws her gangly arms around him.

“Glad you made it here in one piece.” Roman squeezes her.

“Tykhe’s gunna have to try harder next time.” She’s still hugging him.

Roman holds her at arm length so he can inspect her condition. He grabs her chin and forces her head to the right and left. *“Have you been to medical yet?”*

“No. I just got here.”

Roman starts poking at her through her baggy flight suit. “There’s a girl under there somewhere.”

“Ahhh! What are you doing!” Cali giggles.

“Making sure nothing’s bleeding or broken.”

“Seriously, I’m fine!” She squirms.

“I still want you to get checked out.” Roman points.

“Yes sir.” Cali grumbles.

Roman isn’t done inspecting. “Something’s different about you. You look, older, ya know that?” That doesn’t seem

right considering he saw her last month. He suspects it might also be something with her makeup, but he isn't qualified to identify what.

"I just turned twenty-one, in Sol years."

"*Twenty-one?*"

"You're still a damn kid." McCune interjects.

"Technically I'm an adult." Cali puts her hands on her hips and sticks out her tongue.

"Mmm, hmm. We'll see if you can *drink* like an adult later on, missy." The Gath giant challenges.

"You're on."

Roman shakes his head. He puts his organic arm over Cali's shoulder, steering her off a little ways for privacy. "Surprised you're still making these runs. Gotta be more exciting places than ERS?" *What young woman wants to bounce back and forth between supply depots to a remote facility with no amenities. At least playing bus driver anywhere else in the system entails a lively port city catering to pilots.*

"How else would I get to see you?" Her arm is around his waist.

"I could come visit *you*." He suggests.

"Hard to visit. That's my home." She points at the damaged Zhenbao. "Not exactly a good address."

"I worry about you, *ya know?*"

"Don't. Pay's good. It's safe. And I earn KRP's which is tough for a pilot."

"Might earn a little extra this run..." He references the damage of her ship.

"Uh...yeah..."

Roman kisses her head before tussling her hair. "Grab your things. I'll give you a ride to the trailers." Roman is already retrieving one of the bags she left on the ramp. "Come on, I've gotta head over to camp to check in the newbs."

"Oi, Cali, what am I? Belly-button lint?" Akina calls

down from her lift.

Cali looks up, "*Belly-button lint?*"

"Yeah, something nasty you pick out and discard?" The Martian plays at being offended. "Not even gunna say goodbye?"

Cali chuckles. "I'll be back soon, I promise."

"Yeah-yeah." Akina returns to her inspection of the damage.

Roman tosses Cali's things in the back seat of his truck before she can object. "*Hey Zhen, let's assign you a trailer, huh?*" He yells to the Asian man taking his usual wide steps down the ramp.

"Later." The old pilot waves him on.

"You know he'll only sleep on the ship." Cali loads into the passenger seat.

"I know, but it's good to offer." Roman cues the ignition and begins cruising off towards Alpha. "What happened up there?"

"I don't know. Hit some debris. Something got through. Atmosphere's a nasty bitch."

Either she's playing tough or the reality that she almost died hasn't sunk in yet. While they wait for the gates to lift, Roman makes eye contact with Cali and squeezes her hand. "I'm glad you're OK."

She nods and returns his squeeze.

He drives to Alpha and would have stopped at the trailers immediately through the gates, except he sees Stephanie Rosenthal with some stranger, waving him down from the HUB.

"What does she want...?" A new message from Stephanie chimes in his InfoLink.

He's already spotted the shiny gold badge and the pistol on the stranger's hip.

Chapter 5

Day 1

Jillian

The truck crawls towards them. Stephanie huffs, hands on her hips and begins tapping her toe. The driver rolls near. He grins and hangs a gray-metal finger out the window. Stephanie's jaw drops, he maintains the obscenity and mashes the accelerator, blowing past Stephanie in a cloud of dust.

Jillian contains her smile.

Stephanie calls him on her SID. "Real cute. Get your ass back here."

A second later the brake lights illuminate, and he flips a U to return to them. Both the driver and the pink haired girl are chuckling.

"I work with children." Stephanie complains.

The driver parks the vehicle and hops out. The Earther is as jacked now as he was in Stephanie's class photo in her office. He's blatantly ex-military. She's guessing that bionic arm was an on-the-job consolation prize.

Jillian waits for her InfoLink to ID him. It doesn't. Judging by the arm and gold irises of his bionic eyes, she suspects his anonymity isn't a wi-fi connection error—especially if what Stephanie said was true about him avoiding publicity.

"Detective Kahr, this is Derek Roman, Chief of Security."

She shakes his organic hand, now close enough to also notice old scars up his neck and along the left side of his face.

"Ma'am."

"You're a PMC?" *Mercenary.*

He smirks, "You don't waste any time, do you,

Detective?”

“Try not to.”

“*What does my file say about me?*” He is still smirking.

On a camp of only 100 people an augmented merc would stand out among a bunch of tech nerds. Especially since all signs point to him being her most capable suspect. She'll press Stephanie about the missing files later...

He chuckles through her staring and turns to Rosenthal, “Glad you haven’t sold me out yet, Stef.”

“Still waiting for the right offer. Trust me, the minimum keeps dropping...” Stephanie retorts working on her SID. “I need you to process the new employees and the detective—give them your security spiel or whatever it is you do.” She flicks her wrist.

“I was taking Cali over to the trailers. She’s gonna need a room. Her bird hit some debris coming in.”

“How bad is it?”

“Not good. The Zhenbao will be down until we can get parts. I’m thinking at least a month, maybe two. Hopefully before winter sets in.”

“Christ! Are you kidding?” Stephanie puffs.

“Whatever. Set them up. Det. Kahr needs a can too.”

Roman looks at Jillian. “Grab your shit and load up.”

Roman turns to Dir. Rosenthal. “Anything else, *master?*” He says in a mocking tone.

“After you’re done here you can choose between eating shit or fucking yourself.” Stephanie replies.

“Both sound delightful.” He opens the rear passenger door of his truck. “Hop in, Detective. Enjoy the AC for 15 seconds.”

It must be obvious that she’s melting in this heat. Jillian welcomes the cool cabin, but is immediately distracted by the full gun rack mounted between the seats. Each rifle is configured with different optics, muzzle devices, and tactical

lights. *And plenty of extra ammunition in loaded magazines.*

He is ready for war even without the truck. No one can miss the large-frame pistol on a gun belt loaded with extra mags and a combat knife the size of a small sword strapped horizontally across the back.

“You’ve already met California Holmes, right?” Roman asks of his pink-haired pilot in the front passenger seat.

“Technically.” Jillian acknowledges. “Who’s *Earl*?” She decides to ask about the nametag on the spacer’s big flightsuit.

“Former crew member.” The girl is busy playing on her SID. “Left his shit. It’s mine now.”

Jillian tries another route. “I wanted to commend you on your piloting skills earlier...I haven’t had the opportunity to thank you for getting us here in one piece. After seeing the damage, that was some pretty impressive flying.” Jillian concedes.

“Yup.”

Not gunna make this easy, are ya kid? “California, huh? Is that where you’re from?”

“Ew. Do I *look* like a dirty Earther?” The girl looks up from her device.

“—What’s wrong with Earthers?” Roman retorts.

“You’re cool, I guess.” She smirks. “My mom was born in California, before she immigrated. I think it’s a stupid name so don’t ever call me it. Seeing as I’m going to be stuck here for a while...everyone calls me Cali. I guess you can. *You’re a detective right?*”

“Yeah, but you can call me Jillian.”

Roman drives down the lane of white trailers, all uniformly arranged in rows and columns—like a graveyard for refrigerators. Each are identical except where the owners have added personal décor to the front steps.

The three disembark the truck.

The flowy dress comes out of one of the trailers with a newbie in tow.

“Hey Faith, I need two more trailers.” Roman declares.

“Okay...” Faith summarizes the latest rodent infestation limiting the options.

“Don’t worry, I’ll crash with you—” Cali blurts out. She catches her insinuation too late, her face matching the color of her hair. “Bro.” Cali slugs the mercenary in an attempt to redeem herself, except makes it worse as she errantly chooses his metal arm for the target of her knuckles. “Ouch!”

Roman is unaffected by her words or her jab.

“I think the days of double-bunking are behind us.”

Faith sails over the unintended insinuation. She and Roman deliberate over the options, while Jillian wipes her forehead as excess sweat cruises under her collar down her cleavage. *She can already feel her legs sticking to her pants.*

“I have a couple of open units over on C-7 and C-8 right behind yours.”

“You know I like my space...” Roman concedes.

“Fine.”

“Detective, you want the end or the middle?”

“End is fine. I don’t like neighbors.”

“I know the feeling.” Roman huffs. “Alright ladies, I’ll take you over to your new homes.” They collect bags from their vehicles.

“Sorry all the prime real-estate has been taken already.”

“They’re all the same, aren’t they?”

“For the most part, but people have strange ideas out here.” Roman explains. “No one wants to be in the front row because they hear the vehicles moving more, plus the bosses are there. No one wants to be in the back row because it’s darker at night. Most like the middle, think it’s safer—strength in numbers, ya know?”

Roman points out a trailer with gouges so deep into the

side panel she can see inside.

“What the hell did *that*?” Jillian admires the visible frame-work and insulation under the claw marks.

“Just a bear.”

“So it *is* true.” Between *Bending the Universe* and the rumors, Tykhe has a reputation for vicious wildlife. And people have died on the site. There’s no legislation restricting genetic meddling, making everything bigger and badder. Supposedly they even have dinosaurs.

“Don’t worry, this isn’t a daily occurrence. But keep your head on a swivel. Especially outside the fence.” Roman leads them to the end of the row.

“Damn, whose is that?” Jillian notices an armored double-wide. The polymer walls have been reinforced with a thick metal frame and steel panels. It’s the only irregularity in their otherwise perfect grid of white trailers.

“That’s Roman’s.” Cali wears a proud grin. “That’s where you run if shit hits the fan...”

“Noted.” Jillian says.

Roman keys Cali into E-8 first. They turn on the air conditioning and ditch her bags on the floor before retreating. Roman leads them to Jillian’s trailer next.

Against his warning Jillian follows Roman into the kiln of stagnant air. *She’s curious to see inside*. A few seconds later she wishes she would have waited outside with Cali. The only place hotter than outdoors is indoors...

The interior is blasé. Seamless plastic walls. Two auto-darkening windows plus lighting inset into the ceiling. Tall storage closets run the length of one short wall. The opposite has an auto-door that she’s *hoping* leads to a bathroom. The space is barren minus a twin-bed, nightstand, and a fold out chair.

Jillian circles the room. In six strides she’s covered the

width. In ten she's arrived at the bathroom. She hears the AC compressor running outside and can already feel the temperature dropping. *Thank God it works!*

"It's functional." Roman apologizes, walking past her into the bathroom. He tests the faucets on the sink and shower. "Let these run for about ten minutes, clean out the pipes. Then it will be clean enough to drink—*they gave you all your vaccines, right?*"

"Uh, yeah...?"

"Then yeah, it'll be clean enough to drink."

She can't tell if he's joking.

"If you need more furniture, we can figure that out later."

Roman says. "Go ahead and leave your things here, we're heading back to the HUB."

Jillian won't complain about all the back-and-forth if it means returning to cool AC.

Roman escorts all the new arrivals to the *Supply Depot* where they are greeted by a remarkably pale man standing behind a long counter.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Bob." Roman introduces. "Bob is our supply chief. Say hi to Bob, everyone."

The newbs humor his request.

"Greetings. How may I help you?" The older variant android asks.

"Hold up a second, Bob, we're going to kill two birds with one stone." Roman verifies everyone's profile on his SID and delivers a drill-instructor themed briefing about all the do's and don'ts of Tykhe. *Be on time. Don't go where you aren't supposed to. Don't leave the camp without checking out. Be back within the gates before sunset. Be careful, things can kill you...* He's clearly given this speech thousands of times and starts to sound more robotic than Bob.

"Your bodies will take at least a week or two to acclimate. Drink plenty of water. During the summer months

you shouldn't leave any building without a source of water. That's why you're all getting these."

Bob hands everyone two backpack-style hydration bladders and two hard plastic bottles. They receive other essentials like flashlights, multi-tools, and emergency radios.

"If you need anything else, talk to Bob. Need any clothing items," he pauses. "Talk to Faith, she'll print up whatever you need. If you can't tell, she likes clothes. In another month winter will roll in and we'll equip you accordingly. Any questions? No? Good. Put your shit in your backpack and come with me. Thanks Bob!"

They pass through a tube-intersection into *Robotics*. Here another soulless android clerk is waiting behind a desk. A second bot is operating on one of his *species* on a table in the background. Arms are disconnected from the body, and the abdomen is open.

Newer models are nearly indistinguishable from humans. All those machine parts have been redesigned to duplicate the shapes of internal organs, wires crafted to look like veins. *The only tell is they are still legally required to bleed a color other than red.* Jillian would know, *she's seen more than her share of dead ones.*

"We'll assign you a *personal assistant* if you choose. Believe it or not, Faith has more important shit to do, than play baby sitter and tour guide."

Roman explains that they can choose a droid, or a drone. Ten humanoid figures are starting straight ahead into infinity while they charge. *A little creepy.* On the other side of the room are shelves stacked with salad-plate sized aerial drones.

"Go ahead and pick your assistant." Faith offers.

How about neither, Jillian translates *assistant* is a polite word for *spy*. She'd put money that any of these tech gurus could tap into these machines to watch everything that's happening.

“What if we brought our own?” The newbie formally known as *Gash* asks.

“Then I better not see it outside your trailer.” Roman scowls. “You’ve all signed a non-disclosure. We take our work seriously. This isn’t a tourist destination for you to take selfies and post on your socials. Any recorded data is officially property of Hyalite Technology Corporation. If I see your drone I *will* shoot it out of the sky.” He liquifies the man with a glare. “You use one of our company approved assistants, or you don’t use anything.”

“Well, I’ve made my choice.” Frat-boy stands in front of one of the female androids. “These are Kowalski Gen VI’s?”

“Yes, *H* models.” Faith makes special emphasis.

If Jillian remembers her android sales catalog, Gen 6’s were released about 5 years ago. Jillian doesn’t recall what the H stands for (she always thought it meant helper). They are anatomically correct 30-year-old humanoids. Average height, structure, vanilla faces, plain bodies, nothing exceptional or exaggerated, unlike the *M* (*military*) models, *which is the equivalent of a full body of Roman’s bionic arm*, or the *Pleasure* models with their sexualized dimensions.

“These robots are designed to help you do your job and make sure you don’t get lost. They are not your fuck dolls.” Roman emphasizes what Jillian is already thinking. *Alone in isolation...she doesn’t want to imagine how many dicks have been inside these things. Gross.*

Two of the other men cower into choosing drones. Frat boy sticks by his choice.

“Be sure to swing by MedBay for your penicillin shot.” Roman slaps the man on the shoulder.

The auto-door at the back of the room beeps three times before opening. A forklift appears hauling three casket shaped boxes. The droid *doctor* turns to the arrival. Jillian recognizes the Polynesian man in the flowered shirt still manning the

forklift. A second workerbee hops off the back of the lift to help unload the cargo.

“Tell Raj his new skins are here.” Kanoa says over the noise of the hydraulics and electric motor.

The two humans and android work together to stand the boxes upright against the wall with the other sleeping bots. Jillian spies the *Fanukawa* logo with the manufacture date on the containers. *Damn. Brand new and top-of-the-line!* Way more sophisticated than these Kowalski droids.

“You said there’s only 100 people here,” Jillian approaches Faith while the others sign for their new tech, “but I notice you employ a lot of droids?”

“Yeah. It’s about a two-to-one ratio. It’s Stephanie’s way of maintaining personnel while reducing operating costs. Cheaper to repair these things than pay an organic to come out here.” Faith tells. “Most are running on basic personality mode, assigned to support tasks as clerks, servers, janitors...technicians.” She references the two robots behind the counter.

“You said *most* are running basic personality mode, any that aren’t?”

“We have a few AI’s. The chefs. Then there’s Raj—*whose order just came in.*” Faith smirks. “I’m sure you’ll meet him soon enough. He employs a few of his own, too.”

“My ears are burning.” A voice arrives through a newly opened doorway.

Jillian turns to a pretty man in an effeminate silk robe. If he were an Earther (and human) she’d guess Spanish or Middle Eastern...maybe Indian. He carries himself like a flamboyant geisha and if Faith hadn’t already divulged his secret, she’d assume Nikki.

“What do we have here?” He puts a hand on his hip and pinches his chiseled chin as he observes Jillian.

“Raj this is Detect—”

“—ive Kahr.” He finishes Faith’s sentence. “Yes my bandwidth is working just fine, Love.” He hangs a delicate hand for her.

Jillian’s grip is brutish in comparison. *She can’t believe this isn’t real skin.*

“Shake it, don’t strangle it, sweetheart. You’ll have to pay for SM.” He pulls away bored and inspects the other newcomers. Frat Boy’s H-model boots to life. She offers a generic greeting, presenting options for her personality type. Raj walks over to her and presses a disgusted finger into her forehead as though she were an insect.

“May I assist you?” The drone blinks.

“Ughh...shut up already.” He puts a palm in front of her face. “When you want a *real* experience,” Raj puts his other hand on Frat Boy’s shoulder and whispers into his ear, “come find me.”

“Umm...okay.” The newbie trips over his tongue.

The bot runs a hand down the newcomer’s arm before stepping away.

“If it isn’t the village pimp.” Roman scoffs. “They let you out of your den?”

Raj tilts his head to the side. “No need to make erectile dysfunction everyone’s problem, Mr. Security Man. We have remedies for that.”

“Uh huh.” Roman clutches the handle of the sidearm holstered on his hip. “You know destroying an android isn’t murder, *right?*”

“No, but killing an AI is.” Jillian can’t help interjecting.

Raj's jaw drops and he covers his laugh. "Haha! Here enters checks and balances. What an interesting concept, don't you think?" He chides Roman.

The mercenary sets his jaw but redirects his frustrations at Jillian. He stands toe-to-toe with her and leans in until mere inches separate his piercing bionics from hers. She doesn't cower, mustering all her courage to stare back into the tiny mechanisms of his eyes. Yet her hand lingers close to the pistol on her hip.

"If you were to call for backup this instant, how long do you think it would take to show up?"

Jillian swallows.

"A week? At best." He proposes. "Two more likely. Maybe a month. If ever." He shrugs. "John was from the north. They sent a southerner. Who do they send for a southerner? Hmm?"

"I don't like what you're implying." Jillian controls her voice from cracking.

Roman leans in further to whisper into her ear. "Everything on Tykhe has fangs. I'd be careful about provoking the wildlife."

Jillian doesn't dare move. A twitch and he's won.

"Derek." Faith intercedes, placing a palm on his metal deltoid. "Hey, it's alright." She forces him to re-orient his gaze at her.

Roman leaves Jillian with a menacing grin. "You're right." The savagery falls off his face. He gives Faith a kiss on her cheek and marches past. "Faith, you got them from here?" Roman references the newbees. He is already opening the door to leave.

"Yup." Faith leans over to Jillian. "You alright huh?"

Jillian shakes it off. “Yeah I’m used to pissing matches with insecure men. It’s his turf. I get it.” She shifts the focus. “What’s up with those two?” He references Roman and Raj.

“Oh, they just hate each other.” Faith simplifies.

I couldn’t tell. “Why?”

“Umm...well if you ask Raj it’s because they are the *antithesis of one another.*”

Jillian nods. Raj is still gloating. He gives her a wink before approaching the robotics clerk. “I hear I have a delivery.” He rubs eager palms together.

“I thought you already had a *Fanukawa?*” Kanoa clarifies, standing next to the cargo.

“I do, but you can never have too much of a good thing.” He puts a hand on the box. “I missed you.” Raj whispers as though to a long lost child.

This must be the AI equivalent of getting a new sports car.

Chapter 6

Day 1

Roman

Roman barges into Stephanie's office. Veins bulging in his neck, he swallows his initial statement when he discovers her two main cronies, Okambo and Luciana already lounging in the chairs in front of her desk.

"Shit. I didn't realize it was a meeting of the minds."

"Don't worry, we'll make an exception for you."

Luciana jabs.

"Is everyone a comedian today?" Roman glares.

"What can I do for you Chief of Security Roman, sir?"

Stephanie antagonizes him.

He scrunches his nose in annoyance. *"Don't Chief of Security me."*

She chuckles, taking a slow revolution in her chair before kicking her heels up on the edge of her desk.

"I was going to offer to eliminate our little problem. Just say the word..." Roman folds his arms across his chest.

"What problem?" Okombo asks.

Aside from his accent, he could pass for a Gath. Tall and dark skinned. His parents emigrated from Africa before he was born, making him a first generation Tykhe. Sometimes Roman forgets that he wasn't part of the First Expeditionary Group. He arrived with the first batch of new recruits a month after they established the base camp.

Unlike most of the other Tykhe *locals* driven by the incentive of Kyrios Retirement Points, Okombo is one of the

few people *not* trying to get off this rock. Roman is convinced he sticks around to make sure no one fucks up his home.

“The detective.” Stephanie answers for Roman.

“Wouldn’t be the first body we’ve buried out here, huh Stef?” Derek reminds.

“Huh? Detective? Here? For what?” Okambo still isn’t tracking.

“John’s death.”

“Oh, right...” Okombo sips on a bottle of water.

“What’s her story?” Luciana plays with her long dark hair. She has all the features to corroborate her South American claim, yet her Terran accent is so neutral he’d argue she grew up somewhere in the western United States.

“Do you want her file or the bullet points?”

“Summarize please.”

Roman shrugs. “She’s here to dig into John’s death. She’s from Kyrios, meaning she’s full of herself with a point to prove.”

Stephanie mock-laughs at him.

“A Nikki? Really? *Is she cute?*” Luciana asks.

This would be his time to exploit Stephanie’s insecurities except he’s still too annoyed to boast about Det. Kahr. He hefts his shoulders again. “Do they make em any other way?”

“She’s a total babe.” Bill Thurston wanders in from his office. “Kinda looks like Stephanie.”

Rosenthal squints at him. “*We look NOTHING alike.*”

She turns to the others. “Not hair color...eyes...We’re not even the same race!”

“What is she?” Luciana asks.

“Not sure. She’s got a little brown in her. Ya know, like you!” Bill tips his head at Luciana before swirling the ice in his whisky glass. “Exotic.”

Luciana has worked with Bill for too long to be offended by his simplification.

“Yeah I’m failing to see the resemblance, Bill.” Okambo scratches his head.

“Let’s just say...*other attributes*.” He hides behind his whisky glass.

“He means tits!” Stephanie ends the guessing game. Bill toasts with a twinkle in his eye.

“Hmm, sounds like another Nikki slut.” Luciana assesses.

“I seem to recall you two,” Stephanie gestures to Bill and Luciana, “screwing the first night she was here!”

A secret that only became public after Bill’s second marriage dissolved. Luciana was Bill’s rebound eight years ago. Two consenting adults or not, the camp director banging the new young recruit wasn’t a good look for the project’s infancy.

“Daaamn!” Okombo bites his knuckles to clog his laugh.

Luciana blushes. Bill gloats. “I’m down for a second go of it.”

“Um, no thanks.” Luciana crosses her arms. Roman chuckles.

“Wait, you said she’s here for a month?” Luciana is eager to change the subject.

“At least. Zhen and Cali’s bird is down. Hit some shit on entry. They’re waiting on parts.”

“That’s a long time to have police sniffing around.”
Okambo says.

“Uh huh.” Stephanie acknowledges.

“She wants to visit the crime scene.” Roman looks at Stephanie.

She shrugs. “Fine. Let’s take her in tomorrow.”

“We’re going into the *House*...tomorrow?”

“Sure. *Why not?*”

Space travel is not to be taken lightly. Four days in zero-g is enough time to fuck with the human body. Returning to gravity is exhausting. Not to mention the acclimation to a new planet with heavier gravity and these temps. Most people need at least a week to adjust. Stephanie knows all these things...

“*Why delay?* She better be ready to hit the ground running.”

“Stef, you sure about that?” Executive Thurston asks.
“That’s not employee protocol.”

“Neither is drinking during working hours, *Bill*.”
Stephanie returns. “And she’s not an employee. Rules don’t apply to her.”

“I’m just saying...” He takes another sip.

“Bill, when’s the last time you made a real decision around here? I find it convenient that you wander out of disparity to defend a new piece of ass.” Stephanie barks. “This isn’t the time to stand up. Trust me, I’ll take care of this. Unless you want to head back to Kyrios in handcuffs?”

Roman can tell she’s fried. This detective thing is one more grain of sand added to a landslide of other issues. Corporate’s whispers about pulling the operational plug have grown louder since they shut down Bravo and Charlie two years

ago. To them, ERS is a dry well. Stephanie has used her name and bought more time, convinced she can perfect surface-based relays and unlock a new realm of potential. But HyTechCo's patience is growing thin. Roman doubts the project survives another year. *Depending on how they want to spin this John suicide, less.* Stephanie has the right to be paranoid about Det. Kahr's presence.

"I'll find Faith. We'll take care of gear-prep tonight." Roman shields Bill from further berating. *He's a putz, but he's an innocent putz and it sounds a little too much like mom yelling at dad.*

"Thanks." Stephanie then asks about the processing of all the new-hires.

"Everyone's set. We put Cali Holmes—the pilot, in E8."

"Row E? Next to all the dirty mechanics?" Luciana frowns. "Gross. Poor girl."

"She's friends with some of them."

"What about the detective? Where'd you put her?" Stephanie asks.

"A little closer than I'd prefer..." Roman isn't even trying to be aggravating.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"C8."

"Isn't that right behind you?"

"Yup."

"You never let anyone get that close." The red-headed director frowns.

"No other available cans."

"You're telling me there's no room in the back row?"

"The back row is practically on Bravo. And no. That row has become overflow storage, despite my argument."

“Hmm.” Stephanie snorts. “Well I’m glad you’re willing to take one for the team.”

“Yeah, sounds like a real sacrifice!” Luciana mocks.

“Should have put her next to me!” Bill chuckles.

Roman watches jealousy build in Stephanie’s eyes. Normally he’d relish it. He smirks only because he can see how angry and confused it is making her.

Before anyone can remark they hear the elevator open down the hallway. Quiet footsteps approach.

“Detective, *back for round two?* Faith’s not here to save you.” Roman is nearest to the door. Something feels weird about her walking around camp unescorted. *Cop or not, she hasn’t earned that yet.*

“I’m not here to start shit with you. I’m looking for Director Rosenthal. She in?” Jillian asks.

“Right through here.” Roman blocks her entrance just long enough before stepping out of her way. He doesn’t stick around for Okombo and Luciana to ogle her. He heads down the hall. While he’s waiting for the elevator doors to open, Jillian makes her request for all the staff files and surveillance footage. *Fuck...*

Chapter 7

Day 1

Jillian

Detective Kahr sits barefoot and cross-legged on top of sheets that still smell like third world packaging. Her trailer is finally nice and chilly. She wishes she would have eaten something earlier because she does not want to go out again.

A tablet lays in front of her. A pistol next to it. *100 people plus 60 androids*, Jillian creates a spreadsheet. Of those 60 droids, ten are AI's, making them as liable as humans. The other 50 bots are essentially super advanced toasters. *They don't think independently*. And the Four Laws of Robotics prevents them from harming a human. They only do what they are told. At most, they are the murder weapon.

Leaving her with 110 potential suspects.

Jillian records all her thoughts. *This would be easier with some help*.

She considers her personal drone Elsie. *Just don't take her outside, right?* Jillian recalls Roman's warning.

Kahr retrieves a saucer-sized drone from her backpack. She boots it up. The little blue disk takes flight, hovering at shoulder level. It scans the dimensions of the room before making any further movements.

"Welcome back, Elsie." Jillian smiles at her mechanical assistant.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Kahr. How may I help you?" A blue ring flashes in sync with the automated voice.

“Go ahead and land. I want you to browse surveillance footage within the facility.” Jillian specifies the date and range.

“I have received one file.” The little drone sets down on Jillian’s cheap nightstand.

“Elsie, play everything between 1400 and 1500.”

A big concrete lobby appears on her vid screen. Windows bisect a length of one wall. A man enters the room on the other side of the windows. Jillian zooms in on the feed until the windows fill the screen. The man’s face is clear enough for a verifiable ID: *John Parker*.

Mr. Parker mills about the room for a moment before dropping his pack and settling into a chair looking into the lobby. He interacts with the computers below the window sill. Jillian doesn’t have any angles to see what’s on his screens.

Over the course of the next ten minutes, Mr. Parker slips into several *IL freezes*—the zombie stare when people are browsing the InfoLink’s virtual projections. He is statue-still. Occasionally the freeze cracks into expressions, some she could label as *disturbance*. Eleven minutes in, Mr. Parker turns towards the room’s entrance. Jillian pans out and rewinds thirty seconds, never seeing anyone approach from the exterior hallway.

Regardless, Mr. Parker has some interest in it. He stands up, approaches the door, then utters something. The recording is mute, so she can’t tell if he is talking to someone present but out of view, through a com-link, or to himself. He keeps talking as he retreats from the door and begins pacing.

Once he sits down, he pulls something out of his pocket. It’s a paper, or a letter. Old school. Not digital. Again she can’t see what’s on it. Parker laments over the letter for a moment, scribbles something on it, before setting it down in front of him.

He kneads his knuckles into the bridge of his nose looking like a person warding off a migraine.

Parker's senses clear. He stares through the window for almost two minutes. *Another IL freeze.* That or he is lost in his final thoughts. Then, with cool confidence, he produces a pistol. He presses the barrel between his eyes into the same point of agony as his previous headache. *An awkward angle. Most go for the temple or in the mouth...*

A flash of light illuminates his cheeks before spray mists out the back of his head. His arm drops heavy, the gun falling somewhere below the windowsill. His body remains upright except his head tilted back. To a passerby, he could be napping. At any rate, he is at peace from whatever demons he was wrestling.

“Bye, bye, John.”

Jillian doesn't flinch. She's already seen this clip a hundred times before, and thousands others just as violent. *Compassion fatigue.* Without emotion she is able to focus on the details.

By all accounts it looks exactly as Hyalite Technology claimed: *a suicide carried out by a man exhibiting all the signs of someone capable of that.*

John's parents weren't convinced.

They insisted that John would never do such a thing, so they hired a battalion of people on Kyrios to start digging. One of their sources, *some video analyst,* claimed the clip was doctored and because of that, she's here. Before Jillian arrived, she too thought they were chasing phantoms. *The death of a child must do bizarre things to parents.* Not the first time she's seen one wig out. *Grief is a bitch.*

But since she has arrived, she'll admit, something *is* off. The isolation has created a weird monster. Jillian makes an audio log of these thoughts, then sends another message to Dir. Rosenthal, *'What did the letter say?'* followed by, *'I'd also like the footage leading up to the suicide. Please and thank you.'*

In the meantime, Jillian creates a suspect list based on the staff files. *One hundred- people plus ten AI. Not the smallest list. Not the largest either. And it's all contained. Unlike a crime ANYWHERE else, these 110 suspects are her options—not a whole city or a whole planet.* She'll interview everyone then narrow to prime suspects. She is going to make enemies once the interviewing begins. If anyone feels threatened, they'll come for her.

Watch your back. Trust no one. Goddamn she wished she had a partner! A real, full size partner. Not a little battery powered drone. Roman's comments about response time has her on edge. If anyone wants her gone, she will be. She has no means of escape. No backup. And no defenses. *Fuck.*

Jillian considers faking an investigation. Poke around a bit. Don't ruffle any feathers—any *more* feathers. Submit your report. Verify this was a suicide. Then head home. Nice and easy. *Sure beats getting shanked in the middle of the night!* Who cares if there's no justice for the dead? Finding the killer isn't going to bring him back to life. *Another dead rich kid. Probably an asshole.*

"Were you an asshole, John?" Jillian whispers.

Jillian startles to an assertive knock on her door. She snatches her Kyrios Arms 9mm pistol. *"Who is it?"* Jillian repositions herself next to the door, gun at the ready. Her heartbeat drowns out his response. Jillian hides the gun behind her back and cracks the door.

An unfamiliar brown face appears.

“Hi, I’m Nikko.” He says with a big Tykhe smile.
He looks innocent enough. “What do you want?”

“I was told to take you to dinnah—wid us. *Not just me. Not like a date or anything.*” He stammers scratching his head before gesturing to the small crowd of other people.

“Oh ok.” Jillian wants to decline except she’s starving. “Give me a minute.” She closes the door. “Elsie, if I don’t come back, send my notes to Feronia PD. That’ll be our standard protocol.” Jillian reattaches the paddle holster to her belt, securing her pistol.

“Would you like me to accompany you, ma’am?” The drone offers.

“Can’t. There’s a deranged mercenary that’s threatening to shoot you if you fly outside. Sorry.” Jillian slides into her shoes.

“It’s not your fault ma’am. *House rules.*”

“Yup.” Jillian sets up Elsie’s charging station and makes sure everything else is squared away.

Detective Kahr joins the five men waiting outside. They all stare while avoiding eye contact, combined with lots of blinking and toe grinding. A few knead their hands or scratch their heads.

Nikko introduces all of the white smiles. Jillian is pleased to see that her InfoLink is already populating their names as she looks at each of their faces. *And because she’d never remember everyone on her own.*

“Sorry to rush this along, but I’m not quite used to the heat yet. Mind if we...?” Jillian gestures to the HUB across the street.

“Of course, of course.” They all hurry along, offering her first entry through the doors.

“You can *NOT* wear black in da summer. Too hot.” Nikko shakes his head. “Ms. Bennett can print clothes like these.” He tugs on a breathable, white long sleeve with strategic placement of built in ventilation. His pants are of a similar construction. As is everyone else’s. *She is the tourist.*

The gang leads Jillian through the halls and airlocks. *Thanks to the signage she’s not completely lost.* The final leg is through a long transparent tube. The grass has grown up to almost touch the underside of the glass. Overhead the pink sun Cerise is beginning to make her descent.

The auto-doors at the end of the tube opens into the usual space-station polymer walls and ducting. She’s impressed to discover the cafeteria itself is anything but.

Passing through the threshold, she’s transported into a fine dining experience on Kyrios. It is old-Earth classic with marble and frame-panel walls, warm carved woods, woven curtains, mosaic tile floors, and decorative light fixtures producing a gentle, almost intimate glow. Jillian sinks into the dense squish of the runner leading up to a podium with an android host, politely dressed in a fitted black button-down and slacks.

“Damn, I feel underdressed.” Jillian admires the decorative scrolling of the crown molding. A colored glow radiates down from stained glass skylights nestled within the coffered ceilings.

“No, you are acceptable.” Nikko assures.

“Six guests?” *The robot host even sounds like Kyrios aristocracy.*

“Yes, sir.” Nikko acknowledges.

The android pulls six thin-screen digital menus and escorts them to an accommodating table. He pulls her chair first, Jillian accepts. “Your server will be right with you.” He informs after taking their drinks order.

“This is the *cafeteria*?” Jillian taps the table, *real wood. It’s the first non-synthetic furniture she’s seen since home.*

“Yup.” Nikko already knows what he’s going to order.

“Why so...*fancy*?” Jillian peruses the menu.

“I am told one of the past employees was a decorator.” One of Nikko’s friends informs her. “He wanted to bring a touch of civilization to this savagery.”

Nikko chuckles. “He wanted to train Tykhes how to *behave* before we arrived in his world. KRP, *yah know*?”

“I hear it’s the currency around here.” Jillian acknowledges.

“It is a distant dream. In the meantime, we must still live. Provide, *yah know*?” Nikko says.

She nods watching another group of workers enter the cafeteria. They dodge the host and seat themselves. After claiming a table, they bypass the formalities and submit orders through the line of food synthesizers—which despite their glossy black exteriors, look as out of place as a vending machine. *It’s only as formal as you make it.*

“You are from Kyrios, yes, Detective? Tell us about your home. Is it worth working for?”

“The weather is nicer...in most places. I suppose some are as hot as here. It depends where you are from.”

“What about da cities? I hear they are a fairy tale?”

If you can afford them, “In the North. Yes, they are very beautiful.” She admits with pursed lips.

The host returns with their beverages. She thanks him and makes a concerted effort not to gulp it down.

“Very good.” The droid bows at the hip and leaves.

“You are not from the Nort?” The man revives the topic.

“No, I’m from Feronia. It’s in the South.”

“I have heard of dis place.” He smiles.

If he knew more he wouldn’t smile. *It’s where you’ll end up if you ever make it there*, Jillian doesn’t say. “It’s a port city, the largest on the planet. Lots of immigrants.” *And crime.*

“You like it?”

“For a cop...it’s interesting. I stay busy.” Jillian doesn’t want to discourage them. “But home is home, *right?* You’ll always have a fondness for the familiar.”

They all nod and pound their fists on the table in agreement.

An android server in a white button down and a bow-tie introduces herself. She takes their orders and their menus.

“Even dough I am working for KRP, I don’t know if I could evah leave.” One man comments. They pound the table again.

“Tell me, *Kyrio*, is it worth it?”

Jillian delays. “I haven’t been here long enough to make an assessment—I haven’t even seen your cities on Tykhe—”

One of the men interrupts, “Do dey all look like you on Kyrios?”

“Um...well, that’s what people say.” Jillian stammers, “Personally I think we all look different, we have different races and...”

He cuts her off with a friendly assertiveness. “—Dey all look like *YOU*.” His friends chuckle.

“I mean we have really good healthcare on Kyrios. Everyone does.”

He wiggles his finger at her, “Naaaah, dis is not healthcare my friend. Dis is not curing coughs and bandages. Dis is...” He makes an hourglass gesture with his hands and the others start laughing.

Even she cracks a smile.

“Wait—wait!” Another man stands up excitable. He slips into an impression, “I tink I can be a Kyrio, see we dress like them,” he puffs out his chest and runs his hands down his shirt, “we speak like them,” he tries out his best Kyrios accent, “and we even eat like them,” he gestures to the table. The others pound their fists on their tables, rattling the silverware, even drawing in some onlookers from elsewhere in the room. “What you think?”

“Yup, I think you’re ready.” Jillian claps.

“No, no, no.” The first man stands up and puts his friend in a headlock. “You see, I would not go to Kyrios for you. But for *HER*,” he gestures to Jillian, “I will slave every damn day of my life!” He breaks out in a booming laugh, releasing his friend before they both sit down and wipe the tears out of their eyes.

Their humor is infectious.

Nikko reaches over and touches Jillian’s hand as they all come down from their laughter. “We will ask you again in a month if it is still worth it and you can tell us what you tink then, *no?*”

“Fair enough.”

The waiter brings their plates on a chrome tray. He passes them out, fills glasses, offers further accommodation, and then leaves.

“You are here investigating John’s death, yes?” Nikko asks after everyone has had a chance to enjoy a few bites.

Jillian nods while wiping her lips. “Yeah.”

Each makes a *tsk* sound. “What a shame.”

“I’m told it might not be a suicide.” Jillian can’t decide if it’s worth broaching business during a meal.

Everyone stares at their plate. “Very sad.”

She can’t tell if they don’t *want* to talk about it or if they’re *worried* about talking about it.

“I don’t know. I keep my head down and do what I’m told.” Nikko says. A few with full mouths pound the table. “Dey say it was a suicide, it probably was. Kyrios can’t handle it out here.”

“Dat is true—all the suicides are from Kyrios.” Someone interjects.

Is that true? Jillian makes a note to investigate.

“They’re not used to Tykhe. It makes them depressed. And I understand. I am sad too, to be away from my family. But that is no way. No way at all.”

Jillian doesn’t press the issue, redirecting to asking about weather and the seasons. They are happy to provide all the details, restoring the lightheartedness of earlier.

“Thank you for dinner. It was very nice.” Jillian stands in the doorway of her trailer. The five brown faces smile back at her. She would stay and talk longer; except she’s sweating again and doesn’t feel right about inviting five strangers into her place. *Where would they sit?* Besides, she’s been yearning for a proper shower since leaving home.

Jillian hardlocks the front door and cues the lights. *Oh yeah, back to this*, she frowns at the white plastic walls. For a

moment in the cafeteria she forgot where she was. *The designer achieved his goal of the cafeteria.*

Whatever, she heads to the bathroom. ‘*Let the water run for ten minutes,*’ she remembers Roman’s guidance, starting the faucet. It coughs a few times, pukes brown before flowing steady and clear. She awakens her drone Elsie from the nightstand.

“Welcome back ma’am. How was dinner?”

“Really nice, actually.” Jillian opens the drawer on one of the built-ins and searches through her clothes for something to sleep in.

“Elsie, of the seven suicides, how many were from citizens of Kyrios?”

“Six ma’am.”

“And the seventh?”

“Earth.”

“What about the murder victims?”

“Three local Tykhes, two Earthers, one Kyrio.”

“And *murderers*?”

“Two Tykhes, two Earthers, two Kyrios. Only the two Tykhes and one Earther stood trial.” Elsie adds.

“Why?” Jillian sits on the edge of her bed to unlace her boots.

“One Earther was presumed to have died in the wilderness, as did one of the Kyrios. The final Kyrio killed himself after committing the murder.”

That’s because Tykhes have the balls to face their crimes. The Kyrios and Earthers tried to flee, Jillian infers. “Okay, so why are the majority of suicides from Kyrios, but the murders are spread throughout?”

“One might assume the unfavorable conditions of Tykhe have a greater psychological effect on citizens from Kyrios. I am examining case studies now...” Elsie informs.

“I doubt you’ll find many. I bet there’s been more Kyrios on this one location than the rest of the planet.” *Doesn’t fit into their dream destination unless they’re looking for street cred.*

Jillian returns to the bathroom with a change of clothes and toiletries. She inspects the mirror and fixtures for listening and video devices before peeling out of her sweaty clothes. *Better safe than sorry, right?* She places her pistol on the lid of the toilet.

Elsie hovers in the doorway. “I’m sorry ma’am, I am unable to locate any case studies on the local servers and I must wait for the relay to open before I can access off-world sources.”

“Don’t worry about it, Elsie. It’s not urgent.” Jillian adjusts the water temp on her shower. “Stand watch over the door, ‘kay?” And she seals her out.

Jillian pops a few pills before entering the vertical cylinder and lets the water wash away her trip. She stays in long enough for her skin to turn red. The water stops. She hits the *auto-dry* and the whole capsule becomes a warm vacuum, sucking most of the moisture off her body and out of her hair. Judging by the weird, melting plastic smell, she would say it hasn’t been used in a while, but she’ll endure it to avoid going to bed with sopping hair.

Space lag is setting in. She doesn’t know how much longer she can focus on the *job*. Kahr rubs some product into her wavy hair to keep from looking like she was electrocuted and labors into a tank top and shorts—that show too much of her ass but are better than panties if *visitors* come knocking.

She is chilly enough to crawl under a sheet.

“Elsie, I can’t do it anymore. I’m going to sleep. Wake me at 05:30 local.”

“Shall I turn off the lights?” The drone volunteers.

“Please.” Jillian’s world goes dark before the lights do.

She was starting to dream when a pounding on the door interrupted her disorienting sleep.

Her pistol is already in hand, she fights to open her eyes. Elsie’s little rotors hum in the background. She watches the faint blue light float over to the door.

The knock sounds again.

Jillian crawls out of bed, staggering as tactically as she can over to the door. *If this is an attack, she’s going to die...*

“Who is it?” Jillian asks through the door.

“Roman.”

Fuck, this is it. She pops the door because if he wants her dead the polymer and foam is not going to stop him.

“Uh yeah?” Jillian is still rubbing her eyes. Heat rushes past her bare legs. At least dusk has arrived. If she weren’t so tired, she could appreciate the beautiful pink sky.

“Asleep already?” The Chief of Security stands at the base of her aluminum stairs, holding a stack of folded cloth.

“What time is it?” Jillian yawns.

“Twenty-four hundred.” He tells.

“Midnight? Does the sun ever set around here?”

“Naw, midnight isn’t for six more hours—*Tykhe has a 30-hour day.*”

That’s right.

“You’re going into the House with us in the morning.” Roman hands her a stack of clothes.

“You can thank Faith for the clothes. She used the measurements from your AutoDoc scan so it should fit. If not, talk to her. They should breathe almost as well as your shorts here.” He references her bare legs.

Great, she’s feeling a little too exposed in front of him.

“Be sure to pack an extra sweatshirt. It gets cold inside.” He advises. “You’re also going to need this.”

Roman adds a sophisticated yellow climbing helmet to her stack. A headlamp and coms are built in. A black 762 emblazons both sides of the skull cap. The block-print letters are outlined in reflective paint to accompany several strips of reflective tape and some random black squares .

“Make sure to adjust this before we step off. Tomorrow I’ll show you the crime scene. Let you collect clues or whatever you detectives do.” Roman is already taking a step back.

“When are we leaving?”

“You didn’t get the memo?”

Jillian checks her InfoLink. Nothing new, including responses from Stephanie about her questions. “No. I don’t have any messages.”

“Not surprised. It’s tradition to punk the new guys on the first day, don’t tell them we’re going in until 10 minutes prior. Usually we end up waking people up in their pajamas, all groggy and disoriented—I *guess kinda like this.*”

“Yeah, yeah, haha. You got me. Hilarious. *When do you want me ready?*”

“Meet in the motorpool by 06:55—which means 6:40.” He points down the road to a parking lot filled with mostly white trucks. “Formation is at 7:15.”

“Formation huh?”

“Yup. We’re organized around here.”

Or militant.

“Pack and any other gear you might need for your investigation. Be sure to eat something before we go in. It’ll be a long day.”

“Motor pool at 6:40, got it.”

“Goodnight, Detective.”

Chapter 8 Day 2

Jillian

“*Fuck...*” Jillian yawns at her reflection. Her grogginess is catching up to the hi-def alertness of her bionics. *Is it the gravity or the space-lag that has her limbs in protest?* Jillian shakes some pills into her mouth and downs them with a gulp of faucet water before splashing more on her face.

She dresses in Faith’s friendship offering, pulling on a pair of glacier gray pants and a matching zip-up long sleeve. The unique fabric is stretchy and lightweight. *And kinda cute*, she assesses her presentation in a mirror as she adjusts her ponytail.

Jillian fixes a pistol and her badge on her belt before setting out to the cafeteria for breakfast. If she had any doubts about long sleeves, the shirt is already inhaling the morning air through strategic mesh vents under her armpits and down the spine. *Impressive.*

“Going inside today, Detective?” A construction worker asks with familiarity.

His InfoLink is feeding him just as much info on her as hers is on him. “Yup.” She finishes her meal, dumping the tray in the recycler.

“Be sure to pack some snacks.” He tips his head to a buffet of protein bars, jerky, dried fruit and other pre packaged goodies. “It’s a long day underground.”

“Thanks.” She takes his advice adding them to her daypack, mostly water weight plus a few pieces of equipment and a backup sweatshirt--per Roman’s guidance. She fixes the climbing helmet through a strap on the pack and sets out down the paved road to the motorpool.

Jillian hasn’t cleared the edge of the HUB before she’s being flagged down by Faith. *She hardly recognizes her out of costume*, wearing regular-person utility pants and a company T-shirt.

“Detective, with me!” Ms. Bennett calls out, beckoning her with motioning arms to a white truck parked in front of one of the HUB’s entrances.

“Mornin’ hun. Those clothes workin out for ya?”

“I think I will be much more comfortable. Thank you.” Jillian loads into the front passenger seat.

Faith invites a few others to fill the back bench. Two men and a woman accept. Polite introductions circulate throughout the cab--mostly redundant thanks to the InfoLink’s floating bios. One male is from Mars. The second man and the woman are from Earth. They are all computer technicians dressed civilian comfortably with the assumption that this little transition will be their longest exposure to outside.

“Whatdoyou think of the gravity? Real motherfucker, huh?” The Martian asks.

“Heavier than I’m used to.” Jillian acknowledges. A steady trickle of technicians and construction workers hoof it towards the motor pool. Faith keeps her window down, waving like she’s in a parade. She slows for anyone who wants to hop in the bed. She collects six more before they’ve reached the parking lot.

Faith doesn’t stop, continuing down the road towards the North Gate.

“Um, I was supposed to meet Chief Roman at the motorpool.” Jillian watches them pass the parking lot out the side window.

“We’re all going to the same place. I’ll let him know you’re with me.” Faith makes the announcement through her radio. Their truck idles in front of the gate until she’s given authorization. The final barrier rises, nothing but an open field and a paved road leading up to the broken dome in the distance.

“First time into the *house*, huh Detective?” Female Earther asks.

The gate closes behind them.

“Yup.” Jillian watches the dome grow larger through the windshield.

“You’ll get to meet *Despoena*.”

“Who’s that?” Jillian asks.

All three in the back chuckle.

“Why the hell did ya’ll have to start with that crap already?” Faith scolds. “There’s no need.”

“Who is she?” Jillian insists.

“She’s the spirit that haunts this place.” Earther girl tells.

“*Haunts it?*” Jillian is skeptical.

“It’s cursed!” The Martian blurts out.

Faith hisses. “Stop! They’re just tryin’ to rattle you.”

“No we’re not. You know we’re not! It’s the truth.”

The Martian argues.

“There’s a lot of unexplained *mysteries* around here. Especially inside.” Earther boy continues.

Jillian humors. “OK, so where’d the name come from?”

“Our ancient mythology. Greek. Despoena means *the mistress*.” Earther girl starts.

“No...the literal translation is *The Mistress of the House*, and all this superstition originated before any of you ass-hats arrived.” Faith scolds. “Tell it right or don’t tell it at all.”

“Is that why everyone keeps calling this place the house?” Jillian asks.

“Yup.”

“Despoena is the goddess of the *Eleusinian mysteries*.” He says with emphasis. “You can’t say her name unless you have been indoctrinated by these *mysteries*.”

“And how do you become indoctrinated?” Jillian almost laughs.

Earther girl leans forward between the two front seats. She whispers near Jillian’s ear. “Trust me, you’ll know when it happens.”

She squeezes her arm before sitting back. If it weren’t bright with the rising sun, Jillian might have shivered. *They certainly sound convinced*. Or they’ve bought into their crazy.

“Do you know what broke the dome?” Earth boy asks.

“Let me guess, *Despoena?*” Jillian suggests with sarcasm. Faith chuckles in solidarity.

“Hey, look at her! A new believer.” Martian claps.

As they draw nearer Jillian is able to actualize the magnitude of the structure. This was serious engineering made out of steel, concrete and space-grade ceramics. *Not the sort of stuff that weathers away after two centuries of vacancy.*

“It was a hanger. A starship’s core melted down inside.” He cups his hands together and spreads them apart. “*Boom...*”

“A meltdown? There must be a hundred failsafes against that.” Jillian realizes she’s walking into their point.

“*Desponena...*” The Martian whispers.

“Why’d she destroy it?” Jillian challenges.

“Because she didn’t want them to escape.”

“Escape what?”

“The bloodbath.” Earther boy starts. “Two hundred years ago, something happened here. It’s as if everyone went mad. Crazy...”

“*Despoena...*” Martian adds again.

“I dunno. I watched the footage. It shows the *what*. Not the *why*. Brutal shit. By the time it was over, 2000 people and hundreds of droids were slaughtered. No survivors. You can still see the signs of the battle inside. Bullet holes. Burn marks. I heard the First Expeditionary Group found all the skeletons--but they cleared them out before anyone else arrived.”

The truck stops outside an equally formidable fence as Alpha with razor wire and energy turrets circles the entire perimeter of the dome. The autogates permit them entry. Faith drives them between a break in the foundation into what used to be inside the dome. The rubble was cleared out years ago and everything was repaved flat. A single square building resides on the pavement, with a few shipping containers nearby. Wild greasses and vegetation have already started their reclamation.

“You’re saying Des-”

The Martian cuts her off, shushing her through his index finger. “You can’t say her name yet!”

“Sorry. My bad.” Jillian rolls her eyes. “You’re saying *she*...some sort of mythological ghost...caused two thousand colonists to randomly kill one another?” *It’s laughable, but a damn good story.*

“I don’t expect you to believe it. Yet.” The storyteller says.

Faith cuts the response short as she parks next to the concrete building. “Enough you three. You’ve had your fun. We’re here.”

Before Jillian can exit, Earther girl reaches up and squeezes her shoulder. “Who knows Detective, maybe you’ll be the one to figure out what *actually* happened out here...”

Jillian withholds her opinion. “Maybe,” she says, nodding before exiting. *Fucking weirdos.*

The story becomes trivial as Jillian stands underneath the exposed metal framework and missing panels. The creaking architecture converges high above her at the pinnacle of the broken dome. It rivals any sporting arena back home.

Her observation is interrupted by the staggered arrival of the rest of the convoy. Electric trucks and SUVs zoom across the pavement towards them. All are generic white except for one black military offroader.

Jillian collects her pack from the floorboards as the dozen vehicles park side-by-side in one long row beside Faith’s truck. The fence’s autogates seal behind the final vehicle.

“Ariadne.” Jillian shoulders her pack from the floorboards.

“*Huh?*” They look at her.

“Why don’t you call her Ariadne? Wasn’t she the mistress of the labyrinth?” Jillian asks.

“Some would say there *is* an Ariadne too. She’s the *nice* one.” Storytellers grins. “If you remember, Ariadne ended up helping the hero Theseus defeat the Minotaur. She also provided him with the magic thread to find his way back out of the maze.” He replies. “This place is more Despoena than Ariadne.”

“I take it Despoena is less helpful?” Jillian surmises.

“We’re still here trying to figure it out.” Even Faith shrugs. She exits the conversation to greet the new arrivals bailing out of cabs and beds beside them.

“And so are *you*, Detective.” Storyteller says. “Investigating the death of a man who had no suicidal indicators prior to his end.”

“Despoena...” Crazy Martian whispers.

Earther boy hefts his shoulders.

“In my experience men tend to be far more haunting than ghosts.” Jillian dismisses, watching Chief Roman and another soldier in camouflage pants and combat gear dismount the black truck further down the line. They fetch packs and short suppressed rifles from the rear of the cab. Everyone else looks like a construction crew about to start their shift, and those two look ready to insert into hostile territory. *Maybe they are.*

By her estimate, three fourths of the camp is in attendance—easily 75 people present. They grab gear and mill about. Her presence doesn’t go unnoticed for long. Catcalls and whistles make the announcement for anyone unaware, beckoning the brave.

“Hey sweetheart, what’s your name?” A muscular construction worker charms with a cocky smile. He has a

diamond tattoo on the side of his neck with the letters GETM at each of the four points.

As if his InfoLink hasn't already identified her. It's too early for pickup lines. "Detective." Jillian glares, readjusting in case he somehow missed the badge and her gun in his blatant head-to-toe assessment of her.

"Mmm, I've never seen a cop that looks like you. I hope you brought your cuffs." He gives her a wink and slinks away for the next daring soul to try his luck.

The intros arrive in droves. Men fall over one another to offer up names and their best one-liner. Today's crowd is much bolder than the hospitality of the friendly Tykhes last night.

"Don't mind them." Faith shields Jillian from the barrage. "Some have forgotten their manners, hmm?" She castrates the insinuations of the arrival with a fiery glare.

Jillian doesn't have to survive the attention for much longer. A commanding voice booms "FORM IT UP!" from the edge of the mob.

As if waving a magic wand, the disorganized rabble falls into neat rows and columns. Faith pulls her beside her. "You're with me. Stand in the box." She points to the ground.

An extensive grid of square-meter boxes are painted on the concrete under her boots. She does as instructed, everyone else falling in to their designated spots around her.

The end result is two lopsided platoons facing the row of trucks. Based on the quick-facts from her InfoLink, the larger platoon is made up of laborers: construction workers, welders, electricians, plumbers, etc. Her platoon is all the brains: engineers and computer techs.

Jillian decides it is better to observe than ask what is going on, especially as the crowd's chatter diminishes into

silence. It's not the statue-still rigidity of a military formation, everyone stands relaxed, many puff away on vape jewels, billowing steam like smokestacks around them. But all eyes are focused attentively to the front.

Roman marching in front of the platoons like a dictator. "Team leaders, we all up?" One hand secures his rifle in place, the other brandishes a thumbs-up. He walks to the gap between the two platoons and makes eye contact with the left-most person of each row. For Jillian's row, Faith is returning the signal.

Roman verifies with the would-be squad leaders of both platoons, then returns to the center, relinquishing authority to Stephanie.

"Good morning everyone. *Nice day huh?*" Director Rosenthal tests Cerise's warmth on her rosy cheeks.

"Fucking hot!" Someone blurts out, sending a ripple of chuckles and groans throughout. Roman passes a glare with his heartless bionic eyes that shuts them up.

"I know. That's why we'll get through this as quickly as possible." Stephanie encourages. She delivers a briefing on today's expectations. It's as quick as promised. "You've all been working hard lately. Don't let up now. We have a lot to get done and never enough time to do it. Only three days until the weekend."

More groaning. She wins them over with a smile before returning authority to Roman.

"Listen up motherfuckers." Roman barks with all the Marine Corps bravado. "Two days ago, we had five dumbasses committed to the sickbay for concussions after wrecking their goddamn ebikes!"

The crowd snickers.

“Racing their ebikes.” Stephanie adds.

“Racing their fucking ebikes.” Roman clarifies with a nod. “This is a fucking helmet,” he maintains control of his rifle with one hand and holds up spec-ops style skullcap in the other, “yours might look different than this, but they all work the same. It goes on your fucking dome.”

Ah, nothing like some early morning chastising to get the motivational wheels turning.

“Do this now.” He orders while demonstrating.

The crowd grumbles, but complies. Jillian removes her climbing helmet from her pack and follows suit. Once her helmet is on, she turns to Faith who nods and pokes her tongue out the corner of her mouth.

The headgear comes in all shapes and sizes. Some are climbing helmets. The other platoon resembles construction hardhats.

Many have customized their helmets with names or graphics. Faith has painted hers pastel blue with lots of colorful flowers. *It's faded, scratched, and unique--just like its owner.* The back of the helmet in front of Jillian is painted with a rear-view of an Anime girl bending over in cheeky bikini bottoms. The techie turns around momentarily, revealing that the front of his helmet is a frontal shot of the same cartoon girl, still bent over with huge tits hanging and a suggestive smirk on her face. *Oh God.*

“Good. Now this little strappy thing isn't a handle. It goes under your fucking chin.” Roman lets his rifle hang from the one-point sling on his centerline as he clicks his chinstrap into place.

Stephanie follows his example beside him, clicking into her faded yellow helmet.

“If you’re riding an ebike, or any other fucking electric vehicle down there--*because I know you motherfuckers will race anything with wheels.*” Roman points to a giggling group of construction workers, “I’m looking at you Osaka!”

His friends smack him on the back. The guy gives a good-natured shrug.

“Wear your goddamn helmets!” Roman finishes his thought.

The crowd claps and Roman betrays his severity with a smirk, taking a step back.

“In all seriousness.” Stephanie intervenes. “We’re your fucking PPE.” She sighs. “Safety glasses. Helmets and gloves when necessary. OSHA is two light years away, but treat this like a construction site. I can’t afford to lose any of you because of stupid shit.” She turns to confirm anything else from Roman. He shakes his head. “Alright, let’s go in.”

“Never a dull moment around here.” Faith shrugs.

“Sounds like it.” Jillian is still processing the *vibe* of the camp. It’s not all that different from a police department.

“Alright hun, you’re with me.” Faith keeps Jillian close as the crowd flows towards the entrance of the concrete building.

“Gang way! Gang way!” Roman and the other armed security guy clear a path for Stephanie and her lieutenants, Okambo and Luciana. He also waves to Faith over the heads of the crowd, accelerating them to the front of the pack.

The outer doors open, allowing the first group of twenty inside.

Roman gate-keeps the door with the other armed soldier, prioritizing the leadership for the second wave. He gives Jillian a glancing look, as they wait for the doors to open again.

Jillian realizes why only twenty people could enter at a time. Inside is a spaceship-style airlock. One door opens, then the next.

“Prevents a windtunnel.” Faith explains to Jillian as they wait for everyone to fit inside.

Before the second set of doors can release them, someone rips off a trumpeting fart. The instigator chuckles proudly. His victims gag and cuss him. Jillian wants to laugh until the pungency assaults her olfactory senses. She tries to appear unaffected and holds her breath. *Nothing like the best and brightest minds in the system reduced to practical jokes!*

“Goddamn it! Which nasty motherfucker did that!” Director Rosenthal demands. “I swear to god--” Her threat trails off as the next door releases them from the punishment.

Everyone pours out of the airlock into a functional lobby decorated with safety propaganda. Tucked between the posters is a brass plaque with the date of discovery and important names. Jillian doesn’t have time to read it. She follows the flow towards a utility elevator at the end of the hall.

She can hear the elevator moving, ferrying the first wave down the shaft. It must be worth waiting for since no one has elected to use the emergency stairwell.

Jillian can’t help observing the heavily armed mercs as she waits. They both wear dark t-shirts with the Black Crescent company logo printed across their muscly chests. Camo-print daypacks on their shoulders. Their gun belts contain various utility pouches plus extra mags for both pistols and rifle. Jillian is trying to discern the graphic on the side of Roman’s helmet--*is that a grasshopper?*--when she must linger too long. Their bionic eyes meet.

“Detective, we’re going straight to the crime scene.” Roman informs, closing the gap between them. The latino soldier is on his hip. Her InfoLink populates his name before he’s made his introduction: *Juan C. Martinez*.

“Martinez is my second in command.” Roman intros the hispanic Earther.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” He is short and stocky. One muscular arm is sleeved in tattoos. He’s maintaining regs with a clean shave and crisply faded haircut under his helmet.

“Martinez was a Navy corpsman back on Earth...”

Which explains the larger trauma bag that the contractor wears with the rest of his gear.

“But he was attached to Marine combat units in the shit. So he’s one of us.”

“I can kill you or put you back together. Your choice.” He tips his head.

“Good to know.”

The elevator returns. Everyone loads onto the platform. “Ready?” Roman pulls the gate behind them. “Remember to keep your hands inside the railing.”

Jillian’s heart rate quickens. A heavy metal mechanism clunks, retracting the safety blocks. The elevator jerks and then descends smoothly for the rest of the journey downward. The shaft is raw stone. Sections leach moisture. *She can taste the dampness.* As promised, the temperature drops.

Before long the overhead lights diminish and they are left only with the elevator’s rail lights. Jillian’s bionic eyes are already compensating with night vision. Then the light returns and they are deposited into a brown-concrete corridor large enough for industrial vehicles. Several electric bikes are discarded along the walls.

Jillian follows the group down creepy halls. Sporadic ceiling panels are missing. Wires dangle like intestines from a lifeless body. Long runs of overhead lighting are burned out and never replaced. Shadows live in many of the corners. Most of the open doorways are dark caverns.

It reminds her of an abandoned moon colony. *Half space station--half subterranean building.* Technically it was. Before Tykhe had an atmosphere. All that rock would have protected against solar radiation and meteoroids.

They arrive at a massive octagonal lobby that branches off with more vast causeways down the four cardinal directions. It almost matches the suicide footage. Except the ERS logo stretching across the floor is blue where it should be red. And the strange metal rat statue should be a snake.

The main group continues on. Jillian approaches the statue. *It is the only decoration in a world crisscrossed with utilitarian function.*

“We designate all the floors by their animals. *Chinese zodiac.*” Faith notices her lingering. “You’re on the eleventh from the bottom.”

“HyTechCo built them?”

“Nope. They were here long before we were. Back with the founders. Hundreds of years old. They’d be priceless on the market. Stephanie refuses to let anyone take them out. Says they’re part of the building.”

“Unlike the tech?” Jillian counters.

Faith shrugs. “Exceptions for everything, *right?*” Faith gestures to the wall where make-shift benches are in place of the originals--hailed away by *tourists* claiming trophies from their Tykhe adventures.

“Is it what you expected?” Faith asks.

“Yeah, I watched *Bending the Universe* a few times,” Jillian says, “but I have to admit, for a bunch of old extra-terrestrial ruins, everything seems human.”

“Well both species worked together for a time.”

“Before the bloodbath?” Jillian recites her earlier knowledge.

“Yes. Before then. It was remodeled to accommodate humans.”

“Hmm.”

Roman calls out. “Let’s go ladies.” Roman urges them into another set of elevators with people already waiting. The number seven is predictably illuminated. An old digital marquee cycles through corresponding animals as it carries them deeper below. It concludes with a picture of a snake and a dragon.

“Why do snake and dragon share a floor?” Jillian wonders.

“Because there’s only eleven floors and twelve signs.” Faith simplifies. “According to lore, Dragon is Snake’s adopted father.”

The doors open and Jillian hears a death curdling scream.

She tenses, until she realizes it isn’t one of terror, but excitement. She steps out into the lobby just in time to watch a shoulder-to-shoulder row of ebikes tear off into the depths of an endless hallway. Their thrill echoes down the concrete tunnels.

“Goddamn it...” Stephanie grumbles.

Jillian can’t deny the appeal of using the House as a race track. All these wide empty halls.

“Those bikes look fast!” Jillian comments.

“Oh they are. A few of the mechanics modified them.” Faith beams. “Some will go 100 kph!”

“Damn.” Jillian is considering a way to justify riding one. She spies the red Espial Research logo on the floor, reminding her why she’s here.

“Detective, you ready to visit your crime scene?” Director Rosenthal asks.

“Yes.”

Rosenthal dismisses her people.

“Good luck, Detective.” Faith waves goodbye. She and the others mount normal ebikes and electric carts for the remainder of their journey down the same hall as the racers.

Only Rosenthal and Roman remain.

“This way.” Stephanie says.

Considering her tour guides, she hopes they are going to John’s crime scene and not off to create a new one.

Jillian recognizes the run of windows overlooking the lobby. Thousands of old bullet holes pock-mark the walls. *From the bloodbath...* One section of the windows is absent glass altogether. *John’s death occurred on the other side.*

“Entrance is over here.” Rosenthal guides Jillian through a small air-lock to a short set of stairs. The room is long and narrow. Inactive screens oppose the lobby windows.

“That’s where it happened.” Rosenthal points to a roller chair in front of a row of angled computer monitors beneath the sill of the windows.

It always looks a little different in person, Jillian merges her memory of the security footage with the actual place. For the first time since leaving Kyrios doesn’t feel like a fish out of water. She circles the scene.

Rusty blood stains are on the floor. Additional blood splatters clings to the hanging screens behind the chair--corroborating the bullet-through-the-face theory. Most of

the screens appear original to the building. Some have been replaced since the excavation was underway, including the one wearing blood and a fresh bullet hole. *Clear trajectory pathway...*

Jillian turns away from the back wall and approaches the computer stations under the windows. Several screens live-stream locations within the *house*, including halls, workstations, and labs. She catches the finale to the race where workers park their bikes to shuffle victoriously into a room with a half-built relay arc.

“John Parker was a computer engineer, *right?*” Jillian doesn’t need to ask. She’s memorized any factoid that would appear in a public database.

“Engineer, programmer...the kid had a few degrees. He was talented.” Rosenthal hangs next to the stairs out of the way. Roman is standing further into the room. His rifle hangs vertically down his centerline from a one-point sling. His hands rest casually on the base of the buttstock--though she’s guessing it could be up and in his shoulder faster than a quarter horse released from its gate. He is a vigilant centurion aware of her every move.

“Why was Mr. Parker in this room on that day?”

“We always post someone in one of the security stations to monitor the camera feeds... keep an eye on where everyone’s at in case of an emergency. Relay messages to the surface if coms go down, manage facility utilities. Those sorts of things.” Rosenthal explains. “The eye in the sky.”

“That assignment is for all day?” Jillian spins around to make sure she isn’t missing evidence. “No, we usually rotate out every two hours.”

“And that’s a two person post right? In the footage, you see John talking to someone. You don’t actually see anyone, but it *looks* like he’s talking to someone. I’m assuming that was his partner?”

“John didn’t have a partner. No one else was in the room at the time.” Stephanie refutes.

“Are you sure?”

“—Trust me, I’ve watched that footage more than you have.” Dir. Rosenthal glares.

Doubt it.

Detective Kahr moves the chair to her approximation of where it was before the body was removed. She orients it facing out the window, sits down, straightens her back and imagines where his head would have been. From this angle John would have had a clear vantage of the entire lobby and a good length of the south and east corridors.

She spies the security camera that captured his final moments mounted above the entrance of that south passage. In fact, a camera is mounted in each of the cardinal directions. *Why hasn’t she been provided footage from any other angle?*

Rosenthal shrugs. “Whether you see it from the south or you see it from the east, it doesn’t change what happened.”

“No, but sometimes the devil is in the details.” Jillian challenges. “I’d like to see the security footage from all the lobby cameras and the halls further down.”

“Of course.” Rosenthal agrees.

“Who do I need to speak to in order to make that happen?”

“Me.” Roman steps out from his shadow. He invades Jillian’s space, leaning in to activate the computer screens in front of her chair. The Chief of Security enters a manual

password on the old tech and brings up a window of viewing options.

“You’re using the original CCTV feeds?” Jillian has a hard time believing they would rely on ancient tech.

“When it works.” Roman shrugs. “It’s a little grainy from some angles, and some of the cameras are out. They aren’t usually employed for solving crimes, more trying to figure out where people are or what doors we need to open or close.” He steps out of the way. “Knock yourself out.”

Jillian scrolls through the labeled windows.

“Detective, do you have any other urgent questions for me before I step out? I have a project to run and I can’t spend all day here.” Stephanie asks.

Jillian nods. “After I’m done here, I’d like to set up interviews. Start with those who last saw him alive...say anyone that was working under on that day. But before them, I want to talk to the person who found his body.” Jillian doesn’t know who that is because the police department only received footage ending thirty seconds after John died.

“That was me.” Roman says.

Surprise, surprise.

“I’ll leave you two to solve the crime.” Dir. Rosenthal is already descending the steps. “If there’s anything else, message me.”

Chapter 9

Day 2

Jillian

Jillian records all angles of the crime scene. Roman remains out of the way in one of the corners. He is a bouncer waiting to toss her if she does anything unruly. For a while she tries to ignore him, slipping into her *zone*. Then she realizes she might be able to use that watchfulness as her barometer. *If he starts to squirm then she's getting close.*

"You're First Expeditionary Group, right?" Jillian asks.

"Uh huh." The gargoyle leans against the far wall. The gold of his bionics glint hauntingly.

"How much time do you have out here?"

"Nine Sol years."

"That's as long as the project has been in operation. Never took a break?"

"Nope."

"I didn't see you in *Bending the Universe*." Jillian comments.

"*And?*"

"Why not?"

"I don't like cameras. And I don't need fame."

So much for getting him to open up. "How long have you been in charge of security?"

"Since the day we touched down."

"Then you've seen your share of crime scenes out here, huh?"

"All of them."

Jillian has a window of her InfoLink up in her vision. She vacillates between studying angles and browsing files. *This would be much easier with Elsie.*

“As head of security, I figured you would be the one signing off on the death certificates. Yet it never mentions you in any of the reports...I never see your signature on anything.”

“I try to avoid the paper trail.”

He’s done a good job. The files Stephanie sent over were the first of anything she’s received on him. “Why is that exactly?”

Roman smirks. “If you have to ask, Detective, you wouldn’t understand.”

In other words, he fixes *problems*. Whether that’s for governments, corporations, or little scientific expeditions. All the more reason to suspect him of this.

“You were a Marine back on earth?”

“Still am.”

Jillian’s eyes narrow until she realizes she’s made a civilian mistake. It doesn’t matter if you’re an Earth Marine, Martian Marine, Kyrios Marine or Space Marine...*‘once a Marine, always a Marine’* according to their mantra.

“Right. Sorry. You started as an infantryman, then an 0317 scout sniper before recon?”

“Hmm, you finally got your hands on my file.” She realizes he’s still smirking because even though he can’t see what she’s reading, he knows that she’s almost to the end of it.

Besides some home-of-record info and accommodations, it lists a few points of employment. No criminal record. No social media. Nothing. *He’s a ghost*. She realizes that if she wants any dirt on Derek Roman, she’ll have to ask around the old fashion way.

“You host many cops down here?” Jillian observes the monitor behind John’s chair. She puts a virtual circle around the bullet hole.

“You’re the first.”

“Wow, *really*? Forty-two deaths and I’m the first cop?”

“Most don’t think it’s worth the trip.”

“Someone dies and that’s not worth investigating?”

“Thousands of people die on this planet every day—half this planet is at war with one another.” Roman says. “I would say that no one has come out here because people on *your* planet don’t give a *fuck* about Tykhe unless it’s making them money.”

His grip tightens on the buttstock of his rifle. In two breaths it slackens.

“Just because one of your cops never showed up, doesn’t mean they weren’t investigated. My office submitted reports on all those deaths.”

“Hmm, they teach you how to investigate crime scenes in sniper school?” Jillian challenges.

“No, they teach us how to observe everything. Meticulously.” Roman stares.

His bionics are even more steadfast than hers—they don’t have to blink.

“Your job isn’t that hard, Detective. If you had been here when there was a body, you wouldn’t have needed all these angles to make your assessment. Dude shot himself through the face. Murder weapon was in his hand, cherry pie on the wall. No one else was around. Open and shut.” Roman steps nearer, gesturing to all the points of interest.

“It would seem so.” Jillian admits. “Don’t begrudge my thoroughness. Someone invested a lot of money to ship me out

here and make sure foul play wasn't involved." She doesn't want to have an alpha-wolf pissing contest with him.

"I understand. Just make sure you're here for the right reasons and not that you think you should come up with a new explanation to satisfy all that money."

Jillian nods. "Can you do me a favor?"

Roman doesn't say anything so she continues. "Since I wasn't here when the body was, would you mind sitting in this chair, about at the angle you found him."

The scar-faced mercenary agrees, making a point of noisily dropping his day pack before fitting into the chair.

"Face the window, like he was." Jillian adjusts him. "Perfect." She snaps some shots from her InfoLink. "Okay, now hang out here for a minute."

She exits the security office, through the airlock and appears out in the lobby. Jillian takes pictures to test various viewpoints. Roman is visible from the shoulders up anywhere past the middle of the lobby. If she moves closer, only the head up, but if she goes further back--all the way deep into the east or south halls--she has a clear vantage from the sternum up.

John's parents believed the videos of his suicide were fake. Regardless of whether they were or not, unless someone has gone to great lengths to create a new crime scene, the only possible location for a shooter would have to come from one of these corridors.

John died while facing the windows looking into the lobby. The bullet passed through his right tear duct, through his skull and impacted the wall behind, leaving a narrow range of opportunities for a potential killer. There wasn't space for someone to stand in front of him in the same room. However, a

distance shot would have been possible, particularly from someone very good at making distance shots...

Jillian stands in one of the normal-height doorways of the East wing. She captures an image of Roman sitting and inserts a virtual line predicting the bullet impact from this angle. *Someone could have taken a shot from this doorway. In between one of his mumbling rants, all the shitty lighting and complacency, John might not have noticed someone aiming in on him.* This of course, means the arm raising–face shooting–part didn't occur.

Assuming the shot did come from this angle, it would have been at least 75 meters away. Not a difficult shot with the right weapon and magnification. But not one to be underestimated either.

She never attended sniper school, but she knows from speaking with some of her SWAT buddies back home that the ideal headshot is either the base of the skull where all those neat essential nerve endings connect, or the upside down triangle running from the outside of the two eyes and meeting at the base of the nose. It's the softest point of the head, and everything behind it doesn't like to mix with high velocity projectiles.

She always thought it was interesting that John shot himself in the front of the face. It is a tough angle to hold a pistol.

Jillian's stomach churns when she discovers how perfect the line-up was for a good shooter. *Goddamn sniper's wet dream.* The thought twists a little further as she stares at the most likely candidate for that scenario.

"You realize he died in here, right? How long are we going to do this?" Roman shouts. *Is this making him squirm,* she wonders.

“Just a few more minutes.” Detective Kahr duplicates the angles from the south wing. The north shot is too obscure and it’s impossible to achieve a good visual through all the spiderwebbing of the panel glass. This whole thing would have been much easier if glass were still intact in front of John’s position. She could have lined up bullet holes between the wall and anything in the glass to determine if the shot came from within or outside of the room. *Why is the glass missing in this section when the other panels have spiderwebbed but are still in place?*

Roman abandons his chair before Jillian has returned to the room.

“How long has the glass been missing from this window?” Jillian asks. *Fuck, it would have taken a serious bullet to penetrate any of this glass.* The neighboring panels are almost three centimeters thick. For all the surface carnage, the windows served their purpose, not a round made it through. Many modern weapons could defeat the glass handedly, *but if the glass was already missing, they wouldn’t have to.*

“Quite a while.”

“Before or after the First Expeditionary Group arrived?”

“After.”

“The excavation removed it? Why?”

“Because you couldn’t see through it. The spiderwebbing was worse than these.” Roman refers to the other windows. “Plus it makes it easier to yell at people down the halls.”

“Hmm.” Jillian compares the picture from out in the wings to the back wall of monitors. Several monitors have been replaced with new units. One has blood splatter on it. She inspects the mount of the *murder* monitor. It moves enough for

someone to work tools to mount it. Jillian pries it up and shines a penlight on the wall.

She discovers two bullet holes. Jillian closes the monitor flat against the wall, pokes her pen through the only hole on the screen face, and makes a little scribe mark on the concrete behind it. She pulls the monitor out again. Her pen mark is centered in one of the new holes, leaving one hole unaccounted for. Jillian can feel Roman's gaze burning into her neck. She turns around expecting him to have a bead on her already...

"There's two holes." Jillian's voice cracks.

"Oh yeah?" He approaches to look for himself.

Goddamn he has a good poker face, Jillian is studying every movement.

"You don't think that's weird?"

"I don't think it's the weirdest thing I've seen in this facility. No."

Nice non-answer. "When was this monitor replaced?"

"I don't know."

"Recently?" *Within the past two weeks.*

Roman runs a finger across the top of the screen. "Not *that* recently." He shows her the dust on the end of his finger. "I'm assuming a few years ago."

Hmm, Jillian compares the dust with the accumulation on the other new monitors and they seem to match. *Damn, that's weird.*

"You were the first person on the scene. How soon did you arrive?"

"Two or three minutes after the gunshot."

"So you heard it?"

"You can hear everything in this place. It's all concrete and rock. Sound has nowhere to escape except your ears."

“Why did it take you so long to arrive?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, this place is fucking huge. Plus, I’m going to approach cautiously when I hear a gunshot.”

“You were sure it was a gunshot? Doesn’t it usually take two or three shots before someone can identify a loud bang as a gunshot?”

“I’ve had a lot of practice identifying gunshots.”

She can see his insult-level rising. *Good. Throw him off a little, but not too much that he wants to kill you.* “When you arrived, what did that look like?”

“A guy shot himself.”

“Come on *sniper*, give me details.” Jillian coaxes. “How was his body positioned?”

“Upright, leaned slightly to the left, head tilted back.” He narrates a variety of intricate details for emphasis.

“And the gun? In his hand or on the floor?”

“Floor. He’d dropped it.”

“Do you have the weapon, by the way?” Jillian asks.

“Yup. It’s back in the armory, in a bag. Feel free to run it for prints if you’d like.”

“What about the paper?”

“*What paper?*”

“The paper he was reading. He also wrote something on it.” Jillian narrates from the security footage. “If you were the first one, you should have seen it.”

“I don’t have it.”

“Who does?”

“Stephanie.”

“Why does she have it?” Jillian asks.

“She’s the boss.”

“I thought Bill was the boss?”

“Don’t be stupid, Detective.”

“OK.” Jillian pauses. “Did you read the letter?”

“Yup.”

“What did it say?”

“Not my business. Not your business.”

“Whose business *is* it then? Dir. Rosenthal’s?”

“You could say that.”

“Do you think she would let me see it?”

“Maybe if you ask real nice.”

His affect is stone flat so she can’t tell if he’s joking. As a sniper she’s sure he received an intense regiment of prisoner-of-war training which makes for a real asshole when you’re trying to get answers.

“What about the talking?”

“*What talking?*”

“John was talking to someone in the minutes leading up to his death. Was he using a radio?” Jillian suggests.

Roman shrugs. “I don’t know. He wasn’t talking to *me*. I can’t say for anyone else.”

“You didn’t bother asking? Anyone else?”

“No. Why should I? What difference would that have made?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it had something to do with *why* he killed himself. Maybe he owed someone money and was being threatened into desperation. Maybe he knew something...”

“In the end, none of those reasons matter. John’s dead. If we were supposed to hear his cry for help, we missed our window. The *why* won’t bring him back.”

“No, but it might mean someone else contributed to it.”

“Suicide is a choice. He made his.” Roman is unmoved. “Look, if this investigation is supposed to give his parents the warm-fuzzy as to why their child wasn’t an entitled coward, then you can keep chasing that *why*. But I’ve seen too many people die—who *didn’t* choose it for themselves—to feel much pity for those who elect to punch out early.”

“Well, thanks for *those* words of encouragement.” Jillian saves the audio file on her SID. She sits down at the computer station that John occupied before he died, trying to see if there’s anything else she missed. Jillian cues the security footage to study the different angles of the lobby, hoping to find a variance.

She doesn’t. The footage is identical down to the tenth of a second. *Damn it*. If someone did forge these videos, they were damn meticulous about it.

Jillian watches other feeds of the various worker bees. The facility is so enormous that she asks Roman to clarify some of the locations and ID’s. He does. Together they work through the footage for an hour. The whole time Jillian is waiting for that one incriminating scene to arrive and him to execute her where she sits. He remains helpful, making her even more nervous.

At one point they bring up a dozen windows of all the primary locations during the time of the suicide. Everyone, including Roman has an alibi. *Fuck*.

“Is there any way I can get a copy of all this footage?”

“Yeah,” Roman stands up, “Unfortunately I’m not the guy to talk to about that. I’ll find one of our computer gurus.” He leaves. A second later he appears in the lobby and patrols down the north hall, disappearing out of sight except on camera.

Jillian continues browsing footage. For the first time she's aware of the house's chilly temperature. *Adrenaline of the crime scene must have worn off, now she's into the grind.* She rubs her arms contemplating the sweatshirt in her pack.

Overall, the footage is mundane. A bunch of people working in labs--just like today.

Jillian focuses on the live-stream. The 80 employees are all congregated in half a dozen rooms. Hard at work. *No audio to eavesdrop on. No more bike races to entertain her. Boring.*

She notices a woman with long dark hair strolling down a hall. The woman almost looks like Luciana, except her skin tone is much paler than the Latina's. *Snow white with blood red lips.* That, and Jillian has a visual on Luciana in one of the other rooms--No one else on camp fits the description.

The black dress catches her eye. *Not the normal construction garb.* No one was wearing a dress up on formation. Not even Faith.

This crew enjoys their practical jokes. Is that what this is?

Jillian sorts out the location of the woman in the black dress. She is five floors down. The hall is darker than the current levels, blurring the details some, but she knows for a fact that the tall woman with her long spidery arms was not among the group that entered this morning.

The woman disappears into a shadow partway down the hall. Jillian expects to see her pop out on another screen but never does.

Jillian fumbles with the system's ancient controls, trying to figure out rewind. By the time she has sorted it, she is unable to find the footage of the woman.

“Goddamn Despoena!” Jillian laughs at her absurdity. *Too much screen time.* There’s something about being alone in this place. Strange to think that the murderous marine offered psychological security. *No one wants to die alone, right?*

One of the old speakers squawks overhead. If she weren’t sitting in silence she wouldn’t have heard it. It utters the approximation of a soft *hello*.

Jillian keys out over the PA.

“Hello?” Her voice carries through speakers and echo down the hallways. She repeats it until someone responds through her earpiece.

“*Kahr, is that you on the PA? What do you need?*” Roman asks.

“I thought someone called—*nevermind.*” Jillian chuckles. *This must be more of that newbie induction bullshit.* Tell the newcomers a ghost story, sit them down in front of a computer screen with a pre-written program, then have someone make a creepy voice through the PA. Haha, very funny—and well executed! Nicely played HTC, She has been punked!

Nikko, the pleasant Tykhe from last night’s dinner, arrives a few minutes later. He’s all smiles and happiness. She assumes it’s because he’s in on the joke but isn’t about to give him the satisfaction of victory.

“Mr. Roman said you might need my help?”

“I was hoping you could transfer some of this footage over to a drive?”

His happiness vanishes when he sees the blood stain on the ground. *Shit, she forgets everyone isn’t comfortable with a crime scene.*

“*This is...?*” He swallows.

“Yup. Don’t worry, you don’t have to stay long.” Jillian clears space for him at the station.

Nikko makes a religious gesture before taking a wide berth to the computers.

Jillian instructs him what scenes she wants from the murder day.

“You want all of the Vernal 14th?”

“I thought it was the 15th?” Jillian clarifies.

“Oh yes, the 15th.” Nikko sets up a computer on top of the antique station. “Whole day?”

“How about four hours plus and minus the incident.”

“I can do that.” Nikko makes the request look easy, but she’s quickly lost in his process. *It would have taken her a decade to figure this out on her own.*

“That was a pretty clever prank you guys pulled too.” Jillian stands over his shoulder.

“What prank?” Nikko’s fingers are still moving a kilometer a minute.

“The whole *Despoena* story...and the woman on the screen. Then the spooky hello. Waiting until Roman was gone and I was alone. I have to give it to you, it freaked me out for a second...”

Nikko’s stops typing. “Woman? *Hello?* What did you see?”

“Come on, you guys know. Ha-ha, super funny. I’m sure your other newbies are going to piss themselves when they see it.”

Nikko’s upbeat expression is ice cold. The fact that he isn’t smiling is creepier than the image itself. “*What did you see?*” He repeats.

“You know. The pale woman in the black dress. And that *hello* was spot on. Bridging that gap between threatening and curious.”

Nikko swallows hard.

These guys do a damn good job of selling it.

“Which floor did you see her on?”

“I dunno. This one.” Jillian points at the screen. “I rewound it. Couldn’t find it again. You guys are damn good with computers. I see why John’s mom suspected this place of doctoring images.”

“Dat’s the second floor.” Nikko points a shaky finger.

“Okay...?”

“No one’s been on da second floor in many months. We don’t go below de fifth. Don’t need to.”

“Some chick was walking down there.” Jillian is waiting for him to break into laughter.

“Describe her one more time please.” Nikko insists.

Jillian does. “...this dark haired woman, defined facial features, red lips, tall, long limbs...she was walking, then disappeared into the shadows.”

“Okay, dat’s it, DAT’S HER! I’m outta here. No tank you.” Nikko collects his equipment. He stuffs everything into his pack.

“What about the footage?”

“I don’t stick around for ghosts. Come, we must leave now.” Nikko throws on his pack.

Jillian gathers her gear and follows him out. Before they have left the office, Nikko composes a message to the rest of the group. The alert chimes in her InfoLink.

“Come quickly. Hop on.” He directs her to a 4 person golf cart and drives her down the long hall towards the workshops.

“Dis way, dis way.” Nikko hurries her into one of the computer labs.

“What the fuck is going on?” Stephanie demands. Roman and a handful of others circle around. Those nearby have stopped typing and swiveled their chairs in her direction.

“Tell her.” Nikko insists, dragging her into the middle.

Jillian vacillates between whether this is genuine, or a continuation of their elaborate hoax. As she’s now standing in this eager semi-circle, all eyes upon her, she considers the likelihood that this is their way of observing their punchline. *She’s going to tell her tail. They are all going to erupt in laughter, clap her on the back and exclaim, ‘GOTCHA SUCKER!’*

There’s only one way to find out.

Resistant to play the fool, Stephanie’s goading breaks her silence. At the end of it, no one is laughing, which makes her stomach twist.

“You’re sure about this? No one fucking described her?” Stephanie is heated.

Faith testifies to the story the others told Jillian on the truck ride over. “But they didn’t mention any description.”

“Get them over here.” Stephanie demands so she can interrogate the three storytellers. They corroborate Faith’s testimony. “Fine.” Stephanie flicks her wrist. Whispers circulate throughout the onlookers. Stephanie turns to Roman, lowering her voice so that Jillian can barely hear her.

“How? Do you think...?” Stephanie angles sideways towards Roman.

“Yup.” Roman acknowledges without hesitation, staring straight ahead at Jillian.

“Then it’s legit?”

He nods. “Probably.”

“What about you?” Stephanie asks him.

Roman shakes his head. “Nope. Nothing yet.”

“Excuse me, what the fuck is going on?” Jillian grows impatient trying to decipher their code-speak.

“How many did you see? Just one?” Roman asks.

“Yeah. A woman in a thin black dress.” Jillian’s hands feel clammy.

“That’s all it takes, Stef. You know that.” Luciana moves beside her boss.

Stephanie balls her fist. “Jesus fucking Christ, I don’t have time for this shit.” She seethes.

“What fucking shit!” Jillian lets her fear get the better of her.

Pandemonium erupts around them. All the contained whispers become frantic chatter. Nikko leads the retreat, rallying all those nearby. “I am not sticking around.” He gathers his pack, spurring the others into action.

“Make sure all electronics are manually shut down.” The order is repeated through the coms channel with more to follow. All the leadership is giving directions. A flood of inquiry gushes through earpieces from the other workstations. Luciana and Okambo field the responses. Everyone else is frantic to complete their tasks. Fingers zoom over keyboards. Cooling fans whir to a halt. Stephanie is confiding in Roman who has pulled a grenade from a pouch on his belt. Stephanie squeezes her hand over it, staring him in the eyes. She shakes her head.

Jillian is lost in the shuffle. *What the fuck is going on?* She snags Faith by the arm.

“It’s OK hun, we’re just leave for a bit.” Faith is maintaining mom-composure which restores a shred of Jillian’s confidence.

“What is happening? Who is she?”

Faith’s face becomes slightly more grave. “That’s Despoena.”

Chapter 10

Day 2

Jillian

“*That woman is Despoena?*” Jillian confirms once everyone is topside, back to the grid squares under the shade of the dome.

“She’s not a woman, she’s a wraith.” Nikko tells.

“What the fuck is that?”

“It’s a ghost. But worse.”

The crowd buzzes with concern. The lightheartedness of this morning has been eviscerated by a sighting that Jillian still doesn’t understand. *They believe in those myths? Are they myths?* You saw her with your own eyes.

Jillian keeps searching for smiles, waiting for someone to crack and finally say ‘*GOTCHA!*’ No. This isn’t a prank. This response is too serious. These emotions...this level of concern can’t be faked.

Roman calls everyone to order, “Form it up!” partly to get a headcount, partly to put everyone on pause long enough to take a breath. They manage to come to order long enough for him to give them directions to return to camp. *Apparently this is the sort of shit that terminates work days.*

“When’s the last time someone saw her?” Jillian asks as the mob mounts up in vehicles.

“Not for a long time.” Nikko explains.

“Seems like a good excuse to get out of work.” Jillian muses.

Nikko’s lips are pursed. “Dis is no joking madder.” He turns on his heal.

Damn, okay, my bad, Jillian faces Faith, in need of her calm. The woman gives her a hug. “You were right to speak out. Better safe than sorry.”

Jillian returns her squeeze, but she’s still unsettled. “I didn’t think you believed in her?”

“I didn’t say that.” Faith holds her at arm’s length. “I didn’t want to influence *your* belief. Turns out, you’ve experienced something only a select few ever have.”

“What’s that?” Jillian isn’t tracking.

“You saw her.” Faith tells. “Most never do.” She shrugs. “Hear her yes. See? Nah. That’s rare.”

“It doesn’t seem like something to be proud of.” Jillian dismisses. *If she hadn’t seen her, they would all be at work and she wouldn’t have incited a camp-wide panic on Day 2 of being here.* Jillian looks beyond Faith to Roman and Rosenthal hashing out a private debate.

“I’m going back in.” Stephanie turns towards the airlock.

Roman grabs her wrist. “No you’re not.” He’s firm.

“I’m not afraid of her.” Stephanie hisses. “You know I need to do this.”

“You don’t. And you won’t.” Roman is still clutching her wrist with his metal hand.

Stephanie wouldn’t be able to pry it loose with a crowbar, and she knows it. “Fine. Let go of me.”

“Promise me you’re not going inside.” Roman stipulates.

Stephanie shows him a pinky and he releases her. She realizes she has an audience, and pulls her hair-tie to readjust strands that came loose in her frenzy. By the time it’s back in order she’s wearing a neutralized face and a politician’s smile.

“Well, sorry about all that.” Stephanie approaches. “Well spotted down there, Detective—”

“You’re telling me she is real and we should actually be concerned?” Jillian interrupts.

“I’m not.” Stephanie shrugs. “I’ll go back in this minute.” Stephanie points behind her. “But superstition is powerful out here. Better to ensure everyone is...comfortable. We’ll try again tomorrow morning.”

“She’ll be gone by then?” Jillian asks.

Stephanie gives a pitying smile. She steps in and wraps her arms Jillian with a consoling embrace. “Love,” she whispers into her ear, “she was never there to begin with.” Stephanie kisses her cheek and steps back, squeezing her hand until she’s released it too.

Jillian blinks, dumbfounded. *What the fuck does that mean?* Is she fucking hallucinating? What did she see on that screen?

Jillian isn’t able to clarify immediately. Luciana demands Stephanie’s attention, and the two are walking towards

one of the trucks. Jillian is left following Faith for the ride back. She loads into the passenger seat and is about to shut the door when a metal hand prevents it from closing.

Roman swings the door open, a severe look on his face. “Get out, swap with Martinez.” He orders.

Jillian is startled into compliance, unbuckling her seatbelt, but is hesitant once she’s standing outside the vehicle. Martinez has already filled her seat, and the rest of the truck is loaded, leaving Jillian no choice but to catch a ride with the one thing more frightening than ghosts.

“Come on.” Roman urges her towards his truck.

What choice does she have? She loads into the passenger seat. “What’s going on?” She breaks the silence as he sits motionless beside her, staring through the windshield.

“Why are you here?”

“*What?*” Jillian is confused. He repeats his question. “Who told you about her?”

“What? What do you mean who told me about her?” She watches all the other trucks leave the dome. *It’s just them now.*

“Who told you?” He’s forceful.

Her spine tingles. Jillian can’t help moving her hand to the grip of her pistol. *This is it. She discovered the big secret no one was supposed to know, and he’s about to silence her. Permanently.* “No one told me anything. I saw her. On the screen.” Jillian watches for his hand to make a move for his gun. *What are her chances of fending him off? Slim, even with her gun in hand.* She angles slightly sideways, so she might work the door handle and slip out at the first sign of trouble.

Roman has her describe her one more time. He returns to looking out the windshield. “Okay then.” He presses the start button and flips the truck around towards the exit-gate.

“No. Not good enough. What’s going on here?”

Movement inspires her courage. “Is she real?”

“I don’t know why you think I have the answers.”

“Because you’ve been here longer than anyone.”

“Yeah. I’ve also been in the rooms where relays were developed. That doesn’t mean I understand the inner workings of how they function. Proximity doesn’t make you an expert.” Roman argues as he drives. The auto gates open for them.

“Dir. Rosenthal thinks it’s bullshit.” Jillian tells. “She’s not afraid of her.”

“And Stephanie’s been here as long as I have. So you should listen to her.”

“Why do I think you are leading me in circles?” Jillian challenges.

Roman sighs. He stops the truck on the road, halfway between the dome and the camp. “People let their imaginations run wild with the wraiths. They are afraid of what they can’t see. What they can’t rationalize. Those aren’t the things to fear.” He gestures out her side windows towards the hills before the mountains.

Jillian watches the trees.

“Up in these forests are at least four different species of predators that would overthrow their Earther cousins within a generation if they ever co-mingled. They’re made out of muscle, and bone, and blood with teeth and claws eager to tear you to shreds. And if we stayed her past nightfall, you’d see exactly how eager they are.” Roman shifts into drive. “Worry

about those things before you worry about phantoms.” He continues down the road.

Jillian slouches in her seat and crosses her arms. “I think you’ve seen her. I think you know that truth but you don’t want to tell me.”

“Well I don’t really like you, Detective. And I sure as shit don’t trust you...fucking Nikki pig poking around where her snout doesn’t belong. Until one of those things changes, you’re not getting shit from me.” Roman replies.

“You’re a fucking asshole, you know that?” Jillian scoffs.

“Yup.”

The gates to camp open. Everyone else has already fled the motorpool to the cool insides. The heat is on the rise—especially out in the open. Jillian is happy to return to the HUB’s air conditioning. She follows Roman into command where everyone from the *nerd* platoon has assumed temporary working stations. Thirty-odd people are sparse in a room designed for three times as many, but it at least has a semblance of what she’s imagining from the glory days.

Stephanie intercepts her. “Detective, since we are indoors today, I figured you can start your interviews. I’ll set you up in an office.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Rosenthal opens a door on the perimeter. A heap of junk prevents even a single step inside.

Is this punishment for canceling the workday? Jillian tries not to frown. Or more punking the new-girl?

“Okay...so it’s worse than I expected.” Stephanie admits, dodging a piece of equipment that falls forward and breaks on the floor. “Jesus!”

“I don’t want to put anyone out...” Jillian stays out of the path of alling debris.

“Nope. This needs to be addressed whether you are here or not.” Rosenthal shakes her head. She angry-types a message on her SID. A few minutes later the big Polynesian and two others arrive at the scene.

“Kanoa, *did you know about this?*” Stephanie demands.

“Why would I?”

“I want this completely cleaned out. Throw it away. Store it. I don’t care. But do NOT just cram it into another room to become someone else’s problem later on.”

“Yes ma’am.” Kanoa gives a snarky salute as Rosenthal turns to attend to all the techies working behind her. He turns to Jillian. “I thought you all were gunna be gone for the rest of the day?”

“Yeah it’s kinda my fault.” Jillian admits.

He waits for her explanation.

“I thought I saw something in the cameras. *Despoena* is what they called her.”

“Wow, you *saw* her huh?”

“I saw something, and I guess it’s a big enough deal that we cleared out.”

“Yeah, she’s not to be fucked with.”

“Why is that? If she’s a ghost, and no one else can see her, why worry?” Jillian challenges.

“People don’t like hanging around ghosts.” Kanoa shrugs. “Some are very superstitious. They’ve heard the stories, and don’t want to push their luck.”

“You mean they’re afraid of whatever happened here two hundred years ago?”

“Naw. There’s more to it than that. Lots of weird ass shit. People people got hurt. Even died in strange ways. I think that’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” He challenges.

“People think Despoena killed John?”

“People think all sorts of things. I think they give her too much credit. But hey—I’m sure they’re all thanking you regardless. No one wants to spend the whole day in the house.”

“I think someone wrote something into the security footage to pull a prank. I think it’s all imaginary.” Jillian references Stephanie’s statement now that she’s put distance from the event.

“Who knows? I’ve never seen her.”

“Has anyone that’s currently here?”

“I think Mr. Roman has. Others just think he’s crazy.”

“Can’t it be both?” Jillian frowns. “Besides, he won’t talk to me about that. I’ve already tried.”

“Hmm, you must not have made a good impression. Mr. Roman doesn’t like many people—tolerates em, but you DO not want to get on his bad side. No ma’am.” Kanoa untangles the next layer of mess to place outside the door.

“Too late.” She sighs.

Kanoa chuckles. “That’s unfortunate for you. Come on, help me grab the other end of this table.”

Together they wrestle a skinny table out the door, avalanching more items into a raucous heap.

“Jesus! Kanoa, try being louder!” Stephanie and everyone else looks over at him.

“Sorry.” He puts up a paw. “M’bad.” He wipes his forehead. “We’re gunna need more help.” He sends out a request over his SID.

A crew arrives with a few flatbed carts. Together they assembly-line the process. Jillian and Kanoa pull items from the room, two others haul full carts, and the final guy organizes the other end of wherever this stuff is heading.

“How long have you been here?” Jillian asks Kanoa while they wait for carts to return.

“This time? Two Tykhe years.” He replies with an elongated speech pattern of his homeland.

Ten months on the Sol calendar, Jillian runs the conversion.

“Two years is about as much as I can stand at a time. This is my fourth rotation—definitely my last. Might be everyone’s last.”

“You think so?”

“Unless Ms. Rosenthal figures out her relay.” Kanoa shakes his head and chuckles to himself.

“Hasn’t she already done that?” Every populated planet has at least two orbital relays. Most are in the process of constructing more, including Tykhe.

“Not a surface relay. This one would allow you to bend from one relay to another without having to go into space. The science is above my paygrade. I hear it’s tricky--and by tricky, I mean no one’s done it yet. But that’s not all...” Kanoa doesn’t risk speaking in the open. They’ve cleared enough space inside the office that he waves Jillian inside for privacy. “Ms. Rosenthal thinks there’s another door.”

“Another door? To where?”

“Don’t know.” He shrugs. “But you saw how all the floors have animals?”

“Chinese Zodiac, yeah.”

“Well at the end of the snake hall is a room with a dragon statue. There was nothing in it but a relay—a *destroyed* relay. Original. From the aliens. It was here before the expedition arrived. She thinks it leads somewhere important. Maybe another room. Maybe another planet. Who knows?”

Jillian pauses to process. “How does she know the relay wasn’t a decoration?”

Kanoa’s belly bounces as he chuckles. “Right?! Crazy, huh? She’s obsessed with the zodiac statues. Thinks they’re *clues* to an ancient mystery about the alien race. No one can convince her otherwise. They’re designed to help people know which floor they’re on since they all look the same. *Valea Nikki.*” He says in his native tongue.

Jillian processes the info. “So Rosenthal wants to make contact with another lifeform?”

Kanoa hefts an empty shelf to carry out of the room. “Yup. She tells everyone that she’s trying to develop surface relays so she doesn’t sound crazy--but in reality she just wants a pet alien. I guess I don’t blame her. It could be cool. No one can convince her they’re all dead. Extinct long ago. She’s not willing to give this place up. I will admit, I will be a little sad too. The money is great. I can spend one Tykhe year here and make more than two Sol years.”

“How’s it going in here?” Stephanie asks.

“Making progress.” Kanoa reports.

“Good.”

In another hour they’ve cleaned out the office. Jillian is sweaty and lightheaded. Which is embarrassing, considering she lives in the gym when she’s not working. Ninety minutes moving boxes shouldn’t have her winded. This adjustment is no joke.

“Miss Kahr, are you OK?”

“Yeah. Tykhe’s still kicking my ass.” Jillian admit.

Kanoa pushes a roller chair over to her. “Sit down, relax, drink water. We’ll take care of the rest. You have to take it slow for the first few days.”

Jillian doesn’t argue. The crew rounds up a desk and a few more chairs. Kanoa even tracks down a big vid screen and fixes it to an empty mount already secured on the wall.

“Sorry there’s no windows.” He turns on the screen to disrupt the otherwise barren claustrophobia. “I’ll send a cleaning bot in to vacuum the floors. If you need anything else, let me know.”

“Thank-you Kanoa, I truly appreciate it.” She squeezes his big hand.

Kanoa checks the SID on his thick forearm. “Whelp, lunch time. Wanna join?”

“Go on without me. I’m going to catch my breath for a moment first.”

He nods, rounds up his crew and leaves command.

Jillian collapses into her chair and contemplates her next move. While she’s staring out her open door, she notices a house cat dart across the length of command. *After this morning her sight has come into question.* Just when she’s worried that she’s seeing things again, the cat pokes its head into the office. She calls it over to her. It looks at her with big yellow eyes, meows once, and darts off again. *Typical cat.*

Author’s Note: Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed the story so far. Visit tykheuniverse.com for the full E-book launching soon.