

this once precious life

The skin at the corner of Xavier's eyes crinkles when he smiles. It's the sort of nuance lost behind a tinted visa. A lot can be hidden behind the bulk of deep-space personal protective equipment, perhaps for good reason. His mercurial eyes have fascinated me since he walked into our first planning session on the SS Panchjanya, shifting from green to blue to grey depending on his mood. I linger a moment longer than I should on his shoulder's breadth and the muscle definition in his arm visible beneath the tight silicon-weave sleeves. Biceps on full display, because like me, he's carrying a portable cooling unit. I press my unit into the wall, using my torso to steady it, while I press my thumb into the security screen. A moment later, the door to my living quarters slides open, activating my programmed preferences: heat at a mild 21 degrees Celsius, lighting subdued, the susurrant of waves in the distance and the subtle, salty scent of water.

I hesitate before stepping in. I've never invited anyone into my private space. Until now, there's been no need. For a decade I've regarded men either as colleagues or enemies.

'It's not much ... but it's, you know, home,' I say, walking in and depositing the cooling unit on the bench.

As the Managing Director of the Eridani Research Facility, my two-room quarters are a palace compared to the honeycomb billets for transitional staff,

two to a room, with shared communal and ablution areas.

He steps across the threshold, inhales deeply and says, surprised, 'The ocean? You've been to an ocean?'

'No,' I laugh. 'I grew up on Miranda.'

It's an unexpected disclosure. For both of us.

His face doesn't jerk into the usual prejudiced expression that people then have to scramble to cover. Because out here, in this line of work, I am even more exceptional and unexpected than an ocean of warm, salty water, teeming with life.

He nods and my body relaxes.

'I hope I'm not wasting credits on a bad experience.'

Because without a real comparison, I have to trust the sensory simulation. Hoping one day when I stand on a shoreline, I won't be disappointed. Won't feel duped by a company that assured me the ocean sounded and smelled like this.

'One day I'll get there,' I say, feeling another emotional glacier slide into the warmth his company generates.

I've already told him more than I've told another living soul in the last decade. He should leave before I tell him something I will actually regret. Then I realise he's standing there, between me and the door, still holding a cooling unit.

'Shit, sorry.'

I move to let him offload the unit onto the bench. Our arms brush and my heart skips, followed by an irrational uptick in pace; every micro interaction amplified now we are alone.

'You plan to go to New Brisbane?' he asks, picking up the conversation's thread.

'Sooner or later some corporate asshole is going to subpoena me to testify in person,' I say, leaning down to flip open the charging port. 'But they'll hope I won't get there in time and it will void my report.'

There's the slightest tremor in my hand when I extract the units' power cords. Thank fuck I am doing nothing more intricate than accessing a socket. Because technically, I shouldn't be storing samples in the Staff Hub. I told

Xavier it was easier than battling the security protocols again at the Research Hub. There were only two units left and everyone else had clocked off, heading for their first proper shower in six weeks. Xavier didn't look to be in a hurry to join them, so I suggested we bring them here. And now we're talking about the ocean.

'But you know, if they're paying and I get there in time,' I say, 'there's the ocean after. And if not, there's still the ocean.'

A real ocean on a planet not populated with rocks and ice and the descendants of criminals. One not being carved up and transported across the solar system to raise new civilisations, just like the old ones falling down.

I wonder where he calls home?

Out here we are all adrift; risking our lives on the periphery because there's nowhere else to go. Any self-preservation long gone. We pretend this is a voluntary choice, to be here on the edge. We all know we are escaping something though. Or someone.

What, or who, is he hiding from?

I key in the sequence to switch from solar cell to grid power, glad he's too busy surveying my living space to see how nervous he's making me. The questions he arouses unsettle me as much as his physical proximity.

'I didn't pick you as a reader or collector,' he comments, going to the shelves of ancient hardback books and yellowed plastic DVD cases.

He runs a long, elegant finger over the spines. A slow reverence as attractive as his shoulders and easy smile.

'I studied 20th Century Popular Space Culture and 21st Century Pop Poetry. And it's a life-long love affair. Not very scientific I know.'

'Does it have to be?'

I don't dare answer because I fear there's an echoing lag between versions of myself, and I don't know who is talking. It might be the same words but with meanings altogether different.

My attention goes back to the cooling units, waiting for the lights to come on and acknowledge connection to an external power source.

He tilts his head sideways to read the book titles and for a moment I'm back on Miranda, years ago. A different male—younger, darker, unpredict-

able—stands at my digital library, head slanted, flicking at the screen with a careless finger. Books rushed past in a blur, I mistaken for enthusiasm only to realise later, was derision.

It's the same feeling as then: hostage to intense but foreign feelings in my body; frustrated by my inability to string sentences together; giddy with the sensation of tumbling from a known life, out of a safe orbit.

What did I do back then?

It is suddenly crucial I remember my response to Kristof's introduction to my books.

'You read?' he'd asked and I shrugged.

Knowing reading and books probably didn't mean the same thing to him. Afraid he wouldn't understand my desire for a life beyond Miranda. The one my mother had sworn me to before she died. And how it began with being able to read. Properly.

And to ask questions. Then ask more.

Afraid he wouldn't like me for that larger view. For being the antithesis of everything Miranda was. Missing the obvious—without a shared vision of a bigger life, not just bigger than Miranda, but our solar system—Kristof and I actually had nothing in common. Nothing to base a relationship on.

I didn't know that at fourteen, as smart as I thought I was. He was sixteen and I just wanted him to want me. Loneliness has a way of fucking with you. Or compelling you to throw away things that truly mean something to you. Only to have to scramble to try and reclaim them later.

I tried to love him, as much as he said he loved me. Tried to love all sides of him, even as I hid mine because I knew he wouldn't love them. Knowing that passion and violence were different sides of the same coin. That if he was happy, I was safe.

I understand now, how the erosion started that afternoon when I didn't stand up for my love of books, my need for learning. The life I was going to live. When he erased my entire library then kissed me for the first time, I let him.

My books were backed up. You can't back up a life though.

It doesn't matter what I could have done differently. *Should* have done

differently. The past cannot be changed.

I am older. I am different. And this is Xavier, whose lived half a step behind me for six weeks, trusting me, supporting me, never questioning me. He had my back the whole way across a hostile virgin planet while a dozen other researchers tried to find my weakness. Like Planet Impact Studies were some kind of solo pissing match, rather than a cooperative enterprise.

I wasn't surprised. I never am. Men still come here, where I am the expert, to argue my method, my tactics, my intuition, my results. Men who assume they know better.

Not Xavier though, who spent the first week after we'd made camp asking each asshole at breakfast and dinner, how many light years they'd clocked, how far they'd been out, what new life forms they'd discovered and how many words they'd published each time they had a stab at me. His recalibration of their egos wasn't subtle. They ostracised him and he gave zero fucks about not belonging to their cabal. One night I overheard the bitching: *why doesn't he just fuck her and get over it.*

'It's easy to lose your humanity out here,' I say, coming back to the present and joining him at my books, unsure how long I've been lost in my thoughts and he's been standing there in the silence. 'These make sure I don't lose mine.'

He pulled out a red-leather bound book.

'Ever done bibliomancy?' I asked

'Is that a 21st Century Pop Poetry subject?'

'Why not Popular Science Culture?'

'Mancy means magic right?'

'Divination.' I gesture to the book. 'Close your eyes.'

I drink in his calm expression. The unquestioning faith he has in me.

'Open to a random page. Now run your finger down the page until the little voice inside you says stop?'

He does exactly as I say.

'Now open your eyes and read the lines beneath your finger. There's a message there for you.'

His voice is deep. Steady. The distance between us closes.

Gothic lines of dreaming of death undone. Of crows calling for boys. And

a body in a garden,

His breathing is shallow, faster. He closes the book, slides it back into the empty slot and pauses—or is it hesitation—his fingers still touching the book's spine.

A shiver races down mine hits my tail bone, whiplashes up and around my torso, stabbing me beneath my left ribcage. A pain so intense it steals my breath, for a moment, and passes as quickly as it hit.

It's not real. It's not.

I haven't had phantom pain since I was appointed to Eridani. After years of being dogged by pain that didn't exist, overnight it disappeared. 'You've found your purpose,' my last therapist said. 'You can let the ghosts go.' And so it seemed they left. Or did I leave them behind? Or have they just not found their way to me, all the way out here?

I know is no pain. Real or otherwise. I'm just tired and being alone with Xavier is picking at seams I trusted to be robust.

'You don't have the books in a humidifier,' he says.

I don't have books in a humidifier. No, I don't.

Then I repeat it aloud, returning yet again to the present from the past's slipstream.

I hold his eye. Something I've got used to over the years because men think if they can't shout you down they can stare you down. There's uncertainty in his eyes for the first time. It's a gentle query in the blue depths though. Not a harsh interrogation. Or a presumption of incompetence. Missing the point incompetence kills you out here.

'I don't want a humidifier,' I say, getting my metaphoric feet under the conversation again. 'I'm selfish. I want to enjoy them the way they are. Where I can pick them up. Where I can look across and see them on display.'

I take a book from the shelf and bury my face inside it, breathing in the musty goodness of ink, old paper and lives I'll never know. I pass him the book and after a moment, he breathes in the page.

'You put them in a humidifier and they lose their personality.'

I put it back on the shelf and he says, 'You're favouring your left hand.'

'Brain gym for the mentally exhausted,' I lie.

‘Let me see.’

He has my right wrist cradled in his hand, before I can hide it in my pocket. A fresh line of blood is drying in the jagged cut that’s breached a healing caulk he sealed it with two days ago. It runs from my middle finger to the base of my hand. A stupid accident. Made all the more ridiculous because it was me who smashed the specimen jar.

Better at this end than the other, Xavier had joked and I appreciated his dark humour. A dumb accident like that would have smashed what little goodwill I went into the expedition with.

Xavier runs his thumb parallel to the gash and a different shiver runs through me. This one doesn’t end in pain. Instead I’m crushed with longing.

‘Carrying the cooling unit reopened it,’ I say, the words catching in my throat as I try to pull my hand free.

I’m close enough for his earthy, sweaty smell to torture me, in a good way. For it to weave with the ocean currents into something vital. Insistent.

‘I’ll need to run a full scan on it in the morning and sign off on the WH&S report.’

‘I didn’t log an incident. There’s enough data for us all to upload and process without adding more pointless admin. I’ll be fine. Can’t say the same for the sample bottle though.’

He doesn’t let go of my hand though. ‘Come by tomorrow, before the debrief if you’re worried about it.’

‘Should I be worried?’

He doesn’t answer and lets my hand go after an extended silence, saying, ‘I’d better go.’

I’m glad he broke the silence. I’m not glad he let go of my hand.

He pulls a slim-line slate from his back pocket and I see all the admin queued.

‘Even if I wasn’t leaving in 48 hours, I never sleep the first night I’m in, so might as well get a jump on the admin while the system’s quiet.’

If neither of us plans on sleeping, why be alone at opposite ends of the compound? It’s time to stop regretting things I did and the things I didn’t, because there’s nowhere safe between those two kinds of regrets.

There's only now. This moment. And the next.

'See you tomorrow,' Xavier says.

If you're not going to sleep, we could catch the last of the meteor shower from the Space Port?

'See you at the debriefing,' I say instead.

Traitorous fucking mouth and whatever part of my body is in cahoots with it. Another shiver runs down my spine and I wait for my body and the past to synch and smash me.

He nods and says, '15:00 hours.'

I'm too busy anticipating pain to answer.

'Good night, Thaleia.'

The way the three syllables of my name slip from his lips sound nothing like good-bye.

If I don't ...

'Xavier—'

I reach for his cheek. My thumb grazes the rough skin. He's real. And he's here. He sees me. Not the boss. Not some genderless, forgettable scientist or an activist with a death wish. To him I'm not some problematic woman who just won't shut up and go away.

I'm a woman waking from a deep sleep. And he's not threatened by me. Not moving away. He wants me as much as I want him.

My heart thunders as I meet his eye, not daring to say anything.

'Perhaps good night was a bit premature,' he breathes, taking my hand and kissing the palm.

The last thing I see before I close my eyes, is his azure, blazing gaze devouring me. Lips touch mine. Barely a kiss. A promise of more that ignites an achingly familiar anticipation. His lips trace my jaw and trail down my neck, pulling me from the past and anchoring me in the moment.

I surrender into an intimacy that remakes my world. And me within it.

Each kiss, each caress, cracks the hard casing that's protected me from the world Kristof constructed. And all that happened after.

I lose orbit with a past I'll never reconcile and for the first time in years, I feel life surge through me. I don't want to hide any more. I want more than

the tiny existence I've condemned myself to at the arse-end of the world.

He fumbles with my filthy shirt's top fastening and a jack-knife jab thrusts into my lower back.

You're not real, I tell it. And the ones that follow.

They're not real because my body's humming and that's real.

He pushes the partially opened shirt over my right shoulder, pulling down the bra strap to give his lips unhindered access to the ridge of my shoulder. A finger follows my clavicle, finds the scar's top and travels south.

A supa nova explodes in my chest. I gasp and push him away. His finger catches on the shirt. The rest of the fastenings rip open as I stagger backward. When I look up he's staring at the purple keloid scarring criss-crossing my torso. I recognise the disassociated scrutiny I've come to expect from the medical fraternity. It's the same look I imagine a butcher considers a newly delivered carcass with.

I bend down, curl into myself, clutching at the material to cover up.

'Thaleia, God ... I'm a medic, you don't need to be ashamed—'

'I want you to go.'

For split second, it's Kristof standing over me, grinning; unhinged and ready to explode. I blink the image away and try to sweep the agony with it.

'You're in pain.'

I wrap an arm around my middle, brace the other hand against a knee cap. 'Go.'

'I know you think you can only trust yourself, but it doesn't have to be like that. Let me help.'

'Fuck off,' I snarl.

He hesitates. I bite down on my lip, force myself to straighten and walk to the door while pain tears apart my physical coherency.

I thump on the button to open the door.

'Good night, Dr Friedman.'

Experts say survivors will detachment from anything that will give them a chance to keep living after a traumatic event. But what if the traumatic event

is your body? Not just what was done to it, but your actual fucking body? The vehicle you move through the world in. Your home. Your shell. The place where your existence begins and ends?

Where you're meant to feel safe.

What if dying is more complicated than living, because the best *fuck you* in your arsenal is to keep living despite it all?

Until I met Xavier I thought survival was the best I could do. To wake each day and not choose death. Even though out here on the fringe every day is rolling dice with your mortality.

I chose to bring Xavier into my private quarters. What the fuck did I think would happen? That he wouldn't touch me, even if I've thought of nothing else for weeks and was certain it was mutual. What did I think he would touch? What did I think it would feel like? And exactly, what did I think he would see?

The point is, I wasn't thinking.

Alone in the tiny bedroom cubicle, stripped naked of clothes and lust, the pain fades as the thoughts gather intensity. They want to carve something new.

'Light.'

The nanocrystal LED above the mirror begins to glow.

What do I see? Do I still see the same things?

I will myself to stare at my body. This flesh machine I only feel revulsion for. Is there something else here in the spiderweb of scarring? The old ones and the ones that belong to a new story. Is there something that's not the snub-nosed purple indents of butted cigarettes studding my breasts or the thick blue veins that surfaced with breastfeeding and never went away. Or my concave stomach pitted with stretchmarks. For fucks sake, isn't there some evidence of the body I once loved. I once *was*. The body I considered beautiful and desirable; a body bursting with life.

Because all I can see, belonging to me, is sinew and muscle. The barren landscapes of outlying moons and planets carved into my own body as surely as the past.

I place my hand on the right side, where someone else's liver is, moving

both hands over slim hips to my lower back. There's shiny lines over kidneys that are not mine. Only then do I dare to raise my hands to my chest scar and place them over the heart. There's an elevated, but steady beat beneath the sternum, once cracked open to place a new heart inside.

The Gestalts of the 20th Century believed we were more than the sum of our parts. I'd like to believe that, but I can't shake the fact I am defined by the sum of my parts—those that are mine, those that belong to someone else.

I turn from my distorted reflection and step inside the shower tube, punch in the hot water code. Watery fingertips travel the length of my neck and collect in the hollows of my collarbones. A spilling caress over my breasts and ribs that cascades over my stomach and into the arroyo of my hip bones. Scalding water slides between my thighs and down my legs.

The water snaps off; the two-minute ration over. I punch in a special code and another two minutes begins. I put my head against the wall and let the water wash over me, pool at my feet and disappear into the reticulation system beneath the Staff Hub, where it's piped to the reverse-osmosis plant.

Sanitised and recycled. If only the past was so easily dealt with.

The utility kicks and shudders. The wheel spurs separate from the road and suspended in time, we ice plane at 45 degrees. Hit one bank. Spin and slam into the other. Gravity releases us and we tumble. Over and over ...

I'm against the bank. The utility crumpled facing me: passenger door open; driver's seat empty; passenger compartment behind crumpled; the tray gone.

A hole in the windscreen gapes at me. Narrows my world.

The argument hangs in the air with the pop and ping of the engine.

Pain presses in on me; a faltering heart fighting the frozen wasteland to the last beat.

The cold claims me faster than I can get the words out. I'll die knowing it though.

I'm not scared of you anymore.

I lay caught between this world and the other. My nervous system frozen in an emotional terror as threatening as Miranda's lethal cold. It takes time to realise I'm tangled in my sheets, not trapped in the car. I repeat that I'm in my bed at the Eridani Research Facility until I can breathe again. Then gently I take myself to the shoreline inside my imagination and let the calm wash through me. I came here every night before I came to Eridani, to escape the dreams. Only this shoreline has gulls calling in Kristof's voice, reciting words string from my Space Culture as Parody module.

'It's life Jim, but not as we know it. Not as we know it. Not as we know it.'

I spin around, incandescent with rage that he is here; the safest of safe spaces.

'Fuck you,' I scream, lashing out. 'Fuck off. This is my life. My life! Fuck you.'

The shivering is well established before I'm back in my room. In my body. On my feet, beside my bed, hands caught mid-air, body trapped in its convulsions.

The last therapist said it was healthy, the nervous system could shake trauma out. Like some long-dead animal on Earth that had outrun an equally long-dead predator. If they didn't shake the trauma free, they'd die.

I collapse beside the bed, lost in a somatic earthquake. Drowning in tears. Telling myself the agony pushing out from the donated liver is not real. None of it is real. When calm returns, when I've cried myself hoarse, I return to the mirror.

I'm not even real. This face isn't mine. Neither is my name. Masks over other masks; Doctor Halligan covers Thaleia, staring back at me, pushing away the name I was born and broken with. This body isn't mine. Internal organs from another, running a body that every other day I wished had died. Then Xavier joined me on the SS Panchjanya and my world flipped as surely as an all-terrain vehicle on Miranda.

These swollen eyes and mottling belong to some other woman who cannot hold herself together, displayed for all to see on *my* face. A face dozens of people will scrutinise while I deliver a debriefing session in less than two hours.

Men still searching for a crack, a weakness, to undermine me. To invalidate who I am and what I do.

Cold water does little to alleviate the distressed flesh. There's no hiding I've been crying. But as I stare, I find something more shocking than the after effects of losing control.

A yellowish tinge stains my skin—or is it the LED light and the contrast with the red splotches? Are the bruised cavities beneath my eyes accentuated because of the swollen lids? Or have they been there for weeks and I've missed them? All the nuances, all the transgressions, a tinted visor hides.

No one returns unscathed from deep-space fieldwork. I know that better than anyone else. But standing in the climate-controlled air, I'm hot then cold. My temperature a degree warmer than usual. The blood pressure machine is an old one, not linked into the system and it's higher too, which is to say it's higher than its usually elevated numbers. This time my hands run over the scars with diagnostic intention. There's an almost indistinguishable rise over the liver area. It's tender when I palpitate it.

What if I'm wrong. What if this is not phantom pain ... if this is something real?

I take ten deep breathes. Slowing the exhalation. Then I count backward from a hundred. Intent only on the digits in my head changing. And I am back, the duplicitous body under control again. My complicated relationship with it straight once more. And me, Thaleia, I'm back too. Head clear.

Field work is the aberration. I remember this until I forget.

In an earth day everything will return to normal. Endless lab hours followed by long, quiet nights with my books, music and movies. The easy company of the dozen or so long-haul researchers and aux staff who are halfway through their bi-yearly rotation. Once the transport leaves with the temporary field staff, I can relax. I *will* relax.

Xavier will be gone and all that he's stirred up will settle.

I breathe out then call the lab for porters to collect the cooling units and turn on the NewsCast from Earth while I wait.

Mia Hoffman's face fills the holographic screen. I turn on the sound wondering why she is news again. Looking at her young, grief-ravaged face I

understand how every year she gains more presence in her absence. Time heals wounds, eventually. People move on. Mia Hoffman, never does. Her face is frozen in time, snapped on the steps of The World Court after the final verdict was handed down. In her eyes you see the torment of having lost everything, and now the case against her doctors

‘The Terrestrial Government will table new legislation this morning giving doctor’s a raft of new powers,’ says the voiceover as the camera pans the Terrestrial Parliament building in New Brisbane and the throng of protestors gathered with old-fashioned placards. ‘Opponents of the Legislation say the bipartisan support for the Bill is a sham, brokered behind closed doors with secret trade offs voters may not see the consequences of for years.

‘Proponents of the Bill argue polls show the majority of the population support this decision. They say those who oppose the legislation wish to send humanity back into the dark ages.

‘It is expected The Lazarus Ruling, as the verdict in Hoffman case is know, will pass from legal precedent into statute by the end of the week.’

‘Screen off,’ I say, throat tight.

I can’t wait for the porters. I can’t stand here knowing the Medical Lobby have finally won; that in a few days they will have legal authority to bring any individual back from clinical death, without consent and by any means possible.

I leave my door open and take the long way to the Research Hub. Steady, measured steps turn into long, ungainly strides, that devolve into running. And I sprint like that’s all it takes to leave the past behind.

I’m out of breath, my right side cramping and my injured hand thumping when I reach the Research Hub’s side entrance. My hand shakes as the infra-red ray tries to scan my thumb. It takes three goes to steady it for recognition. Once in, I turn all the security cameras off for sixty minutes. At my door, a second infra-red beam scans my thumb, successful the first time. While the DNA sequencer boots, I open an encrypted space to log diagnostics.

I roll up my sleeve, grip the tourniquet between my teeth to tighten the loop, and wait for a vein to plump.

If what I’m feeling is the onset of organ rejection then it will show up in a

DNA sequence; the donor's DNA will exist in my blood at a rate higher than the usual one percent for transplant patients. They explained all of this to me in the hospital, when I was still meeting the terms of the discharge agreement: turning up for appointments, submitting to blood tests, attending weekly sessions with my assigned therapist.

I draw up a sample and deposit it in the sequencer. From a cache on the Head of Medical Science's server, I drop my DNA profile and that of my donor into 'Inga', our AI. I tell her what I am looking for and explain all results must go via the personal channel I coded the year I arrived, knowing sooner or later I'd need more privacy than I'd been assured I had.

Inga tells me she will send the results in 127 minutes.

'I'm sorry for the delay,' her almost-human voice says. 'There is much demand and I am stretched thin.'

There's a quiet irony, that Inga's computing power is not infinite much less immediate.

'I can prioritise—'

'Two hours is fine, Inga.' I don't want to walk into the debriefing knowing I am dying. 'Thank you.'

'And Doctor Halligan,' Inga says. 'Welcome back from another successful field trip.'

Success would be actually be finding something for once. Not just returning alive with bottles of lifeless soil and rock.

I glance down at the wound in my hand.

Success would be returning with everything still intact.

How many field trips and I've never once smashed a sample bottle. Never done anything that even minutely called my competence into question. And now.

'Yes, thank you, Inga. Another success trip. It is good to be back.'

'There was much merriment in the staff hub last night.'

'And there will be much celebration from us all when they are gone.'

As an after thought, I grab four agar-filled petri dishes and swab the cut in my hand (red and raised but no longer painful) and the blood dribbling down my arm. I prepare each dish, replace the lid and scribble the date and time on

it. Two dishes go into the incubator, on a twelve hour cycle. The other two go in the fridge. I don't instruct Inga to do anything with the incubator samples.

With my arm taped up, benches and equipment clean, I pull a lab coat from a hook and leave the lab running dark to brave the Hub's central, communal labs.

My second-in-charge, Alan, on his third rotation on Eridani, is at my side the moment I enter. 'Welcome back, Doc.' He slides a slate into my hand. 'Your timing is impeccable as always.'

Xavier's name is in the subject line of the incoming com. I shove the device back to Alan. 'I'll deal with this after the debrief.'

My office is at the far end and I walk past the central lab, a hive of activity as technicians prepare plates from the samples we brought back from a planet in the Scorpius system, identifiable only by a string of numbers and letters in a terraforming application.

Alan jabs his foot into my door to stop it closing. 'I'm sorry, but this is time stamped by the Head of Medical Science. If you miss the appointment it will go straight to the Director as a breach of contract.'

Pain flares in my side and I think it should be in my arse.

'What's Hartcher doing time-stamping a health req for me on my first day back? Before we have even debriefed.'

'Dr Hartcher retired.'

'Hartcher did what?'

'I forwarded the information to you when you reboarded the Panchjanya. His last day was yesterday. I forged your signature on his Good Luck card.'

'But the transport doesn't leave until tomorrow.' I seize the slate. 'Why's Friedman signing off as Head of Medical Sciences, he's a frontier medic.'

'He was but he's our new HMS. The Director appointed him while you were coming home.'

'But he said last night—' and I stop before I incriminate myself.

He'd spoken like he was shipping out with everyone else.

'You'd know these things if you bothered to download and read the occasional com.'

That's what I have Alan for. Once I am off-planet, I don't care what the

fuck they do here. As long as there is a research outpost to return to.

The door attempts to close a second time, bouncing off Alan's foot.

Pain flares again in my side and moves into my abdomen like invisible fingers probing beneath the skin. The pain strengthens and I lean my hand against the corridor wall. My lungs refuse to inflate to allow me to breathe through the crescendo. I fight the urge to put my hand inside my shirt and touch the skin to prove nothing's living there.

Rejection doesn't mean the organs get up and walk out—it's not like rejected lovers: the donor liver and host body fighting over who takes the t-shirt they both love and claim ownership of. There's no slamming doors or recriminations. No one actually gets to leave.

And suddenly it's all clear.

I'm not dying. It's not organ rejection. This is cellular memory. The pain is a warning. I draw in a ragged breath and Alan's face contorts with concern.

'I'm fine,' I lie, handing back his slate. 'Pull up everything you can on Friedman. And I mean everything. I want to know why he's freelancing as a frontier medic. Tell the Tech Hub to hack whatever they have to and get Comms to retrieve his communications history: incomings, outgoing, uplinks to Earth, the colonies and space stations for the last twelve months.'

'I'm not sure any of that is legal,' Alan protests.

'Let's pretend out here it is.' I go into my office and retrieve my slate. Flick it on, relieved I remembered to power it up before I left. Or Alan did after I was gone. 'My gut says he's hiding something. He's not here by chance.'

Charming and supportive. And I almost fucking fell for it.

So much for not sleeping. For fucking doing paperwork. For heading home on tomorrow's transport. He stood in my quarters knowing he was here for the long haul.

I check my watch and wish I hadn't had to abandon my beautiful mechanical timepiece with the triple faces, keeping time in three different locations. This one tracks me. Tethers me to Inga. But at least the data it spews from my body doesn't go onto the Medical Services' server. Hartcher ensured that. Friedman knows nothing about me.

And he won't.

‘You have 47 minutes,’ I say, striding down the corridor, ignoring the pain.

Alan blanches, but keeps pace. ‘You want this before the debrief?’

‘The last time we had a beer you moaned about how tedious Eridani is.’

‘I don’t moan.’

‘That’s 46 minutes.’

‘How much of Inga can I have?’

‘You can have all of her,’ I say pushing out through the Research Hub’s main doors.

For the first time, my body is an ally. Perhaps this time I am the predator, not the prey.

The waiting room in the Medical Hub is empty. I’ve only ever been in Hartcher’s private office: desk, two easy chairs, filing cabinet and an antique chesterfield beneath a glossy rubber plant. Digital concierge registers my arrival and invites me into an impersonal consultation room. Surrounded by more pieces of equipment than our lab accommodates memories surge. Ones I’ve worked hard to suppress. Medical science is reductionist by nature: I am only a collection of parts. Each piece of equipment in this room exists to fragment me further. There’s no room for Gestaltism’s warm fuzzies here.

I pace, tapping my watch every ten seconds, waiting for Comms’ notification they’ve got Friedman’s communication log.

As I move, I remember discovering the passage in a medical manual outlining the recommended time to leave a patient waiting for maximum compliancy; the 101 on patient creation; the depersonalisation and disempowering of the individual. I was never a compliant patient, no matter how long they left me waiting. The last doctor told me I should be grateful for the life they’d given me. I spat in his face. One of the few useful skills Kristof left me with.

The watch vibrates and I open my slate, flicking quickly through three batches of highlighted coms: the first a series of encrypted messages from TerraCorps’ office in New Brisbane to Friedman; the second Dr Hartcher’s

termination notice and the nail in the coffin, the remuneration for Friedman's services.

The consultation door opens with a gentle sigh. Xavier hurries in looking like he's been startled awake, pulling on a crumpled white coat and running a hand through dishevelled hair. He smiles an apology and there's a jolt of electricity, some stuttering echo from last night. I loathe myself for it, urging my anger to trample to death any lingering attraction to him.

'Thaleia? Is everything okay?'

'Not really.' I position myself near a holographic display of a thoracic x-ray in defiance of my body which wants to get closer to him.

'Why don't you take a seat?'

I ignore him and remain standing. The uplink from slate to the consultation room's screen is almost done.

'You didn't tell me you had been appointed the HMS?'

'I didn't get the notification until I got back to my room. I thought I was meeting Dr Hartcher here for hand over. Not you.'

'Really?'

Confusion fills his face. 'How's the hand?'

'Still attached to my arm.'

I hide the injured hand in my lab coat pocket.

'You look jaundiced? Are you experiencing any hypersensitivity—'

'Stop with the medical jargon. It's just a doctor's way around actually communicating with their patient, or fostering any type of genuine relationship, which actually suits me fine. Any chance you and I had—'

'Thaleia, I went through the files last night. You have no medical records and Dr Hartcher seemed to have a secret cache of information I can't get into.'

I shrug. 'Call Tech.'

He shakes his head. 'This isn't a tech issue. Every human registered with the Department has a medical record attached to their personnel file. Everyone but you.' I don't say anything. 'When was the last time you had a medical?'

I stay silent, fingers stroking the inside pocket seam to calm me.

'Is that why you didn't log the accident with your hand?' He rubs the back of his neck when I refuse to answer. 'I can't log an accident report because you

don't have an active medical file. And I can't seem to create one. Thaleia, don't you understand? If you don't report the accident, it is a contract breach and you'll be removed.'

'You're efficient. I'll give you that.' I flick the slate's screen and the thoracic x-ray is replaced by the first of TerraCorp's coms. 'Perhaps you can walk me through this file, doctor.'

I point to the screen. He stands mute, face bleaching as he reads. I flick to the next message, the one informing Dr Xavier Friedman that Dr Carlisle Hartcher has been removed and the path is clear for his immediate appointment. And the last, confirming the remuneration: half upon arrival on the SS Panchjanya and the other half with the successful termination of my contract.

'I thought you had my back. You made everyone out there think you had my back.'

He looks nauseous. Sweat beads his brow. 'I've never seen these before.'

'You came to Eridani to sell me out.'

'Thaleia, shit. I wouldn't do this to you. You have to believe me. I hate TerraCorps as much as you do.'

He goes to the screen and turns it off as if erasing his collusion is that easy.

'I lodged an Expression of Interest with the Department three years ago for a Head of Medical Sciences position. Anywhere they'd send me. They told me I wasn't qualified and gave me more contract work. Then I arrive back here and find I am the new HMS. They told me Hartcher was retiring.'

'Hartcher wasn't retiring. And this ... you, this is all bullshit.' I don't care if I sound irrational. *Emotional*. I am fucking furious. 'Where the fuck is Hartcher?'

'I don't know, but someone's set me up and you're behaving just like they want you to.'

'Someone's set *you* up!'

My laugh has a knife edge. There's fire in my veins.

My heart races. Pain ricochets and settles. Only to set itself off again.

I push it aside.

'I am the only thing standing between the terraformers and unchecked

development, and you're the one with the persecution complex.'

I take a step closer to him, the pain feeding my fury.

'Let me get you up to speed on a few things, to mull on while you're enjoying TerraCorps' credits. Assuming you live long enough to enjoy them. So many unexpected, *tragic*, things happen out here Dr Friedman. Malfunctions. Breaches. You know, we're family here. We take care of our own.'

I stand close enough for him to feel each hot breath.

'The Planet Impact Studies I oversee are the only things protecting whatever life is out here. One day the terraformers will successfully railroad the Development and Colonisation Act through Parliament, which will supersede the Planning and Environmental Act. That's the law that gives the current Government authority to halt any development until a Planetary Impact Study provides irrefutable evidence a planet or moon is barren. Doctor Friedman, developers don't care what is lost when they terraform the surface for human habitation. But I do.'

'Is that how you got the scars?' He swallows hard. 'Did they try to kill you?'

My watch buzzes. Inga sends the results of the DNA sequencing.

'No, I was dead long before they thought about assassination.'

He tries to touch me and I jerk out of his reach.

'I can't believe you were so easily bought,' I say and wish there was a door to slam behind me.

The Space Port is deserted during our designated 'day', out here in the forever night. Not only do I wonder what it would be like to walk into an ocean, to have the water surround me, cocoon me, I wish I knew a sun's warmth on my face. That constant natural shift of light between night and day.

Several windows are lit up on The Panchjanya. I wonder if its Hartcher, and if he's free or under some kind of house arrest. Tomorrow the atmospheric shell protecting us, will open momentarily to allow The Panchjanya to leave, taking all the fucking deep-space cowboys with them and once again, Eridani will be isolated from the rest of the seething cesspit of humanity.

I was on the first expedition here, when it was still called Epsilon Eridani beta, and returned to build a base, then a research facility, and finally a home. Lured by the prospect of finding life and then bound to discover and protect whatever existed out here from the terraforming boom, spreading like a virus across the solar systems. It's only as my life ends, I consider the personal irony of searching across the known Universe for evidence of life.

I lie on the utility's hood, eyes closed and try to conjure a summer day on Earth. When I fail I return to the shoreline. Here the pain ebbs and flows at a distance.

Lucidity falters as my organs start to shut down. My thoughts oscillate between logic (they never promised it was forever; organ rejection could happen at any time) to superstitious nonsense (this is revenge; murder). When the pain overwhelms the shoreline and Kristof's voice screeches on gulls' wings, I retreat. Stepping away from the ocean, to a waiting coldness.

I turn and see myself wrapped in thermals, lying on the hood of Kristof's Dad's utility. Fingers pick at the peeling ducco. The bare metal rash born from Miranda's harsh atmosphere, rough where my fingers brush it. We pass a spliff between us. Low-Atmos Transports soak us in the rush of take-off and landing.

In the quiet, I dream of rebellion; that I am on a transport heading for Earth. Leaving Miranda far behind. Reinventing myself beyond the brutality and hopelessness of generations of indentured manual labour, propped up by poor nutrition, scant medical care and limited education.

The company colonised Miranda with criminals bought from the terrestrial government. Win-win as it emptied the overcrowded Earth prisons and filled official coffers with much needed credits. A once-off investment the company must have congratulated itself on generation after generation.

From across the solar system they took and branded us. Binding our families in perpetuity to the company and Miranda's barren surface: the Hoffmans, Newmans and Thulmans. The Jackmans, Polmans and Couchmans. The Dartmans, Leishmans and Freshmans.

Bodies to sate development's endless, ravenous appetite. Men to hack ice and haul rock. Women to bear the next generation of breeders and labourers.

A violent, relentless legacy handed to each generation until it reaches Kristof. And me. Lying beside him, stinking of jet fumes and weed, I want the future my mother told me I could have. The one I promised I would make for myself, as far away from Miranda as I could get, as she lay dying.

So in the dead of night, after Kristof goes home, when I'm finally alone, I study—not just the subjects I need, but coding and hacking and encrypting. I get myself off Miranda virtually until a humanitarian scholarship liberates me. I marry Kristof so he can come with me, thinking Sirius and all the opportunities there will fill the hole in him that I can't seem to. I believe on Sirius we be happy.

But I'm young and naïve and Kristof is nothing more than a parasite, which I realise too late. On Sirius he becomes obsessive, controlling and jealous. He resents everything I do and we fight until I can't stand it any longer. I apply for a deep-space expedition in the lead up to graduation. I'm dreaming of going to places no one has ever been, my degree in Biology coalescing with my Space Culture studies. More than anything though, I want a life without Kristof.

In the medical they tell me I'm pregnant; my expedition place revoked. They let me graduate but with my scholarship terminated, there is nowhere else to go except home. My world contracts to the tiny life growing within me; the need to escape gnaws at her barely formed existence.

Kristof's jealousy pivots to his tiny daughter. The arguments escalate. I hide the first black eye behind sunglasses. I forgive him at first. Neither of are coping with parenthood. Without my mother, I flounder. Exhausted and angry that for all my hard work, all the promises, all the opportunities I am still my mother, my grandmother and all the other women who have lived, birthed the next generation and died twenty years earlier than their counterparts in other parts of the solar system.

Kristof loses another job on a planet where you don't lose jobs.

Maybe he could stay home with Ameliana? With my degree and experience, we could have a better life than cutting and hauling ice. Than mining and carting rock.

Elsewhere there are social services. Miranda is a company planet and no

one gives two fucks about what happens here, especially the company, as long as the ice and rock arrive on schedule. As long as you birth your quota of babies. No one cares if you are happy. Or if you are safe.

Life is cheap on Miranda. Humanitarian envoys never make it this far, so the strong destroy the weak and everyone is practised at turning a blind eye. So after the first beating, they release me from hospital, bruised and limping, back to my husband, telling me I am in my fertile window, reminding me I still owe the company four more babies.

I hope Kristof pisses the wrong person off. I hope someone slaughters him in no-man's land between the mines and the settlement.

My nights fill with whispered promises to Ameliana as she suckles at my breast. I will bring no more babies into this world. She will not grow up here. I will take us somewhere she can play in the ocean. She will know the sun on her face and decide what she wants to do with her life. Her life is precious. She will not be a baby machine.

The first chance I have, we will escape Miranda.

But only her memory makes it off.

The utility kicks and shudders. The wheel spurs separate from the road and suspended in time, we ice plane at 45 degrees. Hit one bank. Spin and slam into the other. Gravity releases us and we tumble. Over and over ...

I'm against the bank. The utility crumpled facing me: passenger door open; driver's seat empty; passenger compartment behind crumpled; the tray gone.

Kristof gone. Ameliana gone.

A hole in the windscreen gapes at me. Narrows my world.

The argument hangs in the air with the pop and ping of the engine.

Pain presses in on me; a faltering heart fighting the frozen wasteland to the last beat. The cold claims me faster than I can get the words out.

I'll die knowing it though. *I'm not scared of you anymore.*

‘Thaleia.’ It takes time I do not have to locate myself again. ‘Thaleia.’

This is not Miranda and I am not Mia lying on the roadside taking my last breaths. I’m on a hood of an Eridani utility, sliding into oblivion. Beside me is a sonic stock prod, the only weapon I could find.

‘Thaleia?’

My heart races. The shudders are so intense I can barely get my hand around the prod. The pain which is nowhere and everywhere is somehow worse than that night with Ameliana crushed in the back and Kristof dead fifty metres down the frozen road.

I spy the red cross on the field pack in Xavier’s hand.

‘Don’t come near me,’ I slur, sliding off the hood, brandishing the prod, a glow at the end the only warning the device is activated.

‘I never thought I’d come all the way out here,’ he says, ‘to work with the famous Dr Halligan and discover she’s also Mia Hoffman.’ He comes closer but leaves the utility between us, placing the medi-pack where I was lying a minute earlier. ‘It’s not every day you find out your heroes are the same woman.’

‘Traitor!’ I spit. ‘What do you about Mia Hoffman?’

He squares the shoulders I once coveted. ‘I know they treated you like you were barely human. That because you belonged to the company you had no rights and didn’t deserve any. They spoke of the miracle of your husband being a donor match as the result of inbreeding, not good luck or impossible odds. And it disgusted me so I campaigned on your behalf during the trial and got tossed out of the Medical Association.’

His face flushes red.

‘They threatened deregistration. I was young and they thought they could scare me. When I refused to shut up, they deregistered me and the only place I could work was out here. A renegade medic for hire.

‘I know that’s why they planted the coms. If I chose not to follow protocol, because they must have realised Hartcher wasn’t being honest, they’d blackmail me with my past. And if that didn’t work they’d discredit me with their version of the truth.’

He reaches into his back pocket and places a gun on the hood next to the

medi-pack.

‘And the back-up plan, knowing you’re all family here, that maybe someone would get bent out of shape with my betrayal of you, and shoot me. I mean this is the wild west, right?’

Lies and truth collide.

I lose my balance for a second and shift the cattle prod to my right hand, so I can grip the utility. The pain in my hand eclipses the other pain for a moment. Agony that cannot pattern match with the accident or what came after.

I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on the pain tearing through my palm, into my wrist and up my arm. I follow it, hoping it will return me to shoreline; to my beloved ocean. Instead of a blue sky and the gentle crash of waves, ash showers me. Blinds me. Clogs my ears. Suffocates me with each breath until I am undistinguishable from any of the others I have been. Death blurs all the edges.

‘You can’t access my files. You can’t know I’m Mia.’

‘Your voice, it’s bugged me since we were introduced on the SS Panchjanya,’ he says. Quiet. Confident. ‘The NewsCast this morning, they played an extract from your final interview. You can’t change your voice. And Alan confirmed my suspicions when I went looking for you. He suggested I’d find you here.’

Fucking Alan. He couldn’t keep a secret or let me die in peace. Micro-managing me to the last fucking breath.

Xavier removes a slim-line metal box from the pack and opens it, takes out an ampoule and an old-fashioned syringe. I drop the prod and put both hands on the utility; my grip on everything sliding I don’t have anything left in me to interrogate Xavier’s version of the truth. Or to dispute how he recognised *me*.

My vision fades in and out.

‘I’m tired of fighting,’ I say, forming each word in a flash lucidity. ‘I fought the company to exist on my own terms, my dad for an education, then Kristof to realise my potential. I fought the pull of maternal love. I fought Miranda. I fought to be more.’

Xavier uncaps the syringe, stabs it into the ampoule, tips it upside down and pulls down the clear liquid.

‘Kristof and I were fighting the night of the accident. He punched me while he was driving and lost control. The utility hit the shoulder.’

My mouth is dry. So fucking dry. I fixate on the tiny jet of fluid he squirts from the needle, before recapping it and placing it on the hood between us.

‘I fought the medical profession for negligence for transplanting Kristof’s organs into me. And when there was nothing left to fight I changed my name, changed my face and tried to start over. Now I’m fighting all over again, for whatever life exists out here and for a life I didn’t want.’

I hit the ground. Feel nothing. Xavier is in front of me, hauling me into the sitting position, bracing me against the tyre.

‘I’m tired of fighting. And that ... sucks. I think maybe you might have been worth ... fighting for. Even if ... if I didn’t like you as much ... as I thought I did ... Kristof would have hated you ... he hates you ... and that’s enough to ...’

‘Thaleia, you don’t understand.’

‘You don’t understand.’ I wish I could hammer my fists against him. ‘After the surgery they were looking ... looking for signs my body ... that my body was rejecting ... his organs ... they had it all wrong.’

‘You’ve been infected with a parasitoid, Thaleia. Your hand—’

‘Kristof said he’d kill me before he’d ever let me go.’

‘The dish you put in the incubator exploded, set off alarms—’

‘—cellular memory. The pain, he was warning me off you.’

‘—must have got in through the cut in your hand, from the broken sample bottle.’

‘—punishing me for falling for you.’

‘—unprecedented growth through the primary parasite, then destroying the host parasite and invading your body. Alan says they’ve never seen anything like it.’

Xavier holds something up. A syringe? Yes, it’s a syringe.

Doesn’t he know, drugs can’t kill Kristof.

I out ran him, outlived him, and he’s still going to take me down.

And I fucking hate that.

‘You can’t stop ... stop his organs rejecting ... me ... only my body ... my body from rejecting ... them.’

‘Thaleia, listen to me. Focus.’ He holds my chin in his hand and forces me to look at him. ‘Your ex-husband is not trying to kill you. Your organs are all fine.’

The tremors begin again. An impossible cold consumes me. Pin pricks of light start disappearing from the sky. The stars are dying.

A new night is coming.

I thought it was pain, but it’s pressure. Overwhelming. Killing me from the inside out. Wanting to split me like ripe fruit.

‘Listen to me, Thaleia, you have a parasitoidic infestation. Do you understand me? Nod if you do.’

Fear holds the darkness at bay just long enough to hear the truth: a teeming mass of life within me? Is that what he’s telling me?

‘A doctor’s not making the decision for you this time.’

He offers me the syringe. It strobes in and out of focus. My hand shakes too hard to hold it, it’s only his patience that lands it in my erratic grasp.

‘Do you want to stay or do you want to go?’

I can barely construct two thoughts, let alone decide which one I want. I close my eyes and as I’m slipping away, a voice inside whispers ‘stop’. Beneath my fingers are letters in chaos. Line upon line of words unable to cohere. Then four letters draw themselves to each other: S – T – A ...

‘Stay,’ I rasp, unsure if he’s heard until his fingers wrap around mine.

The needle bites and I surrender, compressed into catastrophic screaming, raining around myself like atomic fallout.

‘So you found life, Dr Halligan,’ the Director crows from the holo screen set up on the tray of the narrow Med Hub bed.

‘It appears so,’ I say, still hoarse despite drinking my weight in water since I came out of the induced coma 24 hours ago.

I pull at my hair, wishing someone had found a comb like I’d asked them

to. I look rougher than I feel, and that's saying something after the last three days.

'TerraCorps is initiating an expedition of its own to, err ...'

He consults his notes, realises there is no easy name for the planet in question, and makes a planet shape with his hands to finish the sentence. 'They intend to table a report as soon as possible.'

'Disputing my findings. I'd expect nothing less. They are welcome to come on up and poke around, try an infestation on for size. We think it is possible *Hoffmonius Lazarusae*—'

'The parasite that rises from the dead?'

'It is a parasitoid, sir. Different, deadlier than a parasite. It's like Russian nesting dolls and yes I agree, the name's a little over the top. Started as a joke but we like it and have decided to keep it.'

The Director frowns. I don't expect him to get any of it: our sense of humour, the homage and definitely not the science.

'When will you finalise the details of the organism.'

'Alan's overseeing the profiling. The team's working to isolate the host parasite. I'm working on an introductory paper for Nature while I'm recovering. There's months, maybe years, of work here but we'll have something concrete in a fortnight, if not sooner. And the future, there's no telling what else we'll find.'

'And you, Dr Halligan, how are you? They tell me we almost lost you?'

'I'm harder to kill than that.'

I might have matted hair, a deathly pallor and be dressed in a medical gown with no underwear, but I am still here.

'The comms are jammed with chatter of your death.'

'Well, technically I died.'

More than once, I want to add.

'I'll issue a statement—'

'Let me stay dead a bit longer. There's some—'

Xavier sticks his head in the door and gesticulates wildly to end the call. I frown and turn back to the Director.

'I'm going to have to call you back, Sir. Something needs my immediate

attention. Can you keep my status ambiguous, just for a few more days?’

Before the Director can protest, I disconnect the call and let Xavier help me to my feet. He leads me to a wheel chair.

‘Are we going far?’

‘Just into the waiting area.’

‘Then I’ll walk.’

I grab a dressing gown as I shuffle out. It’s bad enough Xavier has seen my bare arse through the gown.

We arrive to find Alan fiddling with the remote for the holo screen. The rest of Eridani’s year-long staff are grouped in twos and threes chatting. In the bottom of the screen Comms and Tech patch in and wave to us. Eventually, the screen shimmers and we’re uplinked; New Brisbane Parliament, in session, appears in the space above the row of chairs against the wall.

‘They’re about to take the vote,’ Xavier whispers in my ear and winks, slipping his arm around my waist.

How can he be so frivolous? And I’ve warned him about public displays of affection. Yet I don’t move away. I let my body lean into the stability of his.

As the final Members take their seats, I utter a silent prayer to whichever deity will hear me, to manifest a miracle. The counter behind the House Speaker lights up and votes begin to register. Each Member presses their thumb into a voting panel on their chair arm. Everyone holds their breath. The counter displays an initial flurry of yes votes and then the no votes start to tally. In less than a minute, the Lazarus Ruling is finally laid to rest and Parliament is in an uproar.

‘I don’t believe it,’ I say, looking at the landslide ‘no’ vote.

Alan turns the screen off. ‘There’s going to be some pretty pissed off number crunches and political envoys in New Brisbane tonight.’

‘And I imagine the two parties are unlikely to form any kind of alliance in what remains of this political cycle,’ Xavier says.

‘Or future ones,’ adds Alan.

‘But I don’t understand?’

‘It’s politics,’ shrugs Xavier. ‘Are we meant to understand?’

I raise my eyebrows. ‘You knew?’

‘I had an inkling.’

Contraband champagne appears, glasses clink. I take tiny sips and hold back tears. Mia can finally be laid to rest. I look up at Xavier and he squeezes my hand. He knows, I finally have my freedom.

The champagne runs dry, the waiting area clears and Xavier escorts me back to my room.

‘You sorted out the issue with my admin?’ I ask.

‘Thanks to three cartons of bourbon on the next transport, I’m new best mates with the Tech Hub, and you have an incident report for your hand.’

We pause at the door of my room.

‘They’ll never get you on a technical breach of contract, will they, Thaleia?’

I wink. ‘As long as there is bootleg bourben out here, TerraCorps will always be one step behind.’

He rubs his neck, suddenly lost for words. ‘You know ... you scared the shit out of me with those fake coms. Alan and the Tech Hub—’

‘Alan didn’t call your bluff, Xavier.’

His expression freezes and I wait to see if sweat beads again.

‘I’ve had your back from the start, Thaleia. What more can I say? What more can I do?’

‘Donate the credits they wired you to the Mia Hoffman foundation.’

‘They wired credits?’ he chokes.

‘Both instalments.’

He turns green. ‘What the fuck, I—’

‘Which one do you think it was? Which little fucker came all the way out here to set this up?’

The transports left after I’d been taken into ICU and Alan, in his infinite wisdom, sent the field staff home with the lie I’d died.

‘I don’t know but I am sure the fuck going to find out,’ he says.

‘For a few more cases of bourbon, and with the blessing of the Research Manager, I reckon the Tech Hub could find that person. All you have to do is follow the credits.’

‘I didn’t—’

‘Xavier, if you wanted me dead, if you really wanted those credits, you’d

have watched those little bastards eat me alive at the Space Port.’ A wicked grin plays on my lips. ‘What would you have put on the death certificate? Death by infestation sounds like cockroaches killed me.’

For all the dark humour I can see he’s troubled.

‘Hey,’ I cup the side of his face. ‘I owe you my life.’

‘No you don’t.’ He places his hand over mine. ‘You don’t owe me, or anyone your life. It’s your one life, to live as you want to live it. And if—’

‘Xavier ... I’m glad you’re here, that you’ve chosen Eridani. That you’re staying.’

He closes his eyes and silence holds us.

‘I wasn’t sure you were going to make it.’ His voice is deep, threaded with trauma’s vibrato. ‘I thought you were going to die in my arms and I was going to have to let you.’

I smile, one that not so long ago would have been cynical, but with him, it’s sincere. ‘It was touch and go, but you made a persuasive case to a woman who has wanted to die for the last decade.’ I hit the button beside the door and it slides open. ‘How about you come in.’

‘There’s paperwork—’

‘It’s not much, but you know, it’s mine. For now.’

His face shifts with recognition, brows leaping, eyes transiting from grey to the brightest sky blue.

‘In there?’

‘The door locks doesn’t it?’

‘I’m not sure it’s a good idea?’

‘I think it’s a very good idea.’ I graze my lips over his. ‘Let’s see if we can get it right this time.’

He smiles and the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkles. The stutter in my heart is all mine, regardless of who it once belonged to.