

OUT OF THE DARK

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This is dedicated to my parents, Dave and Julie, and to my husband,
Michael, for all of their support throughout this project.

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ABSTRACT

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My thesis encompasses roughly the first third of a young adult science fiction novel. The narration unfolds through a third person limited point of view, focusing on the happenings of the story's protagonist—16-year-old Jorna Twisdom. Through conversations taking place in the present, as well as a series of flash-backs, the reader is made aware of the dystopic future that Jorna and the other characters find themselves in. The people of Earth have been through both a nuclear and a biochemical war, the fallout of which has rendered Earth's surface uninhabitable and expedited the planet's expiration date. In this future, the poor are relegated to the lawless culture that exists above ground, while the affluent survivors have taken residency in the underground city of Cuniculi, where martial law is enforced by the city's military faction—the Alliance. The Alliance has recruited Jorna and her fellow crewmembers based on the fact that they are the children of the ill-fated crew that had attempted to set up a colony on the planet Novum roughly fifteen years prior. The Alliance hopes to unite the increasingly volatile group of survivors by offering a hope for the future, as Jorna and company recreate their parents' mission and find a place for humanity to continue after Earth is gone. The story follows Jorna's adventures on this new planet as she learns who she is, who she can trust, and how to survive.

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INTRODUCTION

While my story found its way to paper for the first time in the fall of 2011, the inspiration for it came over a decade prior. I was just old enough to consider myself too old for animated movies, and yet I found myself slurping soda and chomping popcorn as I watched the Matt Damon-voiced protagonist try and save humanity in Titan A.E. It was not the best movie I had ever seen, but it gave me an idea that stuck with me even after the details of the plot faded from my memory. I do remember that the whole movie built up to the main characters trying to find a new habitable planet after Earth—hence the A.E. from the film’s title—had been destroyed. They succeeded. The final scene was of this beautifully animated, pristine planet just waiting for human kind to start their second chapter. Roll credits. My twelve-year-old self felt cheated. I was pleased that these fictional characters had achieved their fictional goals and all, but I wanted a sequel. I wanted to see what happened to these people as they tried to adapt to this new landscape. I wanted to see them re-establish some form of civilization. I wanted them to argue about what aspects of humanity were important to preserve, and which ones should be left behind. I felt like the challenges present there might even be greater than the ones they had to face in defeating aliens and whatever other tribulations they had to overcome in the original story. Reaching the planet, I decided, was the beginning—not the end.

I would forget about Titan A.E. for months, even years, at a time, but occasionally something would bring the idea back into the forefront of my mind. I began to play out different scenarios for the Titan A.E. sequel, which I was going to have to write as no one else seemed to be as interested in what happened to Cale and Akima after they reached the magical problem-solving planet. I imagined their first winter to be akin to what the pilgrims faced after settling at Plymouth Colony—cold, sickness, and not enough food. Pair this with the potentially dangerous

fauna that could be lurking in their new home, and suddenly the majestic closing image of the pristine planet began to feel more like Hansel and Gretel's gingerbread house than mankind's salvation. I started planning out Cale and Akima's "and then what" strategy, the one that the writers had forgotten to include.

Fast-forward a few more years to one of my less-glamorous pre-career jobs. I was doing data entry for a resort and compiling a list of all of the thousands of people who had filled out a ticket for the chance to win a free golfers getaway. The only way I found to amuse myself during these mind-numbing hours was by seeking out interesting names and tucking them away for future use. There were a lot of Smiths, Petersons, and Adams, but then by chance came Twisdom and Gloomis—back to back. I loved the way that these names fit together. Twisdom and Gloomis sounded like a twosome who could have some great adventures. Seeing as how my Titan A.E. sequel now had nothing left of the original except for the part about a new planet, I decided that it would be okay to swap out Cale and Akima for Jorna Twisdom and Jaxon Gloomis. It was also at this time that I found myself in my final fiction workshop of my bachelor's degree, which I thought at that time to be the conclusion of my higher education. If there was ever a platform to see what Twisdom and Gloomis's world looked like outside of my imagination, this was it.

As soon as I started writing, I realized that this story was as much about Jorna learning who she is as it was about this group of people learning to adapt to their new environment. Because of the nature of Jorna's inner conflict—as well as my familiarity with the genre—I decided to write this as a young-adult piece. I am an avid reader who does not consider her taste to be genre-specific, but I love a good dystopic teenage drama as much as the next twenty-something girl. I know that this is a market that Hollywood has latched onto in recent years and

that the potential for redundancy is huge. With that being said, I am hoping to throw out some of the more over-played tropes while refiguring others in a new way to build my story and develop my characters. I want to play on the general distrust for authority, but in less of an “us versus them” sort of way. Instead, I want to look more deeply at what each character—including the authority—personally has at stake in the game. I want to explore the angsty-nature or teenage romance, but not as a centerpiece for my story. Jorna trying to figure out her romantic feelings is merely one more instance of her not knowing what she wants—and being okay with admitting it.

I think that my desire to write this story as a young-adult novel serves as both its main strength and its main weakness. As I’ve already mentioned, there are themes that are going to be familiar, and perhaps even overdone—but essential to the story that I want to tell. Most fiction writing, to some extent, is an exercise in reinventing the wheel and my hope is that I do this well enough that readers will see this as more than just another dystopic young-adult story. I want my story to be exciting, inspiring, and fun to read. I want to illustrate that genre-fiction can have literary merit and that attention to language and character can transcend a story beyond genre-fiction into something more universal.

My goal is to portray a world that is different enough to spark the imagination, but with characters and ideas that are still very relatable. Jorna for example, makes a tremendous amount of mistakes throughout the novel. She is guarded, impulsive, jealous and many other things that sixteen-year-old girls are. She is also witty and courageous, as well as extremely loyal to anyone who manages to get her to let her guard down. My hope is that readers will find her real—off putting at times and sympathetic at others. I want her to tackle the issues that all teenagers have to face when trying to figure out who they are, regardless of when in time they come from. I also

want to put a new spin on some old truths; on the struggle between weapons and words, and the potential for power to corrupt.

My goals for this story are mainly weighed down by the fact that I don't always have the clearest picture of what this new world looks like. Describing setting details and inventing creatures has been a continual struggle for me throughout the writing process, mainly because of my desire to make things fantastical but real. I have also had difficulty reining in what the central conflict is going to be about. I think that this is partly because I have been swirling the idea around in my head for so long that I have too many "what if this happened" thoughts. I have come to realize that spreading out a plot in too many directions makes it impossible for the reader to stay focused, and keeps me from exploring any one of those directions with any real depth. As such, I have cut out any side-plots that I feel are superfluous, and making sure that the ones I left eventually tie in and flesh out the driving conflict. Lastly, I have battled with continuity. As my piece has been a patch-work labor of love strung together over the last three years, there are moments when I felt as though I lost Jorna's voice. When I would return to this story after a six-month hiatus, it always felt a little like starting from square one. Sometimes my ideas for who Jorna was would shift, or be influenced by things that hadn't happened in previous drafts. As I revised my thesis, I wanted to make sure that everything I had completed thus far read like a unified story—that there were no gaps or pieces that didn't feel like they fit together quite right.

My love of *The Hunger Games*, *The Host*, *Uglies*, *The Maze Runner*, *Divergent*, etc. almost unquestionably stems from my knowledge to know what happens next for civilization, and it has certainly given me a lot of food for thought when it comes to deciding what I want to happen next to Jorna and Jaxon. While the finite details of each scene are still coming together,

the overarching plot for what comes after the conclusion of my thesis begins with Jorna being interrogated by the Commander of the Alliance but choosing not to reveal her bizarre experiences of the previous twenty-four hours. She then sneaks off to force-feed a vial of the mystery liquid, courtesy of the old man, to Jaxon. When the serum wakes Jaxon from his coma, Jorna knows that she will be called into question again by the Alliance authority. She makes a plan to escape the ship and find the people she encountered in the woods. Jaxon and a few other characters decide to accompany her.

When Jorna finds the settlement of these other people, it is revealed that the inhabitants are the surviving members of the failed first mission—including Jorna’s father. Her doppelganger is in fact her younger half-sister. The group from the settlement is adamant that they were recruited for the mission under false premises and once they realized that it would be only the wealthy and well-connected that would be brought to Novum, they mutinied. The response of the alliance was to deny their existence and abandon them on the alien planet to die. Jorna isn’t sure where to place her trust and struggles to find her place in her father’s home.

I feel like there is a lot of potential for character development in the scenes between Jorna and her long-lost father and new-found sister. She is going to have resentment towards her father for leaving, and even more for starting a new family. Even though she knows that it was not conceivably possible for her father to return to her, she is still carting around some hefty abandonment issues that will cloud her judgment and influence her actions. This is especially true in the way that she regards Bayla, her half-sister/doppelganger. Bayla is the anti-Jorna in everything other than appearance. She is quiet, nurturing, quick to laugh, and generally trusting of new people—as long as they don’t fall out of trees and startle her. While Bayla’s life hasn’t been perfect, Jorna refuses to get to know her well enough to see that. Instead, Jorna sees her as

having been given everything that Jorna should've been entitled to—a peaceful upbringing with a loving family. Her jealousy of her younger sister keeps her guarded, and places yet another obstacle between Jorna and her father.

The other off-putting aspect of Bayla—at least in Jorna's eyes—comes from the other half of her biology. Bayla's mother also happens to be Prael Laarson's mother, linking Jorna to her arch-nemesis in a very permanent way. Prael has been on her own for as long as she can remember, and to finally have a family is a huge deal for her. She shows a serious personality shift during her time at the settlement, which Jorna views as disingenuous. Prael's ability to be open with her new family leads them to be open with her in return, and the fact that she is becoming so much closer with them than Jorna is ends up being very frustrating and baffling to the protagonist.

Things only get worse for Jorna as her chilly demeanor causes a deeper rift between her and Jaxon. As he finds himself drawn to this new, softer side of Prael, Jorna finds her world absolutely upside down. The reader comes to learn that Prael's romantic interest in Jaxon goes way back. Those feelings, coupled with the fact that Prael always felt as though Jorna took Jaxon for granted, begin to explain some of the over-the-top aggression that Prael exhibited towards her roommate in the earlier sections of the story.

All of this tension continues to build and Jorna feels like her admittedly damaged world is falling apart. After a misunderstanding with her father serves as the final straw, Jorna angrily runs away from the settlement with the intent to inform the Alliance of everything she has learned—including the mystery behind the healing liquid. She is feeling betrayed, isolated, and looking to lash out. She also thinks that even though she doesn't seem to possess the necessary skills to be part of a family, she finally understands what it means to be a member of the

Alliance. To her dismay, she is imprisoned and interrogated and quickly forced to come to terms with the fact that she placed her allegiance with the wrong side.

After a brief showdown between the Alliance and the group from the settlement where blood is shed and some important truths come to light, differences are resolved—at least temporarily. Both parties agree to try and coexist. Jorna spends the last bit of the story attempting to mend the relationships that she has damaged—not always successfully. In the final moments of the narration three space shuttles are seen making their way into Novum’s atmosphere letting the reader know that humanity has the chance to carry on, but only if the better parts of human nature prevail in this new world.

CHAPTER I

The last time that Jorna Twisdom saw her mother was six days after her eleventh birthday. Now, years later, she found herself back in that room breathing in the sickly-sweet sterile air and staring at the mess of wires and tubes that failed to detract from her mother's unquestionable beauty. Jorna didn't know how it was possible, but her mother's condition somehow enhanced her features. The cancer had thinned her once-full face, drawing attention to her cheekbones, where her long lashes rested delicately, hiding the dark circles that had become seemingly permanent in the last months Jorna was with her. Her mother's wide, thin lips were flushed a deep pink and their corners turned up slightly as if Jorna had just said something amusing. Her hair, which she had always secured tightly, now hung in loose waves around her face—it's rich brown color providing a stark contrast against the porcelain hue of her skin. Jorna's stomach churned and knotted simultaneously as she studied this face for the millionth time in search of a resemblance that she never seemed able to find. Her throat was so dry that no sound could escape it, even though she wanted nothing more than to call out. Unable to speak, she resolved herself to listening to the constant BEEP BEEP BEEP that was the rhythm of her mother's life force—the soundtrack to her forced, shallow breaths.

Jorna's own breathing began to mirror her mother's, and with every deliberate gulp of sterile air she was left desperately wanting more. Despite her best efforts, Jorna could not force her chest to expand and breathe in. Her efforts were leaving her dizzy. To her great concern, she found that her arms and legs were equally as unresponsive as she attempted to take a step forward towards her mother, whose cool hand always gave comfort, even after it ceased to squeeze back. Thinking about rubbing her thumb against the back of her mother's veiny hand, she let her own heavy lids drop in a blink that lasted a moment too long. She knew that she

needed to open her eyes and to hold onto this moment, and yet her body resisted. Every instinct in her was screaming to look her mother and find out why the BEEP BEEP BEEP was now screaming in her ringing ears. As adrenaline filled her veins like water into a sinking ship, her mind raced in a frantic attempt to regain control over her betraying body parts. Open your eyes. Take a breath. Grab her hand. The words became a mantra, repeated like a skipping record in her frazzled brain. At the moment when she felt her lungs were about to burst, her eyes opened and she sucked in the cool air in a gasp. Her mother was gone, and the man standing before her had aged ten years while she slept.

“Can you hear me, soldier?” asked the man as he used a calloused thumb to raise her left eyelid. He then proceeded to blind her already fuzzy vision with the light he held in his other hand. She tried to resist, turning her head away from the light and raising her arms defensively towards her face, but her body was slow to react. The man repeated his questions and ocular assault on her other eye. Every muscle in Jorna’s body was spasming painfully, and her vision had been spotty before the light, but she could hear the man as clear as the beeping she had not merely dreamed.

“Yes,” she croaked. Her throat was raw and her tongue felt sticky and too big for her mouth.

“That’s a good start. I need you to listen to what I am about to tell you,” he said as he tucked the pen light into the chest pocket of his lab coat. “You are Jorna Twisdom, a soldier on the space vessel *Phoenix II*. You have spent the last seven years, two months, and twenty-three days in stasis and your body is having difficulty rebooting. I am going to give you an injection to aid this process and you may feel a small pinch. I need you not to move.” The man spoke quickly and evenly, but there was urgency in his tone that bid Jorna to obey. As her vision shifted in and

out of focus she saw him drawing a clear liquid into a syringe and she replayed the words he had said to her. She remembered her name. She remembered her mission. She remembered her last look from space at the wasted planet she would never again call home. Lastly, she remembered this man, Dr. Desmond Greer, tucking her into the pod she still found herself in. As he squirted some of the liquid from the syringe into the air, she noted that she had been asleep for nearly a decade and Dr. Greer looked as if he had been awake for every moment of it.

His skin was dull and dry, and his red hair was peppered with grey and looking as though he had run his hands through it one too many times. As he stabbed the needle into her naked thigh she felt more of a punch than a pinch and bit down on her lip to keep from crying out. The injection felt fiery and foreign in her veins. She followed its burning sensation through her legs and up through her chest to her arms, neck, and head, all the while pressing her tongue against the newly created wound that was filling her mouth with the metallic taste of blood.

“You should begin to feel better soon,” he said as he checked her pulse at her throat. Her vision was already starting to hold focus and she noted the crinkles at the corners of the doctor’s eyes, the kind that developed over years but to her seemed eerily instantaneous.

“Dr. Greer, has something gone wrong?” she asked quietly, feeling as though she already knew the answer. He offered only a weak smile and gently grasped both of her hands, easing her forward from her pod. When he was confident that her unsteady legs could support her weight he released her.

“I need you to come to the infirmary so that I can run some more extensive tests. After that you are to report to the mess hall where you will be debriefed with the others.” Others. She had remembered all sorts of things about why she was here but couldn’t believe that she had forgotten who she was here with. She drew his face to the front of her mind. Jaxon. Her person.

This was the best way that she could think to describe him, as all other labels felt somehow lacking. Yes, he had been her best friend since before she could remember, but he had also been her family, her protector, her ally. Most importantly, since her mother's death, he was the only person that she had left in the world. Or in space, she supposed. She envisioned him hooking his muscular arm around the back of her neck and pulling her close to his chest like he used to before things had become strained between them. The reality of the situation was that she was more likely going to be met with crossed arms and a stern face. Thinking about how much she could use one of those all-encompassing hugs right now, she decided that she would get one—even if she had to jump up and throw her arms around his neck to do it. She was going to make him forgive her.



Over in the infirmary, Dr. Greer explained that the headache, nausea, and muscle spasms were lingering side effects of the stasis. He declared her fit for duty, but Jorna wasn't convinced. After some assurance that she should begin to feel like herself again in the next couple of days, Jorna began to wonder what *herself* was supposed to feel like. Everything seemed so surreal that she felt the constant need to remind herself that the situation that she was in was real. You are in outer space. You just woke up from a seven year nap. You are never going to see Earth again. These thoughts were all that she could focus on as Lex, the lanky medic with dreadlocks, escorted her to the barrack that would be her new home. He had attempted small talk, but after Jorna's second misplaced "mmhmm," he abandoned the effort and walked the rest of the way in silence.

“Thanks for walking me to my door,” Jorna offered up in a too-late attempt at acknowledging his presence.

“Mmhhh,” the medic responded, making Jorna’s gut tense with guilt about her rude behavior. To her relief, he only let her stew for a moment before flashing a lopsided smile and giving an awkwardly enthusiastic wave as he turned to leave.

Once he rounded the corner, Jorna rested her hand against the red-lit pad that was mounted next to her door. After a second, the light turned green and the door to her room slid open with a *whoosh*. The sterility of it made her almost miss her pod. The room was small—roughly ten square feet—but it contained enough furniture to make a space twice that size feel cramped. There were two beds pushed together in the shape of an L, encompassing nearly all of the wall space to her right and straight ahead. The left wall contained two lockers, one for each tenant, and she opened the first one to find nothing familiar. In the second locker she found her standard-issue canvas rucksack—she knew it was hers by the *Phoenix I* pin—sitting on the bottom next to her pre-laced black military boots. Hanging in the locker were three sets of fatigues, three sets of undergarments, one set of sleep wear/exercise wear, and a heavy lined jacket. She removed a set of undergarments and fatigues, along with her boots and set them on the back wall bunk.

Closing the door to the corridor, she noted that the backside of the door was an adaptascreen. Currently, it was projecting a pixilated image of what she could only assume to be her reflection, but at any time it could be used to project mission updates, messages from commanding officers, or even old television programs if her higher ups were in a particularly indulging mood. She spent a moment looking at the girl on the screen. You would think that a decade of sleep would leave you looking better rested, she thought. Her large eyes looked a

deeper blue than she had remembered, and stared back at her alert and finally focused. Her skin seemed almost translucent, and the ever-present subtle flush under her high cheekbones was the only thing that kept her from looking sickly. She turned her head slightly and studied her profile, particularly her slightly larger than average nose—which Jaxon said gave her character. Turning her face forward again she moved her mouth from side to side. It was narrow, barely wider than the span of her nostrils, but her lips were full—and particularly chapped at the moment. Even dried out and cracked, the shape of her lips always left her looking like she was pouting. She looked at her jawline which tapered down into the dainty V of her chin. Coupled with her widow’s peak hairline, it made her face look remarkably heart shaped.

It was all as she had left it. Chronologically she was nearly twenty four, but she was looking at the reflection of a sixteen-year-old girl. This was a relief, as she definitely didn’t feel twenty four. During the extensive prepping that had taken place pre-launch, they had all been told to think of their stasis time as one really long night of sleep, and that physically and emotionally they would wake up no different than when they had closed their eyes. This had been a difficult concept for Jorna to wrap her head around at the time, and now, as she stared at the girl who looked as though she had been stored somewhere dark and wet, it was even more mind-numbing.

She removed the medical gown that she had been given in the infirmary and changed out of the undergarments that she had woken up into a fresh set from her locker. After she had done up her fatigues and tightened her boots, she brought her worn clothes over to her locker and removed a hair brush from her rucksack. Her hair was thick, and so light blonde that it was closer to white. She wore it short, blunt cut and chin length and learned long ago that her hair worked best when she stopped trying to fight her natural right side part. She ran the brush through her

hair; it wasn't too tangled on account of the fact that stasis sleep was a motionless one. One she had removed all of the knots she put the brush back in her bag and tucked her hair behind her ears. She had no sooner closed the locker when she heard the familiar zapping sound of the adaptascreen switching feeds. The face of a curly-haired woman she did not recognize appeared where her reflection had been moments ago and cleared her throat.

“Mandatory debriefing of all personnel, military and civilian, will commence in the mess hall in T minus fifteen minutes. Please discontinue all activity and make your way there now. From the corridor, you need only to follow the yellow line on the floor and it will lead you to your destination.” With another zap the woman was gone and Jorna was left once again with her mirrored image. After a final check, she deemed her appearance satisfactory and moved to exit the room. As she closed her locker door, Jorna's stomach gave a ferocious growl and she hoped that after she was debriefed, she would also be fed.

Just as she moved to exit her room, the door swooshed open and in stepped Prael Laarson, who was standing in her fatigues with perfect balance and not looking the slightest bit nauseous. Clearly she had been awake longer than Jorna. Prael was a year older than her, several inches taller, and more muscular than Jorna could ever hope to be. It suited her though, and seemed especially advantageous given the situation that they found themselves in. On a new and unfamiliar planet, Prael looked like a predator—her almond-shaped, sand-colored eyes were always focused and housed underneath fiercely arched brows. Her nose was small, but wider than Jorna's, and rested above a mouth that might have been prettier in a smile, Jorna had never seen one on Prael to know. She didn't know much about Prael, other than one, or maybe both, of her parents has been part of the *Phoenix I* crew. She also knew from training that she wouldn't want to be on the other side of a fight with the girl. A lot of the people in Jorna's squad, Jorna

included, didn't take their roles in the Alliance too seriously. Prael, on the other hand, trained like a warrior and had a reputation for making threats instead of friends. The girl was solitary, hostile, unapproachable, and standing right in front of her.

"Hi, Prael. Did you sleep well?" Jorna offered up, jokingly. Prael's left eyebrow arched even higher.

"Cute," the older girl responded with a snarl, "I'm thrilled to hear that I will be sharing an impossibly small room with a comedian." Prael pushed passed Jorna and into the small open area of the room.

"Whoa. Someone got up on the wrong side of the pod," Jorna said, unable to help herself. Prael rolled her eyes.

"Have you seen Jaxon?" she asked, a hint of bemusement in her voice.

"No, I just woke up and went straight to my med exam. Why? Is he okay?" In the hour that she had been awake, Jorna hadn't been able to shake the feeling that something wasn't right. She took a step towards Prael, who in turn put up her hand to stop her.

"Relax, killer bee. I haven't seen him either," she said as she stepped around Jorna for a second time and began to rifle through first locker that Jorna had opened. "I just figured that they would've put the two of you in the same pod. You being so close and all." She looked up at Jorna as she said that last part, waited a good three seconds for dramatic effect and then continued. "I always wondered, is he your brother, or your boyfriend? The line seemed a bit blurry. But hey, I'm not here to judge—I know that there aren't a lot of available men post-apocalypse." She then pulled a tube of lip balm out and waved it triumphantly before applying it.

"We aren't related," Jorna said defensively, "we just grew up together. And he's my best friend—that's all there is to it." With another sick pain of remembrance, Jorna knew that she

would be lucky if he was even that. She really needed to find him and see where things stood between the two of them.

“Don’t get yourself all flustered, I was just asking the question that everyone has been thinking since you two showed up at Cuniculi. I figured that since we are going to be roommates, honesty is probably the best policy.”

“Well, if we are being honest with one another...” Jorna started, feeling a surge of anger creep up her already tensed neck. Before she could finish, the other girl interrupted.

“Save it,” she stated bluntly, turning on a heel and pressing the button that opened the door. “We’re already late for debriefing, and we wouldn’t want to start things off of the wrong foot.” She took a step out the door and tilted her head towards Jorna who followed behind her. “Would we?” Prael added with a smile. It did make her face look pretty, in the way that a lion looked pretty as it crouched down before the pounce. In that moment, Jorna became resolved not to end up as prey.

CHAPTER II

The yellow line on the floor had been straight forward enough, and after two rights, a door that required a hand scan to open, a left, another right, and an unlocked door she arrived with her roommate at the mess hall. The doctor had explained to her as he sent her on her way that she had been the last person to awaken and that she should not be surprised to find herself alone in her corridor. If only that had been the case, she thought, as she replayed her encounter with Prael. As she surveyed the room, she wondered how many people were coming from corridors other than hers, because the handful of individuals sitting in clusters at metal tables were only a small portion of the ship's crew. She made her way towards the populated tables, catching out-of-context phrases from the buzzing conversations.

"I didn't see anything when I looked out the porthole..." she heard an unfamiliar woman in civilian dress mutter. Jorna moved forward cautiously.

"...but something is definitely wrong," came the reconfirming words of a balding, testosterone-faced man in a lab coat. Her hunger was wrestling with her elevating level of panic, but she kept going, scanning the room. It didn't appear as though Jaxon had arrived yet, which wasn't terribly surprising considering that not even the military had been able to break him of his perpetual tardiness. Not wanting to sit alone, and *definitely* not wanting to sit next to Prael, she took a seat next to Nial Erikkson who looked completely alien without the company of his twin brother Liev. Sinking down onto the cold metal bench, Jorna realized that she had never before seen one Erikkson without the other.

Nial and Liev were a novelty, and not just because they were identical. Back on Earth, there had been a big push before the war to conserve resources and reduce the carbon footprint—starting with population control. Naturally conceived multiples were the only loophole in a

government-mandated rule that each family produce no more than one child. After the war, the carbon footprint turned into more of a carbon boot stomp, with the fallout from the warheads eliminating everything the people had once tried to conserve. When the Alliance was formed to bring order to anarchy, the one child rule was no longer something that needed to be enforced. The vast majority of the decimated population had rubbed up against enough radiation that reproduction was no longer an option. For those still able to bear children, they were faced with not only the pragmatic reality of the frightening ratio of resources to people, but also with the moral dilemma of bringing a child into a world that was poised to self-destruct.

When Jorna had first met the Eriksson brothers in the underground city of Cuniculi, she had been both curious and envious of the bond that they shared. Their reliance on each other was inherent and uncomplicated. Nature had brought the two together, unlike Jaxon and her who were united by circumstance. So many times Jorna had wished that the love she shared for her best friend would stop evolving into something unfamiliar and unpredictable—to be the consistent love that a sister felt for a brother. Things would definitely have been easier if this had been the case. Now, sitting beside Nial and reading the apprehensive expression on his otherwise jovial face, Jorna realized that it did not matter if your other half was family, a friend, or a lover—the void created by their absence was universal.

“Hey, Jorna! Welcome to space!” Nial said, finally becoming aware of her presence. His tone was energetic and delivered through the normal goofy, gap-toothed grin that he shared with his brother, but the worry never left his deep brown eyes. Humor was Nial’s default. His outgoing personality was built on wit and charm, making him either the life of the party or the source of the depravity, depending on the situation. Liev, on the other hand, was incredibly reserved and typically content to let his brother speak for both of them. While Nial drew his

energy from a crowd, Liev was fueled by knowledge and found no greater pleasure than diving into a book—even one he had already read. On the rare occasion that he did speak, it seemed to Jorna to be in the same fashion as how he approached a text—giving each line serious and patient contemplation.

“Thanks. It feels like it took *forever* to get here,” she tossed back sarcastically, content to participate in the ruse that everything was normal. “Have you seen Jaxon?”

“Nope. I’ve seen Remmy and Zeb,” he said motioning to their comrade and their lieutenant who were both sitting a table to their left, “but no Jaxon. Waiting on Liev, too, actually. What did you think of that wake up? It made the day-break drills back home feel like my lady’s sweet kisses after a long night of..”

“Spare me, please—as if you’ve ever had a lady to give you sweet kisses.” She smiled and felt her rosy cheeks flush deeper. “And yeah, it was a rough wakeup to say the least.” Jorna scanned the perimeter again waiting for Jaxon to emerge from one of the room’s three entrances. No one had come in since she had arrived and the room was beginning to feel alarmingly empty. As she leaned over to ask Nial if he knew what the debriefing was about, she caught site of Commander Amory Greer, the highest authority onboard *Phoenix II*, hurriedly stomping in through the left side entrance. Trailed by a party of her subordinates, she made her way to the center of the mess hall and positioned herself in front of the buffet line, flanked by her entourage on either side.

Commander Greer was an intimidating woman, not just in size but in demeanor. Standing just above six feet tall, she was a long, lean stack of muscle who moved with precision and grace. Today, as it was typically, her auburn hair was gathered in a severe bun at the nape of her neck, and her fine features were given sharpness by her angular jaw. Her decorated officer’s

uniform revealed the slightest hint of a womanly figure, and as she turned to face her captive audience, she placed her hands behind her back and cleared her throat.

“Welcome, all, to the *Phoenix II*. Although you have been residents here for the last seven years, two months, and twenty-three days, for many of you, this is your first time really seeing your new home. At the conclusion of this debriefing, breakfast will be served. After you have eaten, please find your team leader for further direction.” She cleared her throat again, squared her chest, and paused for a half second before continuing. “You may be wondering why there are so few of you here, and the answer to that question is that you, well, you are currently all that remain.” Jorna’s stomach gave a roll and she shot a panicked look to Nial as all of the color drained from his freckled face. The whispers quickly gave way to full-fledged pandemonium.

“What do you mean we’re all that remain?! What happened to everyone else?!” Prael shouted above the rest, jumping to her feet at a table where she sat alone. Her outcry drew the attention of the small crowd who had returned to whispers and curious stares at the girl they would not have pegged to speak up. It also drew the laser glare of the commander, and with her eyes alone she seemed to will Prael back into her chair. Commander Greer continued on.

“As the result of a collision with a meteor fragment, our ship has suffered serious damage to the power station. Two of the six power cells became unstable and were ejected from the vessel to prevent radioactive contamination. The loss of energy put us into a safe-mode, an automated measure to preserve the power we have left. Stasis cannot operate under these conditions, and as such you are now sitting here before me. The intention was for you to continue in stasis for another six months, at the end of which you would have been woken up one at a time over the course of several days. We never anticipated the awakening of more than one

hundred individuals at once, and while our medical personnel are top notch, they were not sufficiently equipped to support such an event. I will now turn things over to Doctor Desmond Greer who will walk you the awakening process and shed some insight as to how this happened.” Commander Greer stepped aside for her husband, whom Jorna had not seen enter the room.

“It has been a trying day for all of us, I am sure. I want you to know that on top of seeing everyone in this room today, I have seen everyone who isn’t in this room as well. There were a few exceptions, but the majority of your comrades have not perished, but rather have been left comatose by the awakening process.”

“Who died?!” shouted a man’s voice from the back of the room. Dr. Greer took a deep breath.

“Tell us! Tell us who died!” came another pleading cry. The doctor turned to the commander who nodded the reiteration of an order for silence on the topic.

“Was it Zee? Zee Hess?” a woman asked, her voice strained. Jorna couldn’t look at the woman’s face, but she silently applauded her for having the courage to say the words out loud.

“The names of the dead will be released to you before the day’s end. Right now, however, I need you hear me out. I know that everyone in this room is probably worried about someone who isn’t here, but I need you to understand the process, to understand why this happened.” The doctor paused and waited for a silence the he didn’t regain. A raised hand from the commander quieted the roar back into a whisper and the doctor continued, raising his voice to ensure that he was heard. “So I assume that you are all aware that methodology for stasis is based on the hibernation cycle of the now-extinct North American wood frog. This amazing creature had the ability to essentially freeze to death in the winter, only to thaw in the spring and return to life completely unscathed. The secret to this scientific miracle is glucose, a chemical

naturally produced by the body that has the ability to protect internal organs from sub-thermal temperatures.

For the purposes of stasis, the body is flooded with synthetic glucose which allows it to exist in a frozen state without lasting damage to the major organ bodies. However, to a body at normal temperature, that amount of glucose can be deadly. Luckily, it was figured out a very long time ago that insulin has the power to counteract glucose in the human body. As long as a stasis subject receives a high dose of insulin within the first moments of waking, they can transition out of the process with little to no long-lasting effects. This is why it was imperative that the awakening take place in small, controlled groups. As it happened today, my medical team was unable to administer the insulin quickly enough to aid all of the individuals as they came into consciousness.

For those that you do not see here tonight, the massive amounts of glucose caused them to enter a state of ketoacidosis which can have a number of serious repercussions on the body, the most severe of which are coma and death. The pods that they are in, while no longer providing stasis, are providing life sustaining measures that will keep them going while my team and I formulate a treatment plan. I know that most of you are hurting at this news, but I want to reassure you that we will do everything we can to return your teammates, friends, and loved ones to you. For those who have been lost, remember that their sacrifice has not been in vain. Remember that they placed the survival of humanity above else and that the noble goal that they have died for, even in these sad and unsure times, is not beyond our reach.”

Commander Greer stepped forward and placed a firm hand on her husband’s shoulder before giving a closing statement that Jorna did not hear. Her whole body was trembling, and not from the stasis. She sat in a petrified state at the prospect of Jaxon being one of the “noble

sacrifices” that the doctor has mentioned. No, he is a survivor, she told herself. This understanding about him, coupled with the fact that she could not believe the universe to be cruel enough to strip her of the last person she had left, gave her hope. With no intentions of waiting for the names to be released, Jorna fixated on formulating a plan that would provide her with the quickest way to confirm that her friend was alive. As breakfast was served, no one moved for the buffet line. Despite her stomach’s pleading grumbles, she knew that she couldn’t open her mouth to put food down her throat without worrying about to what might come up it.

CHAPTER III

After the state of hysteria dubbed as breakfast, the conscious crew members were herded into their individual divisions. Jorna and an eerily silent Nial stayed at the table they were at as Prael, Remmy Polluck, Glory Duvernell, Kasper Borzakian, and Lieutenant Zeb Siler moved over to them.

“This is us,” Siler said mournfully, shooting a last glance around the cafeteria as if someone might have walked in late. “Minus Jem Gallo, Liev Eriksson, and Jaxon Gloomis,” he said, as if the last part needed adding. Jorna felt light headed at the sound of his name. She wiped the cold sweat from her brow and reached for Nial’s hand. He gave no reaction as she took it and Jorna began to worry that he had gone catatonic. Siler pulled a tablet from the holster on his hip and set it on the table. With a quick swipe of his finger, it came to life and displayed a flow chart with different colored names on it into the air before them.

“Okay, there are a few things that I want to lay out on the table right now,” he said, rapping his knuckles on the metal surface before him. “It’s true. This is not quite the situation that we were expecting. But that doesn’t mean that we are down and out. I know that you all have mixed feelings about the Alliance, and particularly about our mission, but I’m here to tell you that the time for doubt is over. The *only* way that we are going to get through this is if we stick together and remember that we were chosen for a reason.”

“Yeah. Our parentage,” Glory scoffed, referring to the less-than-conventional recruiting standards that were implemented with Jorna and the other people sitting with her at the table.

“Even if that was the case,” Siler stated, in an effort to regain control before the mood really shifted, “which I’m not saying it is, that doesn’t undermine the year that we spent training for this. Your bodies, your minds, your reflexes, they have all been fine-tuned for this very

purpose. We may have come into the Alliance as a scrawny bunch of orphans, but we were fighters—even then. Now, we have the muscle to back it up.” The group looked at their leader skeptically, but to his relief no one tried to argue with him.

“We have a chance to prove ourselves now. The botched awakening has created some holes that it will be our obligation to fill,” he said, taking the silence as permission to continue. “Okay. So you have Commander Greer up here,” he said, pointing to a box at the top of the chart and returning their attention to the tablet and its holographic projection. When he touched her name in the air the projection changed to show her picture, coupled with a short biography. He placed a finger on her image and swiped it, causing the projection to revert back to the original list “Chancellor Enzel and Chancellor Tarney, who you may have recognized on either side of the Commander as she gave her address, are conscious and accounted for. Cygnus, however,” Siler, began, shifting the projection to the next box.

“A-Team.” Remmy offered up quietly—an inside joke among their group about the ten-person team who served as the commander and chancellors personal body guards.

“Who some of you have affectionately dubbed A-Team. Yes. Thank you Polluck. Unfortunately, only three members of A-Team, I mean Cygnus, successfully transitioned out of stasis. That means,” he said with another swipe, “that Indus...”

“B-Team.” Kasper threw in. Glory managed a half-hearted smile. Back in Cuniculi, Indus had been responsible for enforcing the peace inside the cities walls. They were a rowdy gang of militants with a serious superiority complex. They handed out justice in a very off-the-books kind of way and reveled in hunting down curfew-breakers. Jorna wasn’t afraid of them. She had grown used to rough personalities through her dealings in the night market. Still, she knew better to provoke their attention and found it best to just avoid them whenever possible.

“Indus will be largely responsible for the superiors’ protection, as the majority of their fifteen-person squad made the transition. That means that we, Pyxis,” he said, scanning to a section of the roster that contained their names, “will be taking on some of the responsibilities that Indus would traditionally do. I have another debriefing in a while and I should have more information on what is expected of us after that.” Siler swooped at the air like he was clearing a cobweb and the projection disappeared. With a click and slide, the tablet was once again secured at his hip.

“You know we’re in trouble when they start giving C-Team responsibilities,” Nial said dejectedly, reassuring Jorna that his state of shock was only temporary. Siler gave him a look and Jorna wondered for a moment if the two were going to have one of their infamous face-offs. Siler had a difficult time exuding authority over the group, and no one challenged his place as leader more than Nial. It wasn’t that Nial wanted the position for himself, because that was definitely not the case, it was just that he didn’t particularly care for orders. This was especially true when the orders came from someone who Nial had long considered a peer. After a brief stare-down, Siler sighed and readdressed the group.

“So, in addition to finding out what exactly is going to be expected of us. I’m hoping that I’ll also get a little more insight into where the rest of the crew is standing. I was studying the room while Dr. Greer was speaking and according to our manifest—which I have uploaded to all of your devices—we are missing about seventy people. Most of those folks appear to be civilians—engineers, scientists, and construction workers. It’s going to be hard to build a new civilization without them, so here’s to hoping that Dr. Greer and his team can come up with a solution.” Jorna recognized in this moment everything that made her a bad soldier, and arguably a bad person. She didn’t care about the new civilization, or the people who would build it. She

didn't know them from Adam. Even the people that she did know, she wasn't particularly fond of—with the exception, perhaps, of the Eriksson's. She had *one* person, and without him the rest of it didn't matter. Without him, it was her against the world.

“Siler,” Jorna started, in a voice as quiet as a whisper, “are our people part of the three who didn't make it?” Everyone's eyes focused on him, hungry for information about their friends.

“I don't know,” he said gravely, looking down at the table. “They haven't told me. I expect I'll see the list when I meet with the superiors.” Everyone was hurting. Jorna knew for a fact that with the exception of the stasis sleep, Nial had never gone a day without seeing Liev. Jem was Glory's best friend, and the two of them, along with Remmy and Kasper, seemed to spend the most of their free time trading dating partners. There was even speculation at one point that Jem and Glory were an item, though that might have just been something that Nial made up for entertainment value. Regardless, Jorna could never keep track of who was with who, and it was part of what deterred her romantic feelings for Jaxon. Between Glory, Jem, Kasper, and Remmy, someone was always not speaking to someone else and Jorna didn't want that kind of drama between her and best friend. She wondered for one painful moment if she still had a best friend.

“Come on guys, let's go for a walk and re-familiarize ourselves with the ship.” Reluctantly, the group rose from their seats and followed Siler out into the corridor. “Okay, this is pretty easy stuff so if you don't remember it all right now, I'm sure it will come back to you in no time. The yellow line on the floor, as you know now, means food. We just left the cafeteria and the kitchen is directly behind that. Meals will be served at o-seven hundred, twelve hundred, and seventeen hundred hours. The green line means sleep. I trust that all of you are familiar with

your barrack and your roommate? Eriksson, Duvernell, and I will bunking alone for the time being.” Even though Jorna knew what it meant to have a room to herself, she was jealous all the same. The crew had all toured the ship in the weeks prior to launch, but that seemed like a different life time. Instead of remembering the layout, Jorna was simply left with a wicked case of déjà vu.

“The red line means medical.” Siler continued, leading them down the twisting corridor and through swooshing doors until they came to a set of double doors that said “INFIRMARY” in large red letters across it. Jorna took a step forward. “We don’t have access to this room, only the superiors and the med staff do. However, if you find yourself in need of medical attention, just use your thumb to press any one of the red buttons that line the corridors. It will let a member of the med staff know who, and where you are.” Siler demonstrated this on the red button by the double doors and in virtually no time the frosted glass doors swooshed open to reveal Dr. Greer.

“Just demonstrating, Sir.” Siler said with a smile.

“Well, Lieutenant, your scan tells me that you are a bit anemic. Be sure and eat some iron with your lunch rations, yeah?” Siler, looking a bit surprised, agreed to the doctor’s request.

“Dr. Greer,” Nial started, “can you please just tell me if Liev is okay?” Jorna scooted closer to him and wrapped an arm around his bicep. She wasn’t sure if she was trying to give support or get it, but she felt relief as her friend’s weight gently leaned into hers.

“I can’t, Nial. I’m sorry. I really am. I’m under orders.” Dr. Greer ran his hand through his curls and confirmed the stress response that Jorna had originally suspected. As if sensing Jorna’s scrutiny regarding this quirk, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his lab coat. Jorna had never liked doctors, but Greer was alright in her book. There was something very calming

about him—excellent bedside manner, she supposed. She thought about what a strange pairing he and his wife made. One so severe and the other so relaxed. Not entirely unlike her and Jaxon, she thought with sad realization. Nial gave a curt nod and let out a ragged breath.

“Are they in there? Can you at least tell us when we can see them?” Jorna tried. While she dreaded finding out the answer to Jaxon’s fate, not knowing was definitely worse. She also had her plan to consider; the first step to finding out if it was okay would be finding out where he was at.

“They’re not in here, no. There’s too many of them. And I’m sorry Jorna, but I can’t tell you where Jaxon’s at. You’ll find out everything you need to know soon enough. I promise. I’m sorry that I can’t help you in the way that you want me to. But if you need medical help, you all know how to reach me,” he said pointing again to the red button by Siler’s shoulder before disappearing back behind the double doors.

“The white line will take you to the bridge, and the blue line to the power stations,” Siler began, in an effort to refocus them. “You should hopefully never have cause to visit either, and you do not have the ability to access them unaccompanied. I will, however, take you to each of them in a moment just so you can get a better feel for the place.” Siler pressed forward and continued his well-memorized speech. “Not all briefings will be held in the cafeteria. In the event that you are summoned by me, or by one of the superiors, or if we need to meet as a team, the grey lines will take you to the conference rooms. There are five of them.” Siler pointed to the grey line that stretched out before them and then made a right angle down a corridor. “All of the purple lines lead to either cargo or docking bays. There are four cargo bays of various sizes and two docking bays.” Siler pointed to the purple lines which seemed to turn down every corridor. “I know it may seem like a lot right now, but I have a feeling that in two weeks’ time you will be

able to race through the corridors with your eyes closed. Which I wouldn't recommend. In the meantime, just remember that all of the corridors interconnect and that if you can remember which color line leads where, you should be all set. Again, I'll beam the ship's map to your tablets for you to study up on later. Does anyone have any questions?" He paused briefly. "No? Okay, on to the bridge." Jorna followed along quietly, as did the other members of her squad. No one asked questions, and no one attempted to make jokes. Every time they passed a room with locked doors Jorna wondered if Jaxon was behind it. Judging by the longing stares on her teammates faces, she deduced that they were wondering the same thing.

CHAPTER IV

As the *Phoenix II* careened into the atmosphere of the alien planet, Jorna Twisdom decided definitively that she was not a fan of space travel. It had taken her body nearly six months to completely recover from stasis and she imagined that it would take six months more to recover from the whiplash that she attributed to the less-than-graceful landing on Novum's surface. That evening, through the porthole in her barrack, Jorna witnessed her first sunset in nearly a decade before moonlight blanketed the unfamiliar landscape. She sat on her bunk, back against the wall, and massaged her aching neck. Logic dictated that she should be getting some sleep in preparation for her big day tomorrow. The problem was that she had never been a particularly good sleeper, and since the awakening she had become a full-fledged insomniac. To cure her restlessness, she did the same thing she did every night. Quietly slipping from her room so as to not wake Prael, she silently followed the purple line through the halls until she reached Cargo Bay 3.

The room was comparable to the size of the rec room back in Cuniculi. Big enough to play basketball, but not massive by any means. Wide, short windows stretched out roughly for ten feet just below the aluminum-paneled drop ceiling that, itself, was about six feet over Jorna's head. At one point, someone had pushed up one of the panels and capped the electricity running to the lights in an effort to preserve the ship's dwindling power supply. It must've been a nerve racking operation for whoever had done it, as to cut the wrong wire would've meant pulling the plug on nearly six dozen lives in one fell swoop.

Jorna gave a quick glance at the checkered wall of glowing pods. The Medical Bay was not large enough to accommodate them all, and as such they would remain residents of Cargo Bay 3 until a solution could be found. Over the last six months, Jorna had watched as the glow of

the pods shifted from green to yellow—an indicator of their inhabitants’ state of wellbeing. She wondered how much longer it would take for yellow to fade to red. The adaptascreen in her room would occasionally chirp updates on the medical team’s consistent efforts to revive the rest of the crew, but nothing was working. Not a single person had woken up since Jorna came into consciousness on board the ship. Many people were starting to lose hope, while others were placing a dangerous amount of it in finding the answer on Novum. Jorna was with the first group. Experience had taught her that there are some things that you just don’t come back from. As she made her way to the yellow glow that was third from the left on the back wall, she could faintly make out the outlines of the occasional darkened pod. Their inhabitants, Jorna among them, had successfully made it out and taken residency in the wing of the ship designated for living quarters. She wondered, not for the first time, which pod had been hers and thought on how much easier life had been inside of it. As she reached her destination, she turned towards her homing beacon, closed her eyes, and placed her forehead on the glass.

“We made it,” Jorna said quietly after a couple breaths, lifting her head to look at her best friend Jaxon. She wasn’t sure if he could hear her, in the same way that she never used to be sure that her mother could hear her, but it felt good to talk to him just the same. Through the translucent shell of his stasis pod she could see that his strong features had softened, portraying a vulnerability that only surfaced while he slept. His stern brow was relaxed, blond eyebrows raised slightly. His lips were parted slightly and the corners of his wide mouth dipped into an almost frown. His long eyelashes rested on his high set cheekbones that tapered down into a broad jawline. Watching his chest rise and fall with steady predictability, she raised her hand and placed it on the clear wall of the pod that separated her from him. She breathed a quiet laugh as she thought of the barrier as a physical manifestation of the energy, the tension, which had

existed between them for longer than she cared to acknowledge. She wanted to tell him that she was sorry, for everything, but she didn't—and to this day she wasn't entirely sure that she was. Instead, she heaved a sigh and let the weight of her heavy shoulders pull her to the ground. Positioning herself with her back resting against the pod, she hugged her knees, closed her eyes, and relived the painfully awkward final conversation that she had had with him.

It wasn't that she hadn't thought about him in that way before, of course she had, but venturing outside the realm of their friendship was accompanied by a risk that Jorna felt was unquestionably too great to take. With no other family to speak of, Jaxon's place in her life was a necessity and the only certainty that she had been able to count on since her mother's death. She had felt him edging towards the notion that the two of them should be more than friends since they had first arrived at Cuniculi. If it had been there before that then she had been too hungry, too tired, or too scared to notice it. On Cuniculi, however, she could almost see him rolling the thought around amongst his other pensive ideas, swirling and sloshing it until he had mulled it over for what he considered to be the right amount of time. There was no right amount of time as far as she was concerned. No careful and deliberate arrangement of words could persuade her that this was a good idea.

So she let him mull, carefully controlling the conversation so as to never give him an opening. She worked hard to avoid the playful banter that had always been part of their easy routine. There would also be no reminiscing on "us against the world" memories, which was especially difficult since they seemed to occupy the largest space in her memory. Most importantly, there could be no physical contact, no matter how curious she was about how her cheek would feel pressed up against his newly-hardened chest. She reminded herself, more than once, that nothing good would come from finding out. The only thing left after her process of

elimination was the discomfort between them born from her avoidance. Jorna had reconciled with the discomfort as being the necessary consequence of keeping her friendship intact. The anxiety of the situation, however, had become so great that she had begun to welcome her pending near-decade stasis nap as a reprieve from having to work so hard at something that used to be as easy as breathing. As she waited for Dr. Greer outside of the lab in the moments before she was set to go under, she paced slowly, dragging her feet a few steps across the once-white tile before spinning on the toe of her tightly laced boot and repeating the exercise in the opposite direction. Suddenly, in that moment, stasis had stopped feeling like an escape and started to feel like what it really was—a medically induced sleep loaded with potential for things to go very, very wrong. While she was reflecting on all of the worst-case-scenarios that awaited her, she had failed to notice that her biggest worst-case-scenario had rounded the corner behind her.

“Jo,” Jaxon said in a tone that sounded almost like relief. She tensed at the sound of her pet name—the one that her mother had called her by when she was a child and that only Jaxon knew now. It used to make her smile—a small reminder of the connection between the two of them and a connection to a life before everything had gone bad. The way that it twisted on his tongue this time was different. There was an urgency to it that prodded at her already raw nerves. She was minutes away from being rendered unconscious and thrust across the universe and suddenly that seemed like peanuts compared to the confrontation she was certain was about to happen.

“Hey,” she said coolly, shoving her shaking hands into the pockets of her slacks and staring at the cracked tile by the toe of his size thirteen boot.

“You weren’t trying to sneak off without saying goodbye, were you?” he teased, prodding her shoulder gently. *Yes*, she thought, taking a step back with her right foot to steady her balance. Jaxon caught her by the bicep to steady her.

“Nope. Just scoping things out. I was going to come find you in a minute. Not that we have to make a big production of this or anything. It’s not even like it’s goodbye—more of a goodnight really.” It was a lie. Until he had rounded the corner, Jorna had felt like she had gotten away with something. A small victory for being able to postpone this situation yet again. Wishful thinking. She was very aware of the fact that his hand was still on her arm. His thumb grazed the fabric of her sleeve but it felt like it was touching her bare skin.

“Jo,” He said again, taking a step towards her, “I think that you know this is different.” His voice was unnervingly calm considering the fact that she felt as though she were about to crawl out of her skin.

“It doesn’t have to be,” she pleaded, eyes still on the floor. He had removed nearly all of the space between them and for a moment she panicked that he could feel the pounding of her heart. Tipping her head back to accommodate the height difference between them, she looked into his eyes, which she could never quite pinpoint as being definitively blue or definitively green. The calmness that seemed present in his voice had not reached them. His gaze was focused and intense. The mulling was definitely over, he was in control now.

“But I want it to be different. I love you Jo. I mean, I’m *in love* with you, and I can’t go another ten years without telling you.” The emotional concoction of elation, anger, and fear was enough to make her legitimately concerned about throwing up. This situation that she had dreaded so vehemently felt surreal in its happening. Unsure of what to do, she just stood there, frozen into a stunned silence. It wasn’t until he put his rough hand on her cheek and leaned his

head towards hers that she found her words again. A mumbled slur of “I’m sorry I can’t” tumbled from her mouth as she ducked from his hold and escaped into the lab. She slammed the door behind her with enough energy to startle Dr. Greer, who proceeded to coach her towards stasis. His words were a fuzzy buzz on the peripheral of everything that she was trying to comprehend, and after he asked for a second time if she was alright, she assured him that the tears she blinked back were just nerves.

The look on Jaxon’s face as he stared at her through the paned glass window seared instantly and permanently into her memory. There was no vulnerability there, just disappointment and anger. His jaw was jutted forward in that way he did when he was really brooding about something. She had hoped that he would leave, storm off to process her betrayal. He didn’t. He fixated on her, making her last waking moments on Earth rank in her top three miserable moments, and that was saying something. As she was strapped into her pod she waited anxiously for sleep to come and tried to comfort herself with the notion that after a decade he would forgive her, but she knew that it didn’t work like that.

She shook her head and pulled her focus back to the present. That horrible, awkward, painful moment had become her default memory—the one that she went to every time she thought of Jaxon, visited Jaxon, or came across anything that reminded her of Jaxon. It popped into her head randomly throughout the day and always seemed to find her when she lay wide awake, staring at the smooth-paneled ceiling above her bunk and silently begged for sleep. It seemed it was her turn to mull this mess over, to no longer avoid the issue but rather dissect it. She analyzed every second of it, every word that was spoken and every touch that was felt. She rearranged them and replayed them until she found a different ending. Occasionally, she imagined the ending that Jaxon had been hoping for. She saw herself letting the weight of her

flushed cheek rest against his hand and her closing her eyes and tilting her face to meet his. She imagined the feel of his lips against hers and lifting herself up onto her toes as she wrapped her arms around his neck. That analysis always seemed to hurt the most, but she couldn't help wondering if things would be better or worse right now if things had played out that way.

“You can be mad at me, you know,” she said to her unconscious companion while anxiously drumming her fingernails on the riveted floor. “You can be furious. You can hate me forever. You can do anything you want as long as you wake up.” She let her head roll sideways on the curved glass and half glanced up at him. She knew better than to expect a response but she looked anyway. This wasn't the first time that she had given her blessing for him to feel the emotions that she was certain he wouldn't ask permission for. He wouldn't feel any guilt for hating her after what she did—but it wasn't his absolution that she was working towards.

“Lovers quarrel?” cooed the cool voice of Prael Laarson as she glided through the open door of Cargo Bay 3. Since the only cargo being held here was their fallen comrades, the place was more of a mausoleum than a storage space, but the name Cargo Bay 3 suited just fine. She stopped a few feet from Jorna, crossed her arms, and raised a speculative brow.

“What are you doing here, Prael?” Jorna asked, in the tone of exhausted annoyance that she reserved for her roommate/arch-nemesis. The last six months had been a constant battle between the two of them, and Jorna felt the stress of their deadlock like an Albatross around her neck. She knew from the start that living with Prael would be difficult, but there were moments when she felt like the awakening, landing on the planet, even being without Jaxon—all of it was far more survivable than spending another day trapped in that tin can of a room with the cruelest person in the universe.

At one point, Jorna had even tried asking the girl point blank if she had done something particular to warrant Prael's wrath. Prael played coy, smiling as if she were finally able to move a piece on the board that had previously been locked in check. So Jorna resolved herself to focus on learning the method to Prael's madness, and to abandon the search of finding the logic behind it. She paid attention as Prael taunted her about her family, or lack thereof, her somewhat lacking physical abilities, and most often about Jaxon—her favorite subject of torment. Jorna, however, wasn't entirely defenseless and had become a pretty good study of Prael's hot-buttons. When Prael tossed a grenade about Jaxon, Jorna lobbed one back about Prael failing to have *any* friends. She had reconciled herself to playing dirty, and the level of verbal abuse had reached some dangerous lows. Lines had been crossed on more than one occasion, but the white flag was far from being drawn.

“Couldn't sleep,” Prael said, raising her eyes towards Jaxon's pod.

“And you thought a stroll through the land of the sick and dying might set your thought-filled mind at ease?” Jorna shuddered, having given herself the creeps by her description of her surroundings. Very seldom did she really focus on the other pods in the room; the names of the people in them meant little more to her than lists on a flowchart. She had never met most of these people, and the ones she did—the two members of her squad besides Jaxon—she knew virtually nothing about these other people who had lost one or both of their parents the same way that she had. The same way that Prael had.

“Seems to work for you,” Prael retorted, repositioning her stance in a way that suggested that she was just getting started. As Jorna stared at the girl, she felt happy that she was so detached from the other people sleeping in this room.

“Seriously, what do you want?!” Jorna demanded as she raised herself to a standing position, as if to silently tell her sparring partner that, likewise, would not be backing down.

“Seriously, what were you giving him permission to be mad at you about?” There was a hint of joyfulness in Prael’s otherwise solemn tone which Jorna found unsurprising.

“You know, that is really none of your business,” Jorna spat, crossing her arms to mirror the other girl’s agitated body language.

“Did he find out what a selfish, worthless human being you are? Is that why he hasn’t woken up? Couldn’t face the shame of realizing that he wasted so much of his life clinging to someone as useless as you? The same thing probably happened to your mother. Luckily, your father never had the misfortune of knowing you. But gee, I imagine that he would be disappointed if he knew how you turned out.” Prael concluded her slew of insults with a closed-lipped smile and nod that signaled for her opponent’s rebuttal. It was the trifecta, reiterations of the same old insults brought together in a new and hurtful way. Jorna had no words. Tears of anger burned her eyes and she clenched her jaw as every nasty, demeaning thing Prael Laarson ever said to her stacked on top of this, her most recent and most effective jab. Jorna was ready for her rebuttal, but instead of hurling an insult as she typically did, she hurled her body at the girl and slammed into her with a force hard enough to take them both to the ground.

The initial blow caused the back of Prael’s head to smack off of the metal floor and Jorna’s head to bounce off of the pointy edge of Prael’s chin, though neither shot rattled the girls for long. Seconds later the wall of sleeping soldiers became audience to a tussle of tossed fists, jabbing elbows and knees, and a struggle to pin the other girl down. There was no clear victor rising from the chaos. Prael had size on Jorna, but the smaller girl was quicker—and fierce. What Jorna lacked in stature, she made up in the ability to turn Prael Laarson’s normally pretty face

into the target for every bad emotion she had been holding onto for the last six months.

Unfortunately, determination was not enough to stop Prael from giving her a good punch to the cheek and a hard elbow to the ribs.

“Laarson! Twisdom! What in the hell do you think you are doing?!” The shocked cry of Dr. Greer pulled Jorna’s concentration long enough for Prael to shove Jorna off of her and to the floor. She looked up at the man from the flat of her back and breathed a few heavy, ragged breaths. Even in the near darkness, it was easy to see that there would be no winner from this fight.

CHAPTER V

Jorna had never been bothered by uncertainty. Her life up to this moment had been filled with it, but right now a part of her wished that the titanium doors in front of her would simply remain shut. She waited silently in the Entrance Bay with the rest of her rag-tag crew. Kasper, Glory, and Remmy were hypothesizing about what kind of life threatening predators waited outside the walls, and the thought did not intrigue her. She threw a look to Prael, who hadn't spoken to her since their scuffle the night before. The dark haired girl had a fat lip and a mean shiner on her left eye. It would have likely aroused suspicion from the rest of the group, had they not seen Jorna first. Her cheek was swollen and bruised and her ribs felt, quite accurately, like they had been bashed repeatedly by a bony knee.

Doctor Greer, thankfully, had only reported them to Siler, and not to the Commander or the Chancellors. While Siler had been clearly unimpressed, he had also not been in the mood to dole out punishment at o-three hundred hours. When he forced them to shake hands, which they did reluctantly, Jorna thought things could definitely be worse. Then they were. With a swipe on his tablet, Siler stripped the two girls of their access to Cargo Bay 3. Their fight had alerted the doctor to the fact that only med staff and superiors should be allowed near the pods. It was worse than any punishment that Jorna could imagine, but she was shut down as soon as she tried to argue. Now, she traced her finger over her swollen cheek and hoped that her misshapen face was not betraying the façade of calm she was trying so hard to project. She looked over to Nial, who was sitting next to her. In the last six months, she still couldn't get used to his new self. What was once all laughter and jokes had now been largely replaced by anger that his twin was slowly slipping away from him. She dreaded the moment that he found out that he was no longer

allowed to visit Liev because of her. Feeling the fear begin to creep onto her face, she elected to study her surroundings as a means of distraction.

The bay was by no means the largest open space on the ship—that was reserved for the cafeteria. Still, the room boasted roughly a hundred and fifty square feet with a thirty foot ceiling. The metal interior was currently cluttered with various stacks of boxes that she and the rest of her group were gathered around. Jorna and Nial had were using the boxes as benches and she wondered what was being housed in their improvised seating. Along the far wall was an assortment of neatly parked all-terrain vehicles, separated by sizes ranging from two-wheeled personnel carriers, to the menacing six-wheeled buggies that could transport everyone in the room and then some. There was a good deal to look at but Jorna's focus kept tracing back to those portentous doors.

Prior to this moment, her survival had been based on an endless encompassment of enclosed spaces. Confines and corridors that had gradually become as comforting as the mother's hug she could almost remember. Once they opened, things would be different—things would be real. As claustrophobic as the ship, and especially her room, could feel, it had become familiar. Outside was a world of strange and Jorna felt like her ability to adapt was drying up—like you only got to start over so many times before you were supposed to just stay put. Wrapping her arms tightly around her body, she dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands. She tried to remind herself that this was why they had come here, but all she could think about was where they had come from.

On Earth, the war and due course had left the once lush surface nothing but a scorched ceiling to a desperate collection of people groping for survival in the dark. The last attempt at civilization had been a poor one, but to a generation that had spent the majority of their lives

without the sun on their skin, the buried metropolis of Cuniculi had been home. The city housed roughly 1,100 people and was an expansive and jumbled series of caves, bunkers, and pathways. It had been grown from the skeleton of a government operation from the days when government had been a real thing, and the war had been just barely imagined under worst case scenario planning. She looked at Prael and Nial, and wondered if they were thinking about it too. She wondered if they were thinking about the rusty corridors that she had known so well that the total blackness of the city after curfew didn't slow her step. For an instant she thought she felt the chalky grit on her hand that came with running it along the wall in places where the clay had crept in through the metal seams and left red dust as thick as paint. She drew her mind to the room with the rock ceiling and brick walls where her superiors had drilled into her that as long as she stayed away from the surface should would be safe. She remembered believing them.

Her current surroundings were an updated version of the same cocoon in which she had always existed. The threat of the burning sun and toxic air now replaced by the infinitely large span of nothingness that her ship's captain had spent the last eight years navigating. She remembered back to her second day awake onboard the *Phoenix II*, where she and her fellow crew members had been told that the wormhole had behaved as expected and delivered them to the Duchanian Galaxy, 0.7 light years from their target destination of habitable planet HB-68334W. She remembered hearing from the astronomer who introduced himself as Reikkart Scott and how his thin lips pursed when he said the word "Novum," the planet's newly given name. Jorna had felt as if she were being conned; as if this new name could make the planet feel any less alien. That talking about the part of plan that went accordingly would somehow lift the morale of a group that had seen its numbers cut by three quarters, unsure as to whether they would ever regain those that, at least for now, were lost. Her stomach turned with the familiar

lurch of survivor's guilt that she felt countless times a day when something reminded her that she was awake and Jaxon was not.

Her departure into self-pity was interrupted by the arrival of Siler and she hopped off of the box on which she was sitting to face him. He was a tall man in his early twenties with a serious face accompanied by a no-nonsense attitude. If his cropped brown hair had been longer it would have revealed the slightest bit of curl. As it was, he swept his hand across his cranial stubble and heaved an impressive sigh. Jorna was looking at him, as were Prael and Nial. Kasper, Glory, and Remmy continued on their conversation which had evolved from dangerous predators into potential alien natives. If they were aware of Siler's presence, they showed no indication of it. Siler put on his best confident leader face and stepped into the middle of the crowd and stood military straight.

"Attention soldiers!" he bellowed from his diaphragm, finally gaining the attention of the whole room. "The mission that we are about to embark on is unlike anything that we have ever done."

"That's an understatement," Nial spat under his breath as he kicked at a rivet in the floor with the toe of his left boot. Siler said nothing, perhaps because Nial was right. Jorna's unit had been assembled not because of their great physical ability, or ability to strategize, but simply because of nepotism. The people standing next to her, Siler included, were the sons and daughters of the unfortunate crew of *Phoenix I*, Earth's first and grandest attempt at re-habitation, which had made it to HB-68334W only to crash and burn at last possible moment. To the people of Earth, the initial *Phoenix* mission had been more than just hope for a new beginning; it had been a global unifier. For eight years they had waited together for word on what their future had in store.

Jorna's mind jumped to the memory of the day the news report came in. She was nine years old, and she and Jaxon had been playing astronaut and alien in her room. Jaxon, who was only a year older but twice the size of her twiggy self, always let her be the astronaut. She was just about to burst forth from the space shuttle that was her closet when she heard her mother make an unfamiliar and terrifying sound from the other room.

Jaxon followed her as she proceeded hesitantly to the living room where she found her mother sitting on the faded blue couch with the red stain on the cushion where Jorna had once spilled her juice. She was hunched over herself, her face buried in her hands, muffling the sounds of her wails. Confused and frightened, Jorna turned her attention to the only other sound coming from the room; on the television a somber looking anchorman in a grey suit was describing the variables which could have caused *Phoenix I* to explode upon entry into the atmosphere of HB-68334W. Below his fake mahogany desk the words "BREAKING NEWS: *PHOENIX I* EXPLODES UPON ENTRY TO ATMOSPHERE. COMMUNICATIONS SEVERED. ALL SOULS SUSPECTED LOST. CATASTROPHIC SET BACK FOR SURVIVAL OF HUMAN RACE." scrolled in a loop across the ticker. The rest of the world cried along with her mother but she and Jaxon stood there silently, not sure how to grieve the parents they knew only through stories told by others, and in no way aware of the larger role this moment would play in their lives.

A lot of people said that if the *Phoenix* mission hadn't failed that the war wouldn't have happened. That the dashed hopes of leaving the planet instigated a global mob scene to grab up the resources that were left. The pandemic that spread like wildfire in the midst of the chaos had been the straw that broke the nuclear camel's back, and before long warheads were shooting through the sky like stars. Rumors circulated that the pandemic had been planned, a biochemical

attack meant to justify a nuclear firestorm. Jorna didn't know whether or not that was true. She wasn't one for conspiracy theories and had spent enough time contemplating the what-ifs in her life to know that the only outcome was disappointment.

"I know what you are thinking," Siler attempted again, jerking Jorna back into the present. Nial stopped kicking at the floor and crossed his arms across his chest in defiance, raising his dark shaggy brows and giving Siler a glare that suggested he was unconvinced. "I do. I know that you're thinking that you are in over your head. That you haven't been trained for this, but you have. We are soldiers..."

"We are just a bunch of orphans pretending to be soldiers!" Nial interrupted, taking an agitated step towards Siler. Again, this was not an uncommon scene. The lack of repercussions for Nial's defiance only reinforced his point. "You are a Lieutenant in name only! We are an idea, a publicity stunt meant to distract and pacify." Nial was nearly chest to chest with Siler now. Jorna knew that if Liev were here, he would have reactively stepped forward as well, placing an authoritative hand on his brother's shoulder and pulling him back before he really crossed the line. Jorna had assumed this obligation in Liev's absence. "We're not soldiers Zeb, and we're not stupid, so stop treating us like we are." Nial shook free of Jorna's grip and sulked back by the boxes he had come from. He began to stare at the same invisible spot on the floor that Prael had been locked into for the past several minutes.

"I get it, Nial. You're angry. And you have a right to be. You're right; we weren't the ones who were supposed to step through those doors, but we are the only ones left!" Siler's uncharacteristically loud tone echoed off of the metal walls and made Jorna cringe. "Look at your teammates," he said to everyone, regaining his calm, "and look at who is missing. There are three people who should be standing here with us. There are nearly seventy people on this ship

who should be awake to celebrate the fact that we've made it! Those people aren't going to hang on forever. You heard the reports. The remaining power cells have been all but drained by the landing. Our friends, our crew, have two months at the most before the power goes out for good and they are cut off from everything keeping them alive.

Our parents were heroes because they tried; we can be heroes because we succeeded! We'll never know if we stay in here, and I think that we owe it to ourselves, our folks, and to all of the people relying on us to step up and show them that we are more than just pretenders!" Remmy looked to Kasper and Glory and they started to nod in agreement. Jorna had to hand it to Siler—this name-only Lieutenant's pep-talks were finally getting better. Even Nial looked like he had graduated from opposition to resignation, which was a lot coming from him.

Siler wasn't wrong, of the few people awake on the ship they were the only ones, aside from the commander and her officers, who had any kind of military training. They had been recruited by the Alliance under the premise of giving the despondent and increasingly hostile citizens of Cuniculi a reason to come together. The plan had been well formulated. The Alliance figured that there were just over eighty surviving offspring of *Phoenix I* crew members living in the city and the vicinity above it. Of those eighty, twenty two were orphaned and, as the Alliance saw it, made the most sympathetic and compelling candidates. Those twenty two were then whittled down to eighteen once the age limit was capped at twenty five. From there, eight refused to take part and were suspected to have joined up with the rebel group that was slowly gaining traction among the surface dwellers. The rest, Jorna and Jaxon included, found the offer too good to turn down.

Jorna and Jaxon had been living in an abandoned house on the surface that Jaxon had fortified to block out any traces of sunlight. The war had eliminated not just the majority of

Earth's population, but also her Ozone layer, making even the slightest unprotected exposure a death sentence. They were not alone above ground. Only the wealthy and the connected had a place in Cuniculi, and the rest were left to hide by day and barter for their survival at the night market, communicating through re-breathers and trading ammunition for food and oxygen. Their saving grace had been the stockpile of weapons they found in a bunker buried behind the house. The bunker was useless as a shelter, cramped and caving in on three walls. Jaxon had uncovered the duffel bags of guns from the dirt as he was sifting for food. The first bag of guns had gained them the blackout curtains, fifty cans of food, and the oxygen machine for the house. The second bag they had pieced off slowly and even with their night market gold, food was getting harder to come by. They were down to their final two guns and five cans when they were approached by the Alliance.

Jaxon had been apprehensive, reminding Jorna that these people were the same ones whose main function was to keep the gates of Cuniculi closed to people like the two of them. Jorna didn't care. For the promise of food and access to the city, she would've agreed to just about anything. She didn't have to spend long trying to convince him. When she wanted something bad enough, he knew it was only a matter of time before she found a way to get it. A small part of her had been sad to leave their house behind. She and Jaxon had made a place that was as close to a home as anything Jorna had felt in the three years since she had lost her mother. She was fourteen, only five years older than the girl who had been playing in her bedroom with her best friend the day the world turned upside down. All of that seemed like a lifetime ago. The night that the escort drove them to the city she watched as Jaxon craned his neck to look out the car window at the place that had been theirs, and realized that once again he was letting her be the astronaut.

Cuniculi wasn't what she would call glamorous, but it wasn't any cave dwelling either. The military facility that it had grown from had been very sophisticated, with state-of-the-art research facilities and bunkers that were nicer than some of the homes on the surface. The wealthy and privileged had congregated there as soon as the pandemic began, compensating the Alliance generously to keep them protected from everything above the surface. After the war, it was the post-apocalyptic equivalent of a gated community where the best of the best could carry on their lives under some pretense of normality. They extended residential invitations to people they thought could increase their quality of living—researchers and educators, actors and athletes. In addition, they would hold a quarterly competition where surface dwellers could choose to battle to the death for a handful of sub-par, subterranean living quarters. Jorna had never watched one of the competitions, but she had seen the destruction that they left behind.

“I need everyone to put on their blockers.” Siler said as he pulled the dark tinted glasses from the left breast pocket of his uniform. As Jorna retrieved her own from her belt and rested them on the bridge of her nose and on her ears, the Entrance Bay to grow dark. The right arm of the glasses wrapped down and around her ear and she wiggled the earpiece into place. Once everyone had completed the task, Siler continued. “Now, press the button over your left temple one time.” Jorna followed the command and watched as a grid rolled out before her. The cargo boxes that had rescinded into the darkness were once again visible and a message displayed informing her that prior to Siler's arrival, she had been sitting on a crate of high-grade explosives. She took a delicate step away from the box.

“Can everyone see me?” Siler asked. “To be sure, press the button one more time.” A second click at her left temple turned on a heat detector making the orange blue glow of her comrades unable to miss. In case there was any confusion as to who was who, their name was

displayed above their head, along with a proximity that Jorna could only assume meant distance to her. “Now when we go through those doors, we are going to be stepping into Novum at dawn. The downside is that the sun here is brighter than the one we had on Earth. The plus side is that it’s not going to kill you. As you know, we weren’t expecting to land during the winter, so our vehicles are not outfitted for snow. What this means is that we will be hoofing it. Everyone grab a pair of hover shoes from the crate by the door.”

Jorna followed behind Prael as they walked towards the crate. Back in Cuniculi, they trained on the hover shoes in the city’s rec center, but now Jorna quickly realized that it was not a skillset that stuck with you after eight years of not practicing. After she strapped the hover shoes to her feet, she did as Siler instructed and pressed her heels hard towards the ground. There was a slight *whoosh* sound as her feet lifted a couple inches off of the floor. The sensation was beyond unsteady and she was grateful that she didn’t immediately collapse into a heap like Kasper had. Once everyone had taken a moment to re-locate their center of gravity, Siler gave a sharp whistle and refocused everyone’s attention on him.

“One of the engineers has detected a radioactive occurrence roughly seven miles from here. The coordinates have been uploaded to your blockers and the red arrow in your lower right peripheral is our navigation beacon with distance. Our mission is to scout the area and determine the source of the occurrence. With any luck, whatever is producing that signal could be used to power up one of the energy cells on the ship and buy us some time. In case of emergency, you should all have your weapons loaded and ready to fire.” Jorna touched her hand to her holster with nervous assurance as Siler continued. “We know that there is life out there, but we don’t know where it is or what it looks like. We stick together and watch each other’s backs. Got it?”

Jorna's heart was beating deafeningly loud and she could see her vitals climbing on the top right lens of her blockers.

“Hey Jorna, can I be the one to watch your back?” Nial said teasingly and to the amusement of the other men minus Siler. She looked over her shoulder to see him sizing up her backside and quickly spun around.

“You are really something else, do you know that?” She tossed back with a laugh and a semi-playful punch to the shoulder. It was good to see him acting like his old self, even if it was in brief, vulgar spurts. Nial and Liev had been two of the first people to befriend her and Jaxon when they moved to Cuniculi. On top of being the legacies of two *Phoenix* members, their uncle and guardian was one of the few who had managed to hang on to his fortune during the war and owned a considerable amount of underground space. The boys had grown up in the tunnels and had been eager to show Jorna and Jaxon the ropes. That had been two years ago, or ten—depending on your count, and she understood that while Nial could be annoying to the point of offensive, he was harmless and definitely someone you wanted to have your back.

“Alright guys, this is it. We are about to make history.” Siler said with nervous enthusiasm. He placed his right hand behind his ear and pressed the button on his blockers that allowed him to communicate with the control room. “Open them up.” The words reverberated through Jorna's earpiece and left her momentarily lightheaded. As the giant metal doors moaned and creaked open, Jorna took a deep breath in through her nose and exhaled through her mouth. As the bright light consumed her, she closed her eyes and took in the feeling of the sun on her face.

CHAPTER VI

The vastness of the landscape that sprawled out before her felt more constricting to Jorna Twisdom than her skin tight under layer of cold climate wear. She had become accustomed to the confines of her surroundings, both in the underground city of Cuniculi and aboard the *Phoenix II*, and always positioning herself against a never too distant barrier had made her feel safe. Now the only barriers that held her back were in her mind, and the difficulty that it had taken to will her legs to take the final steps from the ship frustrated her. She wanted to blame gravity, but the difference between Earth's gravity and the slightly larger Verandu's was negligible. She knew that her heaviness came from fear and not from force. Although, the hover shoes didn't help. As she looked ahead to see that even Lieutenant Siler seemed to be struggling with his footing and listened to the spew of profanity that was coming from Nial, she was certain that she wasn't the only one who thought that the team could've benefited from more than a fifteen minute refresher with the technology.

These thoughts flew from her mind as she hovered a shaky boot above the snow and faced the recognition that her night time imaginings from the Cargo Bay porthole of how the landscape spread out hadn't come close. It was almost sensory overload. She hadn't realized how little color had existed in her world until this moment where she saw all of the ones that she had been missing. The sun was barely visible as it began its ascent, and the projections of purple and blue across the cloudless sky were muted by her blockers. Still, the sight was nothing shy of amazing. She had seen sunrises before on Earth, but there had been nothing beautiful about them. The colors had been as dirty as the air and a reminder that they were a slave to their environment, forced to hide from the light. She let out a huff of breath in amazement that she had made it this far. Watching her warm breath hang in the air for a moment, she thought about how it felt in her

lungs and tasted in her mouth. Fresh. She had been swallowing recycled air for so long that she hadn't realized that it had tasted stale.

With her head craned towards the sky, she was able to take notice of a flock of birds that flew roughly thirty feet overhead. They were hard to miss with their orange and red feathers popping with color, contrasting against the sunrise. With wingspans that appeared to be at least six feet, they were the largest air-borne animal that Jorna had ever seen. The flock honked as they flew, punctuating the silence that had taken over since the crew's energy had changed from anticipatory to awestruck. Remmy honked back with impressive imitation but the birds took no notice of him other than to leave behind a splatter of greyish liquid that ran down the shoulder of his jacket.

“Gross! Is that what I think it is?!” he shouted as he attempted to wipe away the mess with a gloved hand but only succeeded in smearing it around. Laughter erupted from the team with the exception of Siler, who just shook his head in quiet amusement, a smile just barely visible at the corners of his mouth.

“Remmy, stop. You're just making it worse.” Glory managed to get out as Jorna belly laughed from the back of the pack. The emotion was as refreshing as the crisp winter air. She had forced a smile or a giggle here and there since waking up on board the ship, but this was the first time she had felt something real that wasn't guilt or fear or loss.

“Get some snow on your glove. Maybe that will get rid of it.” Siler offered in an attempt to be helpful. Remmy bent forward and reached down in an effort to scoop up the snow but received more than he had anticipated as his forward momentum threw off the delicate center of gravity imposed by the hover shoes and placed his entire person into the powder. The squad was really roaring now and Jorna felt tears forming at the corners of her eyes as she watched her

teammate flounder about. Remmy, like Nial, had always liked to stir up a good laugh and he didn't fail to recognize this opportunity to play to his audience.

“Alright soldier,” Siler said, regaining his composure, “back on your feet. We've got a lot of ground to cover if we want to make it back by dark.”

Jorna pressed the button on her blockers that brought up the time on her left lens and noted that it was still only 0748. It wouldn't get dark until just after 1700, but the direction beacon that had popped up with the clock showed the energy source as being just over seven miles away, and the hover shoes weren't built for speed. She exhaled a loud, long breath at the remembrance that they had a job to do and made her way over to help Glory and Kasper pull Remmy to his feet. After nearly ending up in the snow herself, they managed to get him upright and the three of them fell in line behind the others who had begun the march across the frozen lake.

“Can you believe all this?” Jorna said to no one in particular after they had been walking for the better part of an hour. She looked over her shoulder back to the ship. It had seemed so expansive when she had been on board, but when silhouetted against the range of white capped mountains that stretched up behind it the ship looked like one of the toys that she played with as a child.

“Yes, I can believe it. I've been staring at it for the past hour,” Prael said in a voice as chilly as the air, her preferred tone when addressing Jorna. Prael rarely made a habit of facing Jorna she spoke, and this morning was no exception. She continued by adding, “You know who can't believe it? Jaxon. Jaxon and the others who are going to die if we don't get to that power source. Maybe you should focus on that instead of sightseeing.”

Prael was just within arm's reach and it took all of the restraint that Jorna had not to thrust her hands forward straight into the girl's shoulder blades and place her face first in the snow. She ran a finger across her swollen cheek again and forced herself to remember the hot water she was already in with Siler and Dr. Greer over her last encounter with Prael Laarson. It wasn't enough to stop her from a quick game of button-pushing.

"Yeah, thanks. I don't know why you care if none of those people wake up. It's not like you're friends with them. In fact, it's not like you're friends with anyone. Is that why you're so focused on playing the good soldier? Because you don't have anyone interested in letting you play the good friend?" Prael stopped moving and Jorna's eyes lit up with victory. Target hit, she thought smugly.

"That is enough, Twisdom!" Siler said sharply as he stopped walking and turned to face them. Kasper had been following so closely behind Siler that he nearly crashed in to him when the Lieutenant had stopped. He, along with Glory and Remmy, followed Siler's lead and turned to face Jorna with looks that appeared to be a mix of annoyance and accusatory. Siler's look was stern, but Jorna met his frustration with a shrug of her shoulders. She knew better than to let Prael provoke her, but it had been made very clear to her after their cargo hold scuffle that physical jabs would not be tolerated. Verbal jabs were to be her only means of recourse.

"I want you up here. Now!" said Siler, his patience audibly thin. Jorna flashed her eyes over towards her instigator, hoping that she was finally being pinpointed as the source of the problem but when the Lieutenant's finger raised and pointed directly at Jorna, she knew that once again she was going to be the only one reprimanded. She gave a glance backward to Nial who offered up an apologetic smirk and she proceeded forward, brushing her shoulder hard against Prael in an effort to throw her off balance. She didn't succeed, but she did manage to

elicit stifled laughter from her three remaining team members as she passed by them. Glory whispered something to the other two that she couldn't hear; whatever it was only made them laugh harder.

“We don't have time for this, Twisdom. We have a mission to complete,” Siler said to her as the two proceeded forward, signaling the rest of the team to press on.

“Why does everyone seem to think that I don't know that? I want to find that power source as much as anyone here. More than some people here. I can't bear to live in a world where Prael Laarson exists and Jaxon Gloomis doesn't,” Jorna said, half sarcastically.

“Come on Jorna, you are better than that. Have you ever heard the expression, ‘be the bigger person?’”

She rolled her eyes and quickened her pace so that she was now leading the pack. Turning her focus to the tree line that had been the fodder for her imagination, she was finally able to take it in for what it was. Her blockers told her that the forest entrance was roughly a hundred yards away, but even from this distance she could see that the trunks were gigantic, stretching at least a two hundred feet up from the ground with giant leafless branches reaching out and swooping up at different angles. In her quick observation, she couldn't find a single one that grew straight up without bending and stooping or leaning one way or another. The trunks appeared to be a bluish-green color, but Jorna wasn't sure how much of that had to do with the semi-darkness that was quickly fading as the sun crept higher into the sky.

“Alright everybody, listen up!” Siler bellowed after a couple of minutes. “You see that tree line up ahead?” Jorna turned her head back towards Siler and realized that she had moved farther ahead of the group than she thought and took a couple steps backward to close the gap. “That tree line is where we are going to enter the forest. It's the most direct route to our

destination, but that doesn't mean that it is going to be easy. We don't know what the terrain looks like in there, and more importantly, we don't know what might be living in there. As soon as everyone is inside, I want us to stop and regroup." He concluded his command by giving a thumbs up that everyone repeated, signaling that they got the message.

Jorna stayed in place and waited for her comrades to catch up to her and then fell in line just before Nial, relieved to see that Siler didn't try and stop her. They moved forward mostly in silence, the rhythmic *whoosh whoosh* from the displaced air of their hover shoes joining together in an unspoken marching chant. She took a last look back at the clearing, the ship, and the now orange and pink sky with the sun now fully visible above the horizon. Even with her blockers, it hurt her eyes to look directly at it. Still, she forced herself to fix on it for just a moment longer. She felt powerful, defiant even, with her face pointed directly at it. She knew that she was being silly, that of the many things on this planet that could kill her, the sun wasn't one of them. The tree line was only about thirty feet away now and her fear of the openness was quickly dissipating in comparison to the mounting anxiety of entering the alien forest.

When the group reached the forest's edge, Jorna took in the trees as being massive and menacing. In the peripherals where her blockers didn't cover she could see the bright glow of the sun off of the snow. It was more light than she had been exposed to in years and she was about to leave it for the shadows. As she stepped inside, she could see twigs and branches of smaller plants poking up through the snow, and a virtual scan from her blockers identified the chemical makeup of the fauna as it appeared before her. She was no botanist, but she recognized the frequent flashing of *carbon* in the top of her left lens as the reason that this planet had been selected for habitation. She wondered how the smaller plants could survive with so little light, since the bare branches that tangled overhead blocked out the better part of the daylight. Placing

a gloved hand on one of the twigs, she ran her thumb over what appeared to be a leaf bud and reminded herself that things learned to adapt. Every creak of a tree or snap of a branch that punctuated the sound of Jorna's nervous, tired breath caused her to flinch. She knew that she wasn't alone in her uneasiness, as she could hear her teammates startled gasps through the speaker in her ear.

“Alright guys, if we keep up a good pace, we should reach the power source by mid-day,” Siler said as he pushed the button on his blockers that presumably showed him the time. Jorna did the same; it was 0917. “The forest isn't as dense as I thought it would be, but we still need to watch our step. Everything in this forest is a potential threat. Remember the briefing; don't touch the plants and keep an eye out for wildlife.” Jorna let go of the twig and tucked her hand in her coat pocket.

“No offense, LT, but are you sure this is a good idea?” Kasper, normally over confident, asked with a tone of uncertainty that put them all on edge. “I mean, we don't know a thing about this place. Those birds we saw outside could've swooped down and carried one of us off and we would've never seen it coming.” The re-imagining of the formerly majestic moment made Jorna tense and vulnerable. “I'm just saying that maybe we should take the long route and steer clear of the woods today.” There were mumbles of agreement amongst the squad. Glory crouched down as if she was ready to make a run for it. Remmy and Prael were looking back out at the clearing like it was a closing door.

“You just said it, Kasper. Those birds could've been predators. We are no safer out there than we are in here. We just need to keep our eyes open and our mouths shut. I want you to have your weapons ready but do not fire unless the situation absolutely calls for it. Most importantly, under no circumstances are we to split up. As long as we stay together and keep our cool, we will

get through this no problem.” Siler gave a thumbs up again and the group just stared at him. Jorna wanted to believe him, but she couldn’t bring herself around to it. They weren’t soldiers, they were props meant to convince a skittish society to give up the rest of their resources on a longshot that humanity hadn’t reached the end of its run. Trekking into the alien wilderness on a reconnaissance mission had never been part of the plan. She would follow him anyway, because he deserved that much from her, and more importantly because Jaxon’s survival depended on it. She hadn’t been any easier on Siler than the rest of the group since he was appointed their leader. It had been hard to take him seriously when he was running them through search and rescue drills in an underground gymnasium, especially as the real soldiers snickered and jeered in the doorway. Standing in front of her now, with his chin up and his shoulders back she could see why they picked him to be Lieutenant. She put her thumb up in a show of support and elbowed Nial, prompting him to follow suit. One by one the thumbs went up until everyone was at least showing solidarity, if not courage. Siler smiled, gave a nod, and began trekking further into the woods.

They had been walking for just over an hour and Jorna was beginning to sweat. In addition to blocking the light, the trees also did an impressive job blocking the wind and she felt the need for a nice winter breeze. She tried to distract herself with sounds of the forest. Compared to the quiet tranquility of the clearing, the sounds coming from the trees were deafening. The squawks and buzzes from the mostly elusive creatures made the forest feel alive. Every now and then she would see a pair of oversized eyes peeking from a high up branch. It reminded Jorna of when she was little and her mother had taken her and Jaxon to a zoo. She had been so excited to go that she hadn’t slept at all the night before. When they got there she didn’t even know where to begin. Her mother bought her pink and blue cotton candy and Jaxon some

popcorn that he fed most of to an elephant. She led the giddy children through the amphibian exhibit to the marsupial display where Jaxon would've spent the rest of the day watching koalas had Jorna not been so determined to see the big cats. It was a memory of a rare good day before her dad died, her mom got sick, and the world went to hell. A day when she and her best friend had discovered something new together and gabbed excitedly about growing up to be zoologists as they shared what was left of Jorna's now purple and sticky cotton candy on the car ride home. The recollection brought with it the familiar twist in Jorna's gut.

Not wanting to think about Jaxon or her mother, Jorna focused her energy on trying to master her hover shoes. After some experimenting, she had figured out that as long as the ground underneath was level, the shoe was fairly easy to maneuver. She was sure it had something to do with the fact that the air displaced differently when it bounced back off of a rough surface, but it mostly just made them feel cumbersome and defective. It made her keep an eye out for exposed roots and snow covered logs, as hovering over them made the shoe wobbly as it tried to right itself. Prael hadn't quite got this down yet, and Jorna took a small amount of amusement in watching her teeter back and forth every so many steps. The moment came where she teetered too far and was about to get a backside full of snow. Fearing that she would take them both down, Jorna caught Prael by the shoulder and absorbed her misstep. She held her balance and pushed Prael back to an upright position. Instead of looking thankful, however, Prael looked annoyed and began to step quickly until she had moved to the front of the group, placing Glory and Remmy as a buffer between her and Jorna.

Jorna turned to the give Nial eye roll and a huff of exasperation, only to realize that he wasn't the one bringing up the rear. Less than fifty feet behind him was what Jorna could only equate to a big cat. Her blockers flashed *carbon*, which her mind interpreted as *extreme danger*.

The white and grey fur that blanketed the beast spiked up in agitation down the creature's spine. The creature's four paws sank into the snow, but with each slinking step Jorna could see that each one was decorated with five serious talons. She estimated that the thing would come up to her chest, and with hind quarters that looked like pure muscle, Jorna was certain that it was fast. It was also now aware of her specifically, abandoning its hunt to size her up. Its pointy, jackal ears stood up from its watermelon-sized head and twitched with anticipation. Fangs, roughly the size of the dagger at her hip, hung from each side of the cat's mouth and served as a scary preview of what else was in there. The expression on her face tipped off Nial, who turned to see what had her so spooked.

"Siler! We have a problem!" She hissed while holding down the mic button on her blockers with one hand as she drew her weapon with the other. She looked to Nial who gripped his weapon to his chest. As Siler stopped to turn, so did everyone else except Jorna, Nial, and the big cat. It all happened in a moment. Someone fired at the cat and missed, someone screamed, and everyone ran.

Jorna took off in the same direction as Nial but quickly surpassed him as she tore through the forest like her life depended on it—because she was pretty sure that it did. She wasn't sure how long she had been running when she looked back to see how far behind her Nial was. She didn't see him. She also didn't see the ravine before her as she went toppling end over end down the steep bank until her face connected with something solid, causing her world to go dark.

CHAPTER VII

Jorna woke up with the taste of blood in the back of her throat and a confident feeling that her nose was broken. She wasn't sure if she had been out for two minutes or two hours, but her incessant teeth chattering indicated the latter. She had no good way to check as her tumble had ripped her blockers from her face and sent one of her hover shoes flying. Locating her blockers in knee deep snow was proving to be a challenge, especially with one foot still trying to hover. She clicked off the remaining shoe and continued to crawl around feeling for her lifeline, leaving a sparse trail of red drops in her wake. When she finally found her blockers, it was with the horrified realization that the pair of glasses that served as her clock, her GPS, and the tracking beacon that would allow her to reconnect with her team was now in two pieces. She guessed that the blockers had broken at the same time as her nose, and she saw only the tint of the lenses as she held the pieces in front of her face in a last ditch effort to connect with her group. Realizing that she was very much alone and exposed, she tucked the busted equipment into her pocket and decided to make her way back to the ship hoping that she would run into someone, and not something along the way. She found her rogue hover shoe at the base of a neighboring tree, and after several failed attempts to make it take flight she started back the hard way.

Trudging through the snow she gave her best impression of stealth, which proved difficult when every footstep gave way to an unsubtle crunch beneath her boot. She had been meandering aimlessly in the direction she hoped the ship was in for what must have been close to two hours. With no sight of one of her teammates or the clearing, her legs aching and her back soaked with sweat, she sat down on a soggy log frustrated and discouraged. She removed the standard issue military pistol from her belt and lined up the sights with an imaginary target. She had only ever discharged her weapon in training and was hoping she wouldn't lose her nerve

when it came to taking down something living. She thought she had been ready to shoot the big cat, but it wasn't she who had pulled the trigger.

In a panicked moment, she realized what easy prey she would be for a predator; stomping through the forest by herself she was practically shouting "Here I am! Come eat me!" She gave a quick check over each shoulder and wished that Jaxon was out here with her. It felt strange to be without her blockers but there was something so natural to the unfamiliar feel of sunlight on her face that she tilted her head upwards, letting the warmth of the sun sit on her frosty cheeks. She imagined what it must have been like to grow up on Earth before going out during the day time was a death sentence. The now non-existent Ozone layer meant that even the briefest exposure to the direct rays guaranteed the arrival of cancerous cells within months.

She imagined what it would have been like to walk through a forest like the one she was surrounded by now. By the time she was born, groupings of trees large enough to be considered forests were few and far between. What the people hadn't cleared, the changing climate had. By the time she left Earth, the only trees left were in labs she never saw, genetically formulated to emit as much oxygen as possible for the underground city. The thought triggered a memory of when her mother had taken Jorna to visit her paternal grandparents' farm shortly after receiving the news of the *Phoenix I's* fate. Jorna didn't know anything about her father's parents, or her father for that matter, except for what her mother had told her. Apparently, her grandparents didn't know much about her father either as they hadn't been aware that he had been on the ship and seemed as indifferent to the news of his death as Jorna had felt. On the car ride home her mother told her that Jorna's grandparents hadn't spoken to her father in a long time, but that they had a right to know that he had died. Jorna remembered thinking that they were selfish for making the choice not to know him, a choice that she would never get. Looking back now, she

couldn't recall a single detail about her grandparents' faces, but she remembered clear as day the fact that they had three big oak trees on their property. Jorna had spent the majority of that particular day perched in one, climbing up the footholds that her father had nailed into the trunk when he had been her age and feeling aware that this was the closest she would ever be to him.

Jorna was jerked away from her thoughts when a soft crunch demanded all of her attention. She instinctively positioned herself into a crouch, her feet planted firmly on the ground ready to spring at any moment. Whether she would be running towards something or away from it was soon to be discovered. The adrenaline coursed through her in powerful waves and she forced herself to remain quiet and still despite every other impulse in her body telling her to move. She took in her surroundings and tried to make some sort of an exit strategy. Completely surrounded by trees, Jorna didn't know that any one direction would provide a better means of escape than another. She contemplated burying herself in the snow when she heard the crunch again: it was coming from her right. Best case scenario was that one of her teammates had ended up like her, traipsing through the snow in search of a comrade, but she knew better than to call out. With the memory of the Twisdom family farm fresh in her mind, it dawned on her that her best chance of survival had been hanging over her head the entire time.

There were no footholds, but the branches above her head hung low enough that she could reach them with a good jump. If she could manage to pull herself up on to one it seemed that its proximity to the other branches could serve as a precarious walkway all the way over to the area from which the sound was coming. It wasn't a foolproof plan by any means. She didn't know if the branches could support her weight or if it would be a quieter means of transportation than the snow beneath her boots. There was no question in her ability to pull herself into the tree but the jumping part made her hesitate. Jorna had never been a particularly good jumper, and

were she to go for it and miss, the thump she was sure to make upon returning to the ground would definitely give her away. Again, she wished that Jaxon were here, so he could give her a boost. He would barely need to jump to reach them himself. She heard the crunch again and decided that if it was a big cat and not a teammate, she did not have a lot of time to stand there and weigh the pros and cons of her only plan. After taking one more deep breath, Jorna launched herself with as much strength as she could muster.

She clasped her hands around the sturdy branch easily and hung for a second, impressed with her abilities. Reminding herself that she hadn't done anything terribly impressive yet, she swung a leg over the branch and pulled herself up. Slowly, she rose to her feet and stretched out her arms on either side of her for balance. The tree wasn't covered with course bark, like the one at her grandparents' house. Instead it had a slimy, smooth texture from a combination of moss and moisture, which increased her odds of falling significantly and left her gloves stained and sticky. Sliding the toe of her boot back and forth on the branch for a moment, she eventually found the best strategy for placing her step. After giving the branch a little test bounce to make sure that it wouldn't snap, she pulled herself up onto the next branch, hoping that higher elevation would equal better coverage. She noted that the branches seemed to jut off and peculiar angles closest to the trunk, straightening out the further they got from their base. Her added weight caused the branch to rustle, and she prayed that she hadn't drawn attention to herself. When she was sure she was in the clear, Jorna climbed up to a sturdier branch that gave her the stability she would need to make her way over towards the noise. She heard the crunch again, a little further away now and knew that she would need to move quickly. The higher vantage point was a double edged sword as the dense branches disguised her location but also prevented her from being able to determine what exactly was making the sound.

She took an apprehensive step forward followed by a more confident one, and quickly realized the moving along the branch was like walking in hover shoes. All she needed to do was keep her feet steady and pay attention to where she was placing them. Switching to a new branch proved to be more difficult, especially if she wanted to remain inconspicuous. The branches from the next tree tangled into the one she was currently in, providing good cover but less stability. The ends of the branches were weak and bounced under her as she moved. Twice she stepped on a twig and clenched her jaw as it snapped and fell to the ground. By the third tree however, she had developed a system that seemed to be working well for her. At one point as she slid her hand across the branch above her head it crossed her mind that predators on the ground might not be the only thing to be concerned about but the adrenaline of the situation left little room for fear and she pressed forward thinking only about the target in front of her and not about the potential danger above.

After little time Jorna had made it close enough to get a look at the thing she had been chasing. It wasn't anyone from her team, but it also didn't look like a big cat either. The creature had a long thin back, low to the ground, and tan fur. It reminded her of something non-predatory, like a deer. She was familiar with deer as they were one of the few sources of meat, almost as valuable as bullets, at the above ground night market back on Earth where she had been both vendor and patron. As a precaution, Jorna reached for her gun only to find an empty holster and remembered with nauseating panic setting the weapon down on the log where she had stopped to rest. She was racked with indecision as she contemplated going back for it. Jorna was doubtful that she could make her way back to the gun without being discovered, but also knew that as is stood she was roughly ten feet away from something that potentially wanted to eat her with nothing but the element of surprise and the knife hanging from her belt. In this moment, her

ambition began to seem like extreme foolishness. Before another thought could cross her mind she missed her step and plummeted to the ground. In her moment of free fall she hoped the snow would provide a good cushion but the crack she felt in her ankle upon impact proved that would not be the case.

Numb with pain and fighting back tears, she nearly forgot what she was doing in the tree in the first place but a crunch directly in front of her served as a quick reminder. Jorna shoved herself to her feet, pain stabbing up her left leg as she let out groan. She could see that the creature had stopped, hopefully frightened by her arrival. To her dismay it did not turn and run, instead it grew taller stepping up onto its hind legs. Panic seized her but as it took a step forward she realized that it wasn't its hind legs the creature was walking on, they were its only legs—ones that looked unquestionably human. She blinked the tears from her eyes and followed the shape of the figure upwards. The torso, thin and covered in some sort of fur jacket that was nothing at all like military issued ones they wore at base. The two arms under the fur were hard to distinguish but they didn't look particularly muscular, unlike the well-toned arms of her and her comrades. The neck was not particularly unique but as her eyes finally reached the face a gasp escaped her trembling lips. It was a girl, not one she knew from the ship and yet the most familiar person she had ever seen.

As she studied the features, the cornflower blue eyes, the mouth with its narrow puffy lips, she realized that the face was familiar because it was hers. There were some differences, but they were so slight that it was almost as if she were looking in a mirror, exaggerated by the fact that her reflection was staring just as intently back. The double lowered her eyes and Jorna saw her lips move soundlessly, leading her to believe that the girl was reading the silver stitched “Twisdom” sewn to the patch on the upper right side of her chest. As the double's eyes once

again met hers there was something new behind them, fear had been replaced by what appeared to be anger or confusion or both, and before Jorna had fully comprehended what had just happened, her double turned and sprinted into the darkness. Jorna had so many questions, but the pain in her ankle was clouding her thoughts.

“Wait!” Jorna screamed. She had been quiet for so many hours that she had almost forgotten she could speak. She listened for the girl but only heard a faint crunching growing farther and farther away. Jorna attempted to follow her disappearing double, but on the first step her ankle gave way and she collapsed into the snow. Cold, wet, and writhing in pain she laid there thinking that perhaps the combination of all of those things was causing her to hallucinate, that there had been no person at all. Perhaps she had knocked herself unconscious when she fell and this was all one bizarre dream. Or worse, maybe the big cat had caught up to her and she was in fact dead. But she had always believed that death would be peaceful and at the moment she felt anything but. Her fear, coupled with the throbbing in her busted ankle, was enough to assure her that she hadn’t died. Not yet.

That wasn’t to say death wasn’t far off. She knew that there was no way she could walk even a few steps, let alone the hours it would take to get back to the ship, and the sweat from her insulated layer was causing the cold to settle into her skin. Her only hope was that someone would come across her tracks and find her. As she lay there helplessly in the snow, she managed to turn onto her back and squint up at the mid-day sun through the lifeless branches. She closed her eyes but even then the white bright sunlight danced on her eyelids. She succumbed to the tears that had been dying to escape since she first woke and learned that Jaxon hadn’t. She longed for him, for her mother, and for the comfortable darkness in which she had lived her life up to now.

CHAPTER VIII

Jorna opened her eyes to the night sky. She was moving, gliding backwards as she watched the brightly shining stars flicker through the passing tree branches. She could hear a muffled song from her childhood being sung in a soft, deep male voice somewhere close, and the moment might have been serene if she had the slightest idea where she was headed and who she was headed there with. Instead, her panic at these unknowns amplified her already uncontrollable shivering. The thick furry covering weighing down on her chest was more constricting than comforting. She was also distracted by the fact that her right ankle felt uncomfortably swollen in her boot, the pressure intensifying the pain of its rhythmic throbbing. Suddenly, the realization of how she had come to this moment, the vivid recollection of her doppelganger in the woods and the fall from the tree, hit her as hard as the ground had earlier. An immediate need to identify herself with her surroundings pushed its way into the forefront of her mind as she carefully repositioned her gloved hands from their resting place on her stomach to the solid mass beneath her. She was lying on some sort of a sled.

Until she had more information to work with, Jorna decided to keep the fact that she was now conscious to herself. Earlier this morning she had known for certain that she and her crew were the only people on Novum. Now that she knew of the existence of at least two others, she thought it a safe bet to imagine that there were more out here. Her heartbeat quickened as she wondered whether she was being taken back to the camp of these others. Would they see her as a threat? Looking back to her encounter with the doppelganger she supposed that her fall from the tree could have been construed as some sort of poorly executed attack. Her mind was spinning with terrifying thoughts of interrogation and imprisonment, and when her thoughts stopped on the idea of cannibalism she came very close to throwing up. The melodic voice was still carrying

on to seemingly no one but the trees. It sounded too beautiful to belong to a captor or cannibal, yet she supposed that there were no rules saying that such a person wasn't allowed to sing. She tuned in closely to his voice as it carried up and down over the melody. The song relaxed and unsettled her at the same time. Her mother used to sing it to her and Jaxon when they were little and the fact that this man could know the tune meant that he, too, was from Earth or he had an eerie way of looking into her mind. With everything that had happened to her up to this point, neither idea seemed out of the question.

Jorna reminded herself that there were at least fifty other people, her people, on this planet who probably knew that song as well. Best case scenario was that the rest of her squad made it back to the ship and notified the superiors of her disappearance. Would they have sent someone from A-Team or B-Team to look for her? If she was this lucky, which she had a strong feeling was not the case, she still wasn't sure it was a good idea for her rescuer to know she was awake. She had been given one rule—stick together, and at the first sign of danger she had gone every-man-for-himself quicker than you could count to three. She left Nial behind. That thought made her sad. Her connection to him was nothing like the one she shared with Jaxon, but he had become a good filler for her missing other half. It didn't matter if they were faux-military or not, she had broken rank and jeopardized the first real mission her team had been sent on. That would not go unnoticed.

After coming to the conclusion that her hypothesizing was taking far longer than simply positioning herself to get a look at this person, she decided to go with that plan instead. Jorna tried to rotate her body slowly onto her left hip so that she would be able to crane her head towards the front of the sled. Despite the busted ankle, which felt like it was breaking all over again every time she so much as nudged it, she thought she was accomplishing her task relatively

well. Midway through her roll however, both the sled and the singing came to an abrupt stop. Jorna lay there motionless, frozen with fear and with cold. She shut her eyes tightly and willed herself to breathe the calm, steady breaths of a person sleeping soundly. The crunch of snow beneath boots stung her ears as someone approached slowly, accompanied by lighter, quicker paced footsteps trailing close behind. She waited, shivering worse than ever, for an endless amount of time for him to speak or to shake her, but he didn't. Instead he readjusted the fur covering, which had come loose when she shifted, so that it once again was wrapped snugly around her body. Both sets of footsteps moved away and the sled resumed its gliding.

After a moment, Jorna forced her fisted fingers to extend. She tried to relax her body and mind, telling herself that this man, whoever he was, didn't seem to mean her any harm. Still, there was no way to be sure and if it wasn't for her ankle Jorna was pretty would be up off this sled in a heartbeat and sprinting as fast as she could in the other direction. If it weren't for her ankle she wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. That's not entirely true, she told herself. You can't blame the ankle for the horrendous plan the brain came up with. What would Jaxon think of the situation she had gotten herself into? Would he tell her she was stupid and reckless—master of knowing how to take a bad situation and make it worse? Probably. He had called her impulsive more often than he called her by her name, it seemed. He hated the way she charged into situations the same way that it drove her crazy how he weighed the pros and cons on *everything* before making a decision. She imagined herself recounting this particularly horrifying adventure to him the next time she saw him, *if she ever saw him again*. That uncertainty hit her like a punch in the stomach, so she placed all of her focus on the one thing she knew for certain—she was definitely not going to try and get another look at the man until this ride reached its destination. The man had stopped his singing after her close call and so she

closed her eyes and tuned into the only other sounds there were, footsteps and the *whoosh* of the displaced air that suggested her sled was hovering.

The quick paced footsteps of the man's companion were erratic and all over the place but the singing stranger's boots punched through the snow's frozen top layer in a steady beat and Jorna began to pass the time by counting each well timed step. She had reached eight hundred and seventy-two when the sled once again came to a stop. The man was shuffling around in front of the sled and Jorna was about to try and sneak a glance at him when the erratic footsteps came bounding towards her before proceeding to stop in front of her so abruptly that a splash of snow hit her directly in the face. The coldness of the snow was countered by a panting breath, hot and putrid and much closer than she wanted it to be. She wiped the melting mixture from her eyes and then opened them to see giant fangs dripping with saliva. Not caring who knew she was awake, she let out an instinctive scream and scrambled to get off of the sled and away from those teeth. As she fell back into the snow she could see more of the creature, its broad furry back standing at least four feet above the snow that its sturdy legs sunk into. Its head looked almost canine with a long snout and two ears—one standing upright and the other flopping over. White fur covered nearly all of the animal's body, but its ears were black and in the darkness they almost seemed to disappear entirely. Jorna stared up at the beast, waiting for it to attack. Thankfully, it merely stared at her for a moment before bounding away as quickly as it had come. As it left, she noticed its small white tail waving excitedly from side to side.

Jorna watched as the creature approached the man. His face was obscured by the hood of his jacket but he extended out a mitten covered hand and rubbed the top of the beast's head.

“What is that thing?!” she yelled to him in a hoarse voice. She waited for him to respond but instead he proceeded to bend down and start scooping at the snow. “I asked you a question!”

Jorna declared, trying again to elicit a response, but the man just continued to scoop, pushing the discarded snow into a pile and expanding the section of exposed earth. “Hey!” she bellowed as loud as she could without her raspy voice giving out entirely. Keeping the weight off of her bad ankle she managed to push herself up into a stance. The beast turned its gaze from the man over to her and bared its frightening fangs once more. Even if she could walk, Jorna was certain that she shouldn’t take a step in that things direction.

“I know you can speak,” she stated in a matter-of-fact way, “or at least I know you can sing.” Just like that she had the man’s full attention, he straightened his legs and walked towards her in the same steady pace she had previously counted in her head. As he moved closer, she still couldn’t see his face but strands of shaggy white hair, the same color as the beasts, poked out from the sides of his hood. Jorna hopped on her good foot trying to rebalance her weight and the next thing she knew the only separating her from this stranger was the sled he had brought her here on. He raised his arms and lowered his hood. Underneath the hood and the messy mop of hair was a face that wasn’t as strange as she expected it to be. It was just weathered and old. His wrinkled brow was furrowed, making his wild eyebrows give his hazel eyes an angry look. His nose was straight as an arrow with the bottom part partially obscured by an ice chunk filled mustache so long and unruly that it made the hair on his head seem well groomed. The mustache trailed into a beard that hid most of the bottom part of his face and she couldn’t tell how far down it reached as the bottom portion was tucked into his jacket.

“Pretty bold for someone who doesn’t know if I am here to help you,” he said in a deep, gravelly voice as he adjusted a belt around his waist that clearly held both a knife and a gun, “or to hurt you.” Jorna’s fight or flight instincts kicked in with such force that the adrenaline rush nearly took her to her knees. She put her hand on her belt where her knife should be and was

surprised that it was still there. The small relief to find herself still armed was outweighed by the recognition that her blade was no match for his bullets. Fleeing was out of the question. Even if she could fight through the pain and make a run for it, it would only be a matter of time before she was taken down by the old man or his beast. Her chest felt tight as she struggled for a deep breath and her heartbeat was pounding in her ears at an unsettling rate. She was trapped.

“Relax, girl. If I wanted to kill you, I would have done it where I found you and not wasted my time dragging you halfway through the damn forest.” He reached out his arm towards her and Jorna pulled back, losing her balance in the process. The man grabbed her by the shoulder before she could fall and forced her back down to the sled, which was in fact hovering. “Sit,” he added as an afterthought. With that he walked back to the front of the sled and pulled Jorna over to the spot he had been working on. He grabbed a bundle of wood that Jorna now noticed had also been on the oversized sled along with a couple of bags, one twice the size of the other. Jorna remained silent as the man built a small teepee out of sticks in the middle of the clearing. He pulled a jug from the small bag and poured a blue liquid onto the wood. To Jorna’s amazement the wood began to crackle and smoke and in no time at all a toasty fire was growing in front of them. Jorna remained seated on the sled and the man joined her, sitting as far away from her as their make-shift bench would allow.

“Would you hand me those bags?” the old man asked without turning to face her. His fidgety movements led Jorna to believe that he was just as uncomfortable sitting next to her as she was with him. It wasn’t until he cocked his head and looked at her that she remembered he had asked her a question. Feeling self-conscious for staring, Jorna looked grabbed the larger bag which she gathered to weigh around twenty pounds and heaved it over to him. The smaller bag didn’t weigh twenty pounds, but it was still heavier than she imagined it would be. The old man

set both bags out before him and opened each one to peer inside as if taking a quick check of inventory. Jorna had already watched him pull something out that started a fire without a spark and she was overwhelmed with curiosity as to what other strange items were hidden inside. Seemingly satisfied with what he saw, the old man closed up each of the bags and removed his mittens and placed his hands in front of the fire. She realized she was staring again and couldn't stop. This curious man with his bag of tricks and oversized pet was unlike anyone she had ever met, or could even have imagined. She was mystified by him.

“Who are you?” Jorna finally asked as she pulled her gloves off and let the heat of the fire thaw her own frozen fingers.

“Who are *you*?” the man replied quizzically, the corners of his mustache turning up in indication of a smile. Jorna said nothing. She simply looked at him and thought how differently this day had turned out from what she had planned. She hadn't been sure what she might run into out in the woods but a person, no *people*, had definitely never entered her mind. “Not exactly forthcoming when a stranger starts poking around about your identity, are you?” The old man held his mittens in front of the fire and let them warm for a second before placing them back on his hands, a satisfied expression on his face.

“Touché. Let's try this, then. Why did you go through the trouble of dragging me all the way out here? Wherever here might be,” she said, gesturing widely with her arms. The man pulled something that looked like a bird from the large bag. Aside from horns coming from the top of the animal's head, the overlooked feather here or there and the stripped down wings and legs made the naked thing look remarkably like a chicken.

“I drug you out here because *here*,” He said, dramatizing her arm gesture, “is where they need to find you. What were you doing in the woods in the first place?” Again, he didn't look at

her when he spoke, instead he pulled three more sticks from the bag that the dead animal came from and stuck two similar looking ones with forked ends into the ground next to the fire. He used the last stick to spear what she hoped was dinner and rested on top of the other two. Every few seconds he would rotate the top stick so that a different part animal was touching the fire. The smell of real food wafted from it immediately and Jorna's mouth began to water. They had been surviving on space food for the last six months, and recently it was announced that they were dangerously short on rations. By the time they landed on Novum, they were subsisting on one small meal a day and Jorna's growling stomach had grown as fierce as it was pre-Cuniculi.

"I was attempting to hunt; food supplies are running a bit short in my group," she half-lied, wiping the saliva from the corner of her mouth. "Who are you expecting to find me? And why does it have to be here?" She looked around her and saw nothing but trees and nothing to distinguish them from the countless ones they had traveled past earlier. Nothing about this spot seemed remarkable.

"I imagine your people will be coming for you before too long." The old man carefully plucked a remaining feather from the roasting critter and after a moment it became clear that he wasn't going to answer the second part of her question.

"Not likely. I wasn't supposed to go off on my own. It might've been fine if it wasn't for that damn cat," Jorna said solemnly as she wrapped her arms around her chest and leaned forward on to her knees. She was foolish to even consider that they would send someone for her.

"Cat, you say?" The man was trying to sound nonchalant but Jorna detected an interest in his tone. The fact that he was trying to hide it made her all the more curious.

“I didn’t really take the time to study it. All I know is that whatever it was it had some serious fangs and claws,” she said, cautiously eyeing the beast that had reemerged from the woods.

“Sounds like a gwalar to me. Sneaky critters. They can stalk you for miles without you having the slightest clue. Not like this brute and his kind,” the old man said giving the beast a pat on the ribs as it walked by, “nothing sneaky about that oaf.” Jorna watched the beast as it spun around a few times before lying down on the opposite side of the fire. It didn’t matter how harmless the man tried to make the beast out to be, Jorna still didn’t think it was something you would want to pet.

“How do you know so much about the wildlife? How long have you been here?” She watched the old man intently as he turned the critter over again. It stood to reason that the man could’ve lived here—a member of some sort of Veranduvian hermit clan—his entire life. He’s too human, Jorna thought. The man had Earthling written all over his grizzly exterior.

“You sure ask an awful lot of questions,” said the man after letting out a deep sigh. “And I wish I could give you all the answers you are looking for, really I do. You’re just not ready yet.” Jorna felt like her head could explode with frustration over the things he wasn’t telling her.

“Ready for what?” she mused, trying to keep the anger from her voice.

“For what is going to happen once people find out the truth.” The last word was barely more than a whisper and for a moment the man was lost in thought.

“The truth about what?!” She was losing control of her temper. Her face felt hot and it wasn’t just because of the fire. The beast seemed to pick up on the intensity in her voice and rose to its feet. In no time it was staring her down tentatively, waiting to see what she would do next.

“What part about not being ready was unclear to you?” the man fired back, raising his voice. For the first time when he spoke he had looked her directly in the eyes. The dancing fire reflecting off his glassy pupils had given him a look that was even more wild than usual. For a moment they just stared at each other, neither one prepared to back down, until the old man finally pulled away. He shoved the stick holding the cooking critter into the snow so that the flames could still lick the underside of its belly and pulled a mug and a small pouch from the smaller bag. After filling the mug almost to the top with snow, he then sprinkled a pinch of whatever was in the pouch onto the top. He scooted the concoction up towards the fire, picked his stick back up, and resumed rotating.

“Listen, this whole thing makes no sense,” she said in a measured tone. The man nodded in seeming agreement. “Are you being intentionally cryptic or is this how you normally carry on a conversation?” His lack of any real information was just as pointless as her own inconclusive thoughts, but that didn’t stop her from speculating. The old man was from Earth, this much she could safely assume. She racked her brain for what truth he seemed to know? Why wouldn’t she be ready for it? Did it have something to do with how he got here? There were just too many variables for her to put the pieces together. Defeated, she pushed the toes of her boots closer to the fire, careful not to put too much pressure on her bad ankle.

“Don’t worry you will get all of your answers soon enough. Can’t say you are going to like all of them though. Eat this,” he said as he pulled a leg off of the crisped critter and thrust it towards her. She wanted to say more but the smell of the food and the thought of having a warm meal, meat none the less, was so overpowering that she snatched the drumstick from his hand and tore into it so quickly that the man raised a bushy eyebrow at her. She didn’t care; her mouth was exploding with flavor greater than anything she had tasted in years, though she couldn’t

quite compare it to anything she had ever had. The man didn't comment at her carnivorous gnawing, instead he called out "Soc" in a loud sing sing-song way and before Jorna could question him the beast came trotting from the darkness and up to the fire. The man handed another leg to the animal who grabbed with his impressive fangs and loped off to a spot about five feet away, spun in a circle a couple of times again before laying down and devouring the food instantaneously. Jorna's mouth, filled with mostly chewed drumstick, hung open in astonishment. The man let out a small laugh as he pulled a wing of the bird and replaced the picked-clean-drumstick Jorna was holding. He threw the bone over to the beast. Seeming to sense Jorna's confusion the old man offered up some explanation. "He gives me a little security and I give him a little food. Plus, we keep each other company. Works out well for both of us."

"And you call him Sock? As in what I am wearing on my feet?" Jorna asked after having finally closed her mouth and swallowed its contents.

"No. That'd just be dumb. Soc, as in Socrates. He's a thinker that one, you can see it in his eyes." Jorna looked over at the beast who was chewing the bone to pieces in a series of frightening snaps. Thinker was not the first thing that came to her mind.

"I totally see it," Jorna said sarcastically, unsure of the reference. The man shot her a sharp look. When she finished off the wing, her belly fuller than it had been in weeks, the man handed her a steaming mug of whatever he had been brewing and a small vile containing a clear liquid.

"I want you to drink both of these," he said. She did not reach for either beverage.

"You've got to be kidding me. I'm not drinking that. I don't know what it is." She eyed him suspiciously as he thrust the drinks forward with impatience.

“I’m guessing you didn’t know that was Banyup you just ate, but it didn’t stop you from inhaling it at a speed that would put Soc to shame, did it?” She reached forward tentatively and cupped the mug and the vial, but she did not move either one towards her mouth. The man let out a growl of frustration. “Okay, girl, I’m going to be blunt with you. You look like hell. You look like crossed paths with a Nozark and lost.” Jorna looked at him like he was speaking gibberish—which he was. He shook his head and tried again. “The stuff in the mug will help with the pain and the stuff in the vial will help you heal.” She was ecstatic at the thought of her ankle not hurting but still a little skeptical at whether or not she should just willingly drink something that this man, who was still essentially a stranger, offered her. She trusted her gut.

“You should see the Nozark,” she said, tipping back the tea. She removed the lid from the vial and shot that back as well. The tea had gone down like honey water, smooth and delicious and warming her body from the inside out. The vial, in comparison had been disappointingly tasteless. The old man let out a bellowing laugh.

“You’re spunky, girl. I’ll give you that much.”

Warm and full and with the pain slowly starting to disappear, Jorna stretched out on the sled, placing her arm under her head as a makeshift pillow. She wanted to ask more questions but the only thing she could concentrate on was how heavy her eyelids were beginning to feel. As she struggled to keep them open she heard the man speak, and although she knew he was sitting right across from her he sounded so far away.

“No, you aren’t ready yet but you will have to be soon. You have an important role to play, Jorna Twisdom.” She wanted to know how he knew her name, but the fog she was slipping into was so enticing, warm and smooth like the tea—like the man’s voice as he sang, which she swore she could hear before she sank away entirely.

CHAPTER IX

Jorna awoke with a start. The images of a nightmare flew from her mind leaving behind nothing but a familiar panic. She trained all of her barely-awake thought process on recalling the dream, but to no avail. Her focus shifted to the fire that was emitting more smoke than heat. Looking towards the sky, she saw that it was nearly dawn, the sky a vibrant mishmash of pinks, purples, and oranges. She puzzled at whether or not she had only been gone from the ship for only twenty four hours—it seemed like so much longer. Her sense of time was completely askew. It didn't help that everything that happened to her after she left was so bizarre that her head was spinning with what was real and what wasn't.

From what she could tell she was alone; the old man, his pet, and the sled were nowhere to be seen. There weren't even tracks in the snow indicating which direction they might have gone. Jorna wondered if they had ever been there at all but she couldn't shake the feeling that last night wasn't a figment of her imagination. She stood up to get a better look around and even though there were no physical signs suggesting that anyone but her had been here, Jorna found her proof in other ways. Her proof was in a full belly and the almost complete absence of pain as she stood and put her full weight on her right ankle. She stretched to the left and the right without any protest from her aching ribs and breathed a full breath in through her clear nasal passages. She touched her cheek and her nose and could feel the abrasions, but not any pain from running her hand over them. She prodded them a little, just to be sure. Nothing.

“Looks like the ankle is healing up just fine,” the old man said, his voice coming out of nowhere. Jorna threw her hand to the knife on her hip and jerked around to see the old man and Soc emerging from the woods. The man stopped in his tracks, noting Jorna's defensive stance

with a raise of his wild brows. Soc also noted her tension, responding in turn with a hunched stance and a threatening growl.

“Sorry,” she replied, moving her hand from the weapon and jamming it in her jacket pocket, “I just don’t like being snuck up on.” As she relaxed so did the beast. Soc cocked his head and as he looked at her with his big brown eyes it was easy now to imagine the thoughtfulness that the old man claimed him capable of.

“Didn’t mean to startle you. Just making an observation.” He gestured to the ankle that she had so gracefully pivoted on just a moment before.

“It still hurts, but nothing like it did yesterday.” Balancing her weight on her left leg, Jorna pulled her right one from the snow. She rotated her ankle until she felt a soft pop that offered a little more relief.

“Oh it will hurt for a couple days yet. Broken bones take time to heal,” he said tossing a small vial her direction, “even with that.”

“Is this the same stuff I drank last night?” she asked, staring down at the vial resting inconspicuously on her right palm.

“It is. I want you to take it with you when you go. Jorna, listen to me when I say that it’s very important that they don’t find it.” The intensity in his voice pulled her attention back to him.

“When I go where? Important that who doesn’t find it?” She was growing tired of his cryptic conversations and yet she knew that her questions would remain unanswered.

“When you go back to camp and it is important that the people you foolishly place your loyalty with don’t ever find out that you have that.” She was stunned that he was actually capable of being straightforward. “I am not playing here Jorna. If they know about that vial, or even that you met with me, you will not like the consequences.” As he spoke he unloaded a couple of limp

bird-like animals. She imagined they were the same kind that they had eaten the night before, but instead of being naked these ones were covered in feathers that were a deep blue and rich green. With his sled nearly free of cargo, he ushered his furry companion onto it where Soc proceeded to lie down obediently.

“You have to give me something to go off of here! It’s too much! Everything that you have told me, everything you are refusing to tell me. I need to know how you know my name.” It was obvious that she wasn’t going to get all of the answers she was looking for, but maybe if she could get just one then that would be enough to figure out some of the rest.

“It’s a lot, but not too much. Not for Geardon Twisdom’s daughter. The only thing that you need to know right now is that you can’t trust your people. When you figure out why, I need you to go back to the tree where I found you. I will find you again.” With that, he left. The image of the old man and Soc disappearing into the trees without a trail behind them would have grabbed more firmly to her mind if she hadn’t been so confused as to what exactly her dead father had to do with any of this. Jorna sank into the snow and threw her head into her hands in an attempt to squeeze her racing thoughts to a stop. Images of giant cats and doppelgangers flittered in her mind. She had broken more bones in the past twenty four hours than past five years, and yet they were all miraculously healed. She had met a man who knew her father, who knew her, and wanted her not to trust the people that she was supposed to give unwavering allegiance to. As she attempted to plug all of the pieces together, she realized that the completed puzzle looked like the mind of a raving lunatic. Had she snapped? Invented the whole thing? Nope, she thought as she carefully tucked the vial into her sock, resting it against her good ankle. Once she was convinced it was in no danger of breaking, she rose to her feet.

With the old man and Soc out of sight, Jorna looked down at the lifeless animals lying in the snow. It might not feed the entire ship but since it did appear that she was headed back to camp, she could try offering up the protein as a peace offering. Feeling more alert and awake than she had in a long time, she bent down and scooped the birds up by their horns and slung them over her shoulder. She desperately wished that her blockers hadn't snapped in half yesterday when she fell. Not only were the suns about to become unbearably bright during the next half hour but she also didn't have the foggiest idea where she was at, something the homing beacon on her blockers could quickly remedy. Her attempts to keep track of direction on last night's surreal sleigh ride had been mostly a wash since she wasn't sure how much of it she had been unconscious for. But judging by the position of the sun, she could safely assume that her camp was located southwest of her current position.

Jorna did a double check before heading out to make sure that the fire was completely extinguished. She knew it to be a pointless act since everything in sight appeared either snow covered or damp and in no way in danger of catching fire. Experience, however, had taught her never to walk away from fire unless you were willing to let it devour its surroundings. The spot where the fire had been was now as void of human interference as the old man had left the rest of the area when he departed. Remnants of smoke still hung heavy on the wet air and she suddenly she remember exactly what her nightmare had been about. The recognition transported her mind back to the home she had shared with her mother and Jaxon.

After her mother's death, no one had noticed or cared about the two children that would now be left unattended. They blended into the impoverished landscape of the post-war world. Not one person interjected as the two returned back to their empty home and tried to create some semblance of a normal household in the best way that an eleven and twelve year old could

manage. The feeling of cold from the last night they spent there leached into her bones, and she remembered burning a chair from her mother's mismatched dinette set in the fireplace. They no longer needed all four, and the two of them fell asleep by its warmth. The smell of smoke crept into her dreams and she imagined herself lost in a haze with her mother calling out for her. *Jo*. Her nickname that was only ever used by her mother and Jaxon was being repeated over and over again with a panicked intensity. The haze had closed in on her, suffocating her. Her lungs had begun to ache and even though she wanted so desperately to answer her mother's cries all she was able to do was cough. Suddenly the voice changed and it was no longer her mother's but Jaxon's.

She opened her eyes to see him standing over her, shaking her violently. It was dark and even though the air around her was frigid she was soaked with sweat. She felt dried grass under her cheek and pushed herself up onto her elbows and looked past her concerned friend to the inferno raging a hundred feet away. Her house, her few possessions, every tangible connection with her mother she had left was engulfed in flames. Jorna jumped to her feet fully prepared to go in and save something, anything, but Jaxon held her back. Her knees gave out and he braced her as she fell to the grass, the sting of tears in her eyes competing with the burn of the smoke. Jaxon pulled something from his pocket before joining her on the ground. As she sat there in stunned silence he handed her a small silver frame containing a picture of her parents. She held the frame to her chest and leaned against Jaxon as they watched the last of their old life collapse to the ground. No one came.

When Jorna's thoughts returned to the present, she was more than ready to leave this place behind her. Suddenly she knew exactly what to do with the vial in her boot. Her best friend, the person who had saved her life in so many ways so many times was in trouble and for

the first time she had the chance to return the favor. She didn't care what she would come across on the direct route back to camp—she had to get there fast. Setting off in the right direction, as best she could pinpoint, she moved at a quick pace, carefully avoiding the branches and other obstacles hidden beneath the snow.

After a couple of minutes, she reached a clearing where the snow was nearly up to her knees and it weighed her down like quick sand. The absence of trees meant that the direct light of the sun was able to reflect off of the snow and she was forced to walk with her eyes on the ground directly in front of her. Her free hand rested on her forehead, providing minimal shade. Even though she was in better physical condition than she ever had been before, it wasn't long before she found herself winded. She had to stop every few yards to catch her breath. It was on her fourth rest break that the small red dot appeared on her chest which she recognized immediately as a laser sight. She raised her head towards the far side of the clearing where sure enough she could make out a group of roughly five people standing at the edge of the woods, nothing more than black figures in the intense light.

“DON'T SHOOT!” she screamed, her voice echoing towards them. She wondered briefly if they were her people or if the old man had tipped off a group of his. She didn't have to wonder long.

“TWISDOM, REMAIN WHERE YOU ARE AND PUT YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!” the authoritative voice of a man she didn't recognize boomed back across the clearing. Deciding that now was not the best time to protest, she dropped the birds to the ground, closed her eyes and threw both hands in the air in a sign of surrender. The distance that probably would have taken her half an hour to span took the group only minutes and as one member closed in on her she opened her eyes and identified the cause of their quick travel. The large transport vehicle

from the entrance was thrumming with energy and sporting impressive chains on all six wheels. Apparently it wasn't *that* hard to outfit it for the snow after all. Looking towards the ground she could see a pair of military issue boots hovering towards her. She looked up to see Prael's expressionless face. The girl's blockers were covering her eyes, but Jorna could only imagine them to be dancing with delight.

"Prael," Jorna whispered, "why did they train their sights on me?" Prael said nothing and continued to circle her waving a variable depth ion scanner, or VDIS, up and down the length of Jorna's body. Jorna knew about the technology they had to assess whether a hostile was armed but she had never actually seen one used. The VDIS let out a short beep when it hovered over the knife strapped to Jorna's left hip and Prael quickly reached her free hand up and detached it from her belt.

"Scan is clear Sergeant Mordan, Twisdom is unarmed," Prael said in a quiet, silky voice picked up by the chat feature on her blockers and radioed back to her superior. Seconds later the rest of the group arrived.

"Twisdom you have exhibited judgment that is not consistent with the philosophy of the Alliance. When you broke rank you not only jeopardized the mission that you were assigned to, but you also jeopardized every member of your team. It is my obligation to inform you that you are being placed under quarantine until a time when you can be evaluated, and your standing with the Alliance better determined." Sergeant Beau Mordan, whom Jorna now recognized as a member of the A-Team, pulled her hands from their resting place on the top of her head and secured them with restraints behind her back. As he placed his arm firmly around her bicep and began to lead her towards the sled Jorna let out a cry and let her weight drop hard towards the ground.

“My ankle,” she started, “I think that it’s sprained. I tripped over some undergrowth and busted my blockers.” She did her best to contort her face into a look of extreme pain but with the light in her eyes it was hard to do anything more than squint.

“We will have Dr. Greer examine it when we get back to the ship,” he said gruffly as he led her forward once more, this time lifting up on her arm. When they reached the open-topped vehicle he opened a door and motioned for her to sit. “Siler, find something to cover her eyes so that she isn’t blind by the time we return. And grab whatever it was she dropped into the snow.” She looked towards her downtrodden Lieutenant and quickly realized that she wasn’t the only one in trouble. Her guilt at the prospect was quickly overwhelmed by her excitement and she reveled in the fact that her crazy trip actually turned out to be a success. Not only did she have the means, she hoped, to save Jaxon resting safely against her ankle, but Cargo Bay 3 was also just one corridor over from the Medical Bay. She was brewing an idea about how to use the latter to gain entrance to the former.

“Before you are allowed to the Medical Bay, however, your presence has been demanded by Commander Greer. She has a few questions she would like to ask you.” Mordan’s voice cut like steel, and Jorna’s stomach tightened as she tried to figure out how she was going to explain herself. According to the old man, she couldn’t tell them the truth, and even though she wasn’t entirely sure she could trust him, her instincts were telling her that he was right about this. Her mind was racing for a cover story as Siler approached and tied a makeshift blindfold over her eyes before strapping her into the vehicle. She was being transported for the second time in twenty four hours and once again her world was dark.