



The Guide to Palas

ANN BERNATH

The Guide to Palas

By Ann Bernath

Prequel to “Rock. Stone. Pebble.”

5/13/2025 5:33 PM

Ann Bernath, annheartdlp@gmail.com, 12/12/2022

Initial Draft Completed, 4/28/2025, 3:40 PM - readannbernath@gmail.com

Contents

PROLOGUE.....	3
Part I.....	1
1 – Seven.....	2
2 – Chance House.....	14
3 – magnolia18.....	25
4 – Parts.....	36
5 – Gwendolyn.....	44
6 – The Real Palas.....	51
7 – Options.....	58
Part II.....	66
8 – Yuta Tensai.....	67
9 – Wild.....	76
10 – Confessions.....	86
11 – Exception.....	94
12 – Eight Makes Seven.....	100
13 – Firsts.....	104
Part III.....	109
14 – Preparation.....	110
15 - Goodbyes.....	116
16 – Go.....	121
17 – Eye and Wing.....	129
18 – Fringe Point.....	137
19 – The Prisoner.....	144
20 – The Caretaker.....	149
EPILOGUE.....	157

PROLOGUE

Trey adjusted the power zoom on his goggles and brought the ascending transport ship into focus, its plume of rocket exhaust highlighted against the dawn's orange-tinted sky. He drew in a deep breath of cool morning air and let it fill his lungs before he exhaled. To some, transport launches were as commonplace as airliners and jets soaring overhead, but each time Trey watched one escape the pull of gravity, he felt the same stir of excitement. He had always dreamed that one day he would be aboard one of those ships. He imagined looking back at the planet receding below him as he left the congestion and complications and absurdity behind, then turning to look forward to something new, even if it meant he would face risks he couldn't imagine.

He smiled. The day that dream would come true was drawing closer.

The ship ascended beyond the zoom's range, appearing as a mere speck before disappearing.

Trey lowered his goggles.

"Are you sure that's the same transport that will take you to your ship?"

His friend, Jack, seated beside him in their rooftop, do-it-yourself lounge, pulled two cans of beer out of the cooler that sat between them and held one out to him.

Trey took it and opened it, took a sip of the escaping foam, and sighed. Drinking beer at dawn on the rooftop was a special kind of luxury.

"The *Raven Wing* is scheduled to rendezvous with the *Nighthawk* in six months. And that was the *Raven Wing*." Trey downed a few swallows of beer, then turned toward Jack. "You said *your* ship as if you aren't going."

"I never said I was going."

"But – "

"I'm just helping you out." Jack opened his beer and waited for the foam to dissipate before he drank. He lifted his head toward the sky. "So, we have six months to finish the boxes."

Trey nodded. "Yes. Well, technically, they're electronic readers, but yes, they'll look like boxes and we'll encase them in protective boxes then pack them in stainless steel boxes."

"And your group is going to load them with instructions, not only to teach you 'leavers' how to survive without tech, but also to teach a primitive civilization how to make the *very same tech* you're leaving behind."

"Well, yes, but also how *not* to. At least, that's the . . ."

Trey trailed off, sat up straighter.

A droning hum was rising up from the street below.

"Hover," Trey said.

He switched his goggles off, stowed them under his chair. Jack switched his goggles off but didn't remove them.

The hum grew louder until its source rose above the roof line, a small, four-rotor craft which paused momentarily above them, the camera mounted on its belly rotating then pausing as if bringing them into focus. A small light blinked four times in rapid succession, paused, then blinked again twice before the craft elevated high above them and flew away, its hum receding behind it.

"It's all right. It's one of ours." Jack smiled. "At least, *now* it is, thanks to Ace."

Trey released the breath he had been holding, and even though he had been reassured, he still waited until the hover had flown out of sight.

He sighed. "You should come with us, Jack. You wouldn't have to worry about hovers anymore."

Jack didn't answer for a moment, perhaps deciding between serious honesty and joking banter, deciding on the latter. "But will they have beer where you're going?"

Trey drew in a frustrated breath, then nodded. "Sure. Beer's universal, isn't it?"

Jack chuckled. "I'll play it safe and stay here."

Trey glanced over at him, wishing he could see his expression, but Jack always wore some kind of eye covering when he was outside, especially on the rooftop. Today, he wore the same type of powered goggles as Trey.

Trey shook his head. "Well, I've got six months to talk you into it."

Jack chuckled. "You can try if it makes you feel better, Trey."

They fell silent, both gazing upward and watching the sky brighten.

When Trey finished his beer, he tossed the empty can into the cooler and grabbed another.

"About the readers. Do you think they'll be ready in time?"

"Should be," Jack said. "We should be able to get the final materials once we get the delivery schedules, and Love should be able to get those in a few days. Trouble is, I don't think any of us know how to get at the data once we have it."

"Not even Ace?"

"He can rewire hovers, but he claims that reading database files takes different skills."

"We'll need to bring someone else in then."

Jack nodded.

Trey pulled his cap farther down on his forehead. The morning sun had cleared the high-rise to the east of them and now struck their patch of rooftop.

He took the time to savor a few more long swigs of beer before speaking again.

"I've been thinking about bringing someone else in for a while now anyway. This might be a good time, and she has the skills we need."

"Don't tell me. Another family member." Jack waited for Trey's nod. "Which one this time?"

"Seven. You remember her."

Jack leaned back in his seat, took a long, slow swallow before returning his can to its holder in his chair. He rotated it in place.

"Lucky Seven," he said.

"She goes by Savannah now," Trey said.

"You've kept tabs on her, like all the rest."

"They're family."

Jack nodded. "Bring her in then. But make sure she knows we're all Unregistered."

Another droning hum, higher-pitched this time, approached from the south, skimming rapidly over the neighboring rooftops.

Jack pushed himself up out of his chair.

"Let's get inside," he said. "This one isn't ours."

Part I

"Choose your world."

The Guide

1 – Seven

It took three days for Savannah to realize that the triangle of light appearing on her bedroom wall every morning was a signal. The first day she had watched it through half-open eyes without lifting her head from her pillow, wondering what new balcony adornment across the street was catching and reflecting the morning light. She watched the triangle dance and flicker before it disappeared, then discounted it. The second day she noticed that the triangle appeared in a slightly different spot on the wall. She had felt curious enough that day to climb up on her bed and peer out her small, rectangular window, but by the time she focused her eyes on the top floors of the neighboring building, the reflection on the wall had vanished. On the third day, as she watched the triangle of light rotate in one direction, then turn to rotate in the opposite direction, she realized the light wasn't a reflection at all. It was a projection. A signal.

She sat up and stared at it, chagrined that it had taken her so long to recognize it, one hand covering an ever-widening smile.

Trey. It was a signal from Trey. It had to be. A triangle was his signature.

How long had it been?

She had just turned fifteen when she and Eight had been adopted, when Trey would sneak away from Chance House and shine this very pattern onto her bedroom wall signaling for her to meet him. She would make up an excuse to stay late after school, then she would take the cross-zone bus back to to meet him at their favorite café.

That had been ten years ago. Could she be so sure it was Trey sending a signal again after all this time?

She smiled. The only way to find out was to look for him at *503's Best Café*.

She sprang to her feet. She pulled on a one-piece, socks, and boots, then ran a brush through her thick, maddening hair. She had made an appointment for a haircut last week, but she had forgotten. But perhaps it would work out for the best. Trey would be more likely to recognize her with long hair anyway.

She grabbed her bag and handheld and headed to her front door, managing to unlock it and pull it open an inch before she remembered two things. First, she and Trey always met after her school day ended which meant if he really was waiting for her, he wouldn't expect her until late afternoon. And second, she had a job.

Savannah released the door. The lock re-engaged.

What day was it? Thursday? She had a weekly meeting with the four J's on Thursday.

She set her bag down and kicked off her boots. Grabbing a leftover burrito and a bottle of juice from the refrigerator, she made the three-step commute to her work pod along the west wall of her apartment, sat and swiveled her chair into place, then slipped her headgear on.

She took a moment to appreciate the complete sensory deprivation the headgear provided. Someday, if she were ever promoted to Extended status, she would buy her own device for dark, silent, deep nights of blissful sleep.

She sighed. "Time?"

"8:59"

She wondered who provided the voice for these sets or if it was computer-simulated. She also wondered if human voice modulation was improving or if she just needed to talk to people more often to hear the difference.

“Headgear on.” The headgear’s viewscreen powered up. “Connect.”

The virtual conference table resolved into view and the J’s popped into virtual seats around the table one by one. Jerri, Jimi, Janine, and Jeremy. Savannah had never met them in person. She had looked up their profiles so knew their real faces, but their avatars looked different every time. Different outfits, hairstyles and colors, head coverings, even earrings, and that was when their avatars looked human. Her own avatar appeared close to her real self, auburn hair pulled into a ponytail to one side, hazel eyes, dressed in an oversized T-shirt displaying art from one of her favorite fantasy worlds. Apparently, the others took the time before connecting to tweak the appearance of their avatars. Even if she did connect with more than a few minutes to spare, she didn’t have the creative energy to waste on the appearance of her fake self.

“Morning.”

Greetings and “how’s the weather where you are?” inquiries were exchanged before the topic turned to the new product line, the accompanying help materials that would be required, and each of their associated assignments.

Savannah’s mind wandered.

Thinking of Trey always made her think of chocolate. Milk chocolate-colored skin, dark chocolate eyes, and bittersweet chocolate locks of hair. He had been her favorite among her house siblings. She and Trey had played marbles on the kitchen floor until they were shooed out onto the rough, cement patio. They had climbed out onto the roof through Trey and Diamond’s shared bedroom window and had stared at the sky, and instead of talking about their dreams had talked about stupid things. Except for their last night together at Chance House, the night before Richard and Claire Jones had come to find a young girl to adopt – taking two of them in the end – when they had promised that if she were adopted, they wouldn’t forget each other.

“Savannah? Hello? Are you still connected?”

Savannah straightened. She had a bad habit of slumping in her chair when her mind wandered.

“Um . . . yes. I’m here.” She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. I was thinking about which settings I should use for the audio tracks this time.”

She wasn’t lying, except for the fact that she had made that decision twenty minutes ago while the J’s argued about which features and materials would be offered to Limiteds versus Extendeds.

“Good then.” Jerri’s avatar swung its long purple hair aside. “I’ll post the notes. End meeting.”

The meeting dissolved.

Savannah pulled her headgear off, stretched her shoulders. If she could work through her lunch break, she could edit the audio scripts and post them for review by early afternoon. Then she could head to Zone 503 to look for Trey.



Zone 502’s current official name was GenTech City. Not only had the GenTech Corporation based their headquarters in 502, but they had also secured the naming rights contract from the Fifth District. In everyday conversation, however, everyone still called the zone “502,” using its permanent grid designation instead, since naming contracts tended to change hands every five to ten years. Even Savannah who worked for GenTech called it 502. Her employer’s inescapable omnipresence was

oppressive enough, its “forward-thinking” ads and logo pasted and streaming on every physical and virtual surface in the zone.

Zone 503’s naming contract, on the other hand, remained open. At one point, a large supermarket chain had made noises about laying claim to it, but the deal had faltered due to low return-on-investment expectations. The zone was mostly residential, predominantly populated by Registered-only citizens since anyone promoted to Limited status usually moved to other zones and spent their higher-paying wages elsewhere.

Savannah had grown up in 503, at least between the ages of five and fifteen. She had no memory of anything before that. When she was adopted by Richard and Claire, she moved to their home in 502, then known as Brighton Skyways. There she had finished her education, secured a position with GenTech, and rented her own apartment. Although zones 502 and 503 seemed worlds apart in many ways, they were physically adjacent, and one could travel from one to the other in less than an hour on a cross-zone bus. As close as she was to 503, once she had settled in her apartment and her job, she hadn’t been back. In fact, she hadn’t taken full advantage of her Limited access status to travel at all, although she had toyed with the idea of venturing at least once to coastal zone 501, currently named Cyan Cruises, to watch Unlimiteds sail off into the sunset. In essence, Savannah hadn’t seen much of the world. In fact, she rarely left her apartment.

Today, though, she ran the three blocks from her building to catch the GenTech-503.

Panting, she took a seat near the rear doors facing the windows and flipped up her headphones to block out the cacophony around her. Multiple screens competed for her attention, smiling people talking over feel-good music about GenTech products that everyone with the right status needed to add to their handhelds or home systems. Like her fellow passengers, she took immediate measures to block it out. Her headphones filtered out most external sounds while fixing her gaze out the windows helped distract from the visual onslaught, at least until other buses passed by displaying eye-catching ads along their length. Some passengers simply stared at their handhelds, opting to deal with ads on those smaller screens instead.

At some point, Savannah’s eyes closed.

“Zone 503.”

Her eyes popped open.

The announcement took over the screens, a loud, three-note tone punctuating the transition across zone limits.

Handheld screens lit up.

Savannah glanced down at hers.

Savannah Jones. Limited. Zone 503 Status: Active.

As expected, her handheld’s access light stayed green.

“Excuse me.” The young girl seated next to her showed her handheld’s display to Savannah and pointed to its screen and access light, currently flashing a bright yellow. “What does this mean?”

Savannah guessed the girl to be in her early twenties, maybe younger. She had short hair, bleached white then streaked with varying shades of blue, the girl’s eyes matching the deepest hue.

Savannah glanced down at the girl’s handheld.

Cynda Wright. Limited. Zone 503 Status: None

A one-day access will be added to this account in 1:35:00. . . 1:34:59

“Looks like your Limited registration doesn’t include 503,” Savannah said. “If you stay connected, you’ll be charged for single-day access. But if you don’t want to pay for that, just power down.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

The girl powered off her handheld and closed it, stared at the now lifeless and featureless device before slipping it into her bag. The girl drew in a deep breath, slumped in her seat. Her hands sought each other out as if they needed something to hold.

"First trip outside your zones?" Savannah didn't, well, ever strike up a conversation with strangers, but this girl had initiated one and now seemed to need a distraction. "Staying in 503 long?"

The girl shook her head. "504. I'm headed to 504."

"Oh, you'll be changing buses then."

The girl nodded.

Zone 504. Industrial. Manufacturing. Full of warehouses and large housing projects often populated by transients and Unregistered workers. At least, that's what Savannah had heard. She wondered what would take this inexperienced girl to such a place.

The ads changed. They no longer promoted GenTech's products. Instead, they invited riders to local restaurants, bakeries, and clothing stores. The high-rise office and residential buildings outside the windows gave way to small shopping areas and one and two-story, single-family homes. Motor scooters, three-wheelers, and minibuses shared the road instead of other large buses and Extended-owned personal vehicles. Trees and flower planters lined the streets, a refreshing sight since greenery was confined to balconies and rooftops in 502.

Savannah smiled.

Zone 503 felt familiar and welcoming.

Giving the girl with color-streaked hair and deep blue eyes a nod, Savannah exited the bus at the corner of West Fourth Street and Third Avenue, pausing a moment to reposition her bag on her back and scan the signs. A block or two north, if it was still there, was a game arcade that she and Trey hadn't been allowed to enter but had stood peering in at through the large pane-glass windows to watch others play. One block east at the corner of Fifth and Third was *503's Best Café*, the perfect location for it, the sign out front, its menus, and the proprietor's greeting spiel reminded its customers. Savannah and Trey would roll their eyes each time they heard or read the café's silly catch phrase, then laugh.

She gripped her bag's strap with both hands and headed to West Fifth Street.

"Welcome!"

Savannah recognized the proprietor's voice calling out from a back room as soon as the tinny door chime announced that someone had entered.

The café only had a few patrons. It was too late for lunch and still too early for dinner.

Savannah scanned the tables looking for Trey, nerves fluttering in her stomach. Would he have changed so much in ten years that she wouldn't recognize him?

"Hello, there! You came after all. Good to see you again."

Savannah didn't need to read the name on her apron, for she remembered the proprietor in vivid detail, especially the lilt in her voice. The wrinkles around her eyes had deepened, but her smile still seemed to extend to her sparkling grey eyes just the same.

"Hello, Miss Carol." She had never learned her last name, but she had always added the honorific. "You remember me?"

"That beautiful hair. Those dimples. How could one forget?" Miss Carol wiped her hands on her apron. "You came for Trey, yes? He's been waiting for you. Take the stairs to the roof and I'll send your order up."

"The roof? My order?"

Miss Carol gestured toward a set of stairs leading off of the kitchen.

Savannah didn't remember any stairs. Either they were a new addition, or she had been too distracted when she met with Trey to notice.

The building only had two stories, so the climb was easy. At the top of the stairs, she opened the heavy door and exited outside into the now waning daylight.

At the corner of the rooftop was a hooded chimney allowing steam to escape from the café's cookstove. In the middle of the roof sat a small apartment with an adjoining covered patio furnished by a table and two folding chairs that matched the café's furniture decor.

Savannah drew in a long breath, shivered slightly, then zipped her jacket higher. The sun was losing its influence on the day and the temperature.

And then a warm hand fell on her shoulder.

"Tag. You're it."

She spun around.

Standing with the setting sun behind him, his smile still as sweet as chocolate, was Trey.

Being self-conscious teens the last time they met, and children who saw each other every day before that, she had never hugged Trey before. She wasn't expecting such a warm, enveloping, almost crushing embrace. But her surprise only lasted a moment before she returned the hug with equal vigor.

When he released her, he took her by both shoulders and pushed her to arm's length to study her, his face alight. She smiled. She had forgotten how Trey always exuded a sense of joy.

"You came," he said. "You saw my signal and came."

"I did. Of course, I did." She tilted her head. "But I'm just now wondering why you didn't just knock on my door."

He grinned. "What would be the fun in that? Besides, I only had partial information about where you lived. I've been shining – well, I've had a hover shining that signal into every window on your floor."

Savannah imagined the bemused looks on the faces of her neighbors, except for Rose in 6C in the apartment next door who may not have noticed. Rose was an early riser, braving the chill of early morning to fetch one of the few remaining print newspapers. She often bought Savannah a copy, and Savannah enjoyed flipping through the physical pages.

Savannah gripped the front of Trey's shirt.

"Ten years, Trey. It's been ten years."

"I know, and I want to hear everything. All I know is that you live in that building in 502, you work for GenTech, you aren't married, and you live alone."

Savannah smiled. "Well, it sounds like you're caught up then." She poked his chest. "Your turn."

He released her shoulders and gestured around the rooftop. "You're looking at it."

"You live here? On top of the café?"

He nodded. "Let me give you the two-minute tour." He turned and pointed toward the edge of the roof. "Here's my view of the surrounding area. Great for watching parades and AFA protest marches. I have a covered patio with lighting and a freestanding heater for outdoor dining. And of course, I have my oh-so-quaint living quarters."

Trey reached out and took her hand and led her through the door of the small apartment.

The structure was comprised of a small, combined kitchen and dining area, a living room, a bedroom large enough for a single bed and a nightstand, and a tiny bathroom, the bathroom the only room separated from the others by a door. Floor-to-ceiling shelving units filled with model cars and planes and spaceships lined the walls of the living room, leaving just enough space for a recliner and a small desk. An old single-purpose television set and a computer of a similar vintage sat on the desk. The kitchen was smaller than the living room, containing a half-size refrigerator, sink, and a microwave.

Savannah ducked out of the way of a spaceship model that hung suspended from the ceiling.

"Oh, sorry about that. I just finished that one."

Savannah reached up and turned the model in every direction to appreciate its details. Like Trey, she often dreamed of flying off and living in another world, but where Trey built models, she immersed herself in the virtual worlds of games and computer sims.

"So there. Tour is done. The place is pretty self-explanatory. Miss Carol has been letting me live up here ever since I moved out of Chance House. I do odd jobs for her to pay for my room and board."

Trey led her back outside. "If the weather's good at all, I eat outside. And look, right on cue, here's Miss Carol with our usual order of lemon and berry pancakes."

Savannah took a seat at the table under the canopy closest to the heater while Carol unloaded the plates of food and utensils from her tray.

"Here you go. Eat them while they're hot." Carol smiled. "It's good to see you two together again."

Savannah rubbed her hands together in anticipation. "Thank you, Miss Carol."

"Oh. I forgot the coffee. I'll send someone up with it." She headed to the door to the stairs and lifted her hand in a wave. "Enjoy."

Trey lifted his fork and gestured to Savannah to do the same.

"To old times," he said.

Savannah hadn't had lemon and berry pancakes since she'd been here last. The cakes were dusted with powdered sugar. They were perfectly round, fluffy, tasty, and were just the right amount of sweet. She ate, occasionally reminding herself to slow down, glancing across the table at Trey who looked up to meet her gaze and return her smile. A strand of lights that had been attached to the perimeter of the canopy illuminated, sensing the onset of twilight.

"So, pretty humble lifestyle compared to what a Limited like you enjoys, huh? Or are you Extended now?"

She shook her head. "Limited. And you? Are you even Registered?"

He smiled a slow smile, shook his head.

She might have guessed his status from the age of his devices. As far as she knew, only old, outdated, second-hand units became available for Unregistered consumers, and access to networks could only be purchased in time-based increments. Although, one only needed to have a steady income to attain basic Registered status. That meant Trey didn't have a steady income, or he chose to remain Unregistered.

"Think less of me now?" He crossed his arms on the table and leaned forward. "It's alright if you do."

She put her fork down, wiped her hands on her napkin, and pushed her plate aside.

"Who do you think you're talking to? If I was concerned about status, I'd be trying to work my way up at GenTech." She laughed. "My apartment isn't much bigger than yours. You have a patio – a lovely one really with these lights and the view of the sky. I rarely see the sun. Miss Carol feeds you and dotes on you too I imagine. I order food delivery almost every day, delivered by people I don't know. I envy you, to be honest. When you aren't Registered, no one, except for those you want to know, knows where you are or what you're doing."

He smiled.

"You don't know how happy that makes me to hear, because I have a reason for calling you here. I wanted to see you, of course, and if you were worried about my status, I would just hug you one or two more times and then send you home. But, now that I have you here, and you don't seem fazed by my humble existence, I'm not sure how to begin." He took her hands in his, squeezed her fingers, then drew in a deep breath. "Do you know databases?"

She lifted her eyebrows. That had been an abrupt change of subject.

"I know the big ones. TrackIt, R & C, GenTech's MetaList. The interfaces are all slightly different, but the basics are the same."

"What if you just had the files and not the software? Could you read the data?"

"Probably. They use similar file structures." She sat up straighter. "What is this about? Why would you have files without software? Why would . . ."

Her question trailed away. He was Unregistered. He had an old computer. And this was Trey. He wouldn't be satisfied just doing odd jobs at a café. He had too much energy and drive. He had to be

involved in something else, something that an Unregistered person could do more freely than a Registered one.

Trey released her hands.

A young girl brought their coffee, smiled sweetly at Trey, then gathered all their dishes and returned downstairs.

Savannah drew in a quick breath, dropped her voice to a whisper. "You said you used a hover to signal me? A hover?! I'm just realizing you said that." She swallowed. "Don't tell me you're with the AFA?"

His slow smile almost convinced her that her guess had been correct, but he shook his head. "I'm not. I do agree with them though that there should be 'access for all,' and I can't fault them for fighting for their cause. However, I don't believe protesting in the streets is going to change anything. Also, hovers scare me, and District Security always sends hovers to protests."

Savannah nodded, then tilted her head. "But you said you sent a hover to send me that signal."

He nodded. "Let's just say I have access to one. And controlling one is different than being chased by one."

She nodded again, but her head remained tilted. "If not the AFA, what then?"

He leaned his elbows on the table and laced his fingers together. "I can tell you everything now, but then you wouldn't be able to claim ignorance, or I can just ask you for a favor without giving you a reason and keep you somewhat innocent."

Savannah noted that she was wringing her hands in her lap, wondered if they were just cold or if the act was a manifestation of a sudden bout of nerves. She took a sip of hot coffee, let it warm her throat before swallowing. She took another sip before setting her cup down.

"Is it illegal, the thing you want me to do?"

"Well, technically, the illegal part has already been done, but now that I think about it, I should have just asked you to retrieve some data for us from some database files and told you that we'd lost the software." He sighed, smiled. "But I guess subconsciously I wanted to involve you because I don't want to leave you behind."

"Leave me behind?" She blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Like I said, the AFA isn't wrong. There should be access for all, technology advancements for all. I heard GenTech has some new product called *Lookout*. For Extended and Unlimited, *Lookout* can track the whereabouts of children and other family members and send alerts if they're nearby or in trouble. If you're Limited, you can only keep track of other Registered or Limited people you've *paid* to track. If you're Registered, you only get alerts about products available in physical stores nearby, a pretty useless feature when you're inundated with ads anyway. If you're Unregistered, you don't even have a handheld." He shook his head. "That's a stupid example, but the same stupid logic applies to everything. It's no wonder there are more groups like the AFA popping up all the time."

He paused, picked up his coffee cup and sipped it, held it under his nose and breathed in the steam before setting the cup back on the table.

"There's another group, though, that just wants to leave all of this behind." He laced his fingers together again. "Listen, I'm just going to leave it there and let you decide if you'd like to help with the files knowing your involvement may put you at risk. If you decide to help, and if you want to know, I can tell you everything."

He reached into his rear pants pocket and withdrew a business card.

"Think about it. If you do decide to help with the files, or just talk more, come to this address. Most of us are there most of the time." He put the card in her hand, then wrapped both of his hands around hers, waited until she lifted her gaze to meet his. "I hope to see you in the next couple of days. If not, I don't blame you, and I'll make sure to see you again before we leave."

She swallowed. She hadn't seen him or heard from him in ten years, but the thought of never being able to see him again pulled at her heart.

The day had given way to the dark. Only the lights from the overhead canopy illuminated Trey's face. Savannah leaned even farther across the table hoping to see answers in his dark eyes.

"Trey, when you say 'leave' what do you mean? Where could you possibly go to leave 'all this' – by which I assume you mean tech – behind? Is there such a district or territory without tech?"

Trey smiled. He leaned toward her and touched his forehead to hers, then dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Not even a country, Savannah. It's another planet."



"Choose your world."

One by one, the world options resolved into view, identified themselves by name, scrolled through a series of sample scenes, then dissolved into the next. *Dawn's Mist*, a fantasy world filled with other-worldly creatures, castles, and labyrinthian caves occupied by monstrous beasts. *Garnet City*, a world contained in a single city with a perpetually gray sky and rain-soaked streets offering mysteries of crime and intrigue. *Vista Road*, a world of endless paved highways and rusting, smoke-generating vehicles locked in a savage race. *Palas*, a vast world of desert plains, mountains, lakes, and lush islands with white-sand beaches waiting to be explored.

The soft-spoken voice in Savannah's ear prompted her again. "Choose your world."

GenTech's DreamSight System had been designed for Extended and Unlimited users, but, having voiced the system's *Guide* for these four worlds – it was her own voice in her ear – she had been granted special privileges. She had spent countless hours in each virtual reality, ostensibly to learn each world's ambience to inform her vocal performances, but she had spent most of her time immersed in her favorite, the beautiful world of *Palas*.

Which world, she wondered, would be most like the planet Trey had mentioned?

She shook herself. She still couldn't wrap her mind around his words.

"Come to 504 if you want to know more," he had said.

As she left the café's rooftop, Trey had waved all her subsequent, half-spoken questions away, then grinned, amused by his own rhyme, before his face sobered.

"Really though," he had said. "We could use your help."

Savannah's headgear vibrated announcing the arrival of a reminder icon that pulsed in front of the rotating images.

Ah, yes. Today was the last Friday of the month.

"Disconnect."

The icon winked out. The rotating images faded to black. She removed the headgear and set it aside, reached into her back pocket to retrieve the business card Trey had given her.

Thompson Transportation and Storage
Warehouse 11, Chester Street
Zone 504

She flipped the card over. Trey had handwritten the ID of the closest bus stop ID and had drawn a small map.

She released a long sigh.

Had she lied to Trey? Was she bothered, after all, by the prospect of traveling to a mostly Unregistered zone?

To believe the media, Unregistered individuals were too unskilled to work, more often thieves than merely transient workers. Those who didn't register didn't contribute to society. They devalued society. Savannah had always tried to make a conscious effort to keep the propaganda at a distance, but she knew some of it had slipped past her defenses and had taken root, for she could sense her own reluctance to venture into a zone purported to have Unregistered comprising its majority.

Or did she fear getting involved with this group who planned to, somehow, leave the planet? Was it illegal to leave the planet? Were the files Trey wanted her to read obtained illegally? If so, then handling them and helping to enable their use would be deemed illegal as well. She didn't even need to consult with her lawyer brother-in-law to figure that out.

Still, this was Trey asking for her for help. That fact could eclipse all other concerns if she were to gaze into those milk-chocolate eyes again.

For now, she returned the address card to her pocket.

She didn't have to decide today. She couldn't go anywhere until tomorrow. Today was the last Friday of the month and she was expected at family dinner.

She ran a brush through her hair and tied it back with a hair band, wishing she had made it to that haircut appointment after all, then changed her clothes, for she had been told more than once that a sweatshirt and leggings, her usual work attire, was inappropriate for family dinner.

"Hire a car to 502 north."

Savannah waited for the happy noise of success from her handheld, then exited her apartment.

Richard and Claire Jones had recently moved to a three-flight townhouse near 502's northern boundary, a twenty-minute car ride from Savannah's building, Or would be twenty minutes without traffic. The journey after work on a Friday night doubled the travel time. On the way, Savannah tracked her sister's progress using *Lookout* and scowled. Once again, she would arrive last.

Lookout.

It was the app Trey had used as an example of access status inequality. Yes, as a Limited she had to pay for each person she tracked, but she had never considered the fact that the feature wasn't even available to Registered status. How many other advantages did she enjoy that were off-limits to Registered? How many more was she was missing out on with her Limited status?

She studied the app's screen a moment longer then closed it.

Claire greeted Savannah at the door. As usual, her adoptive mother was dressed for the occasion, wearing matching black slacks and sweater. Her hair, dyed a youthful brown, was swept back and up into a bun held in place with a silver clasp. Richard followed close behind her wearing a large apron over his light blue button shirt and tan trousers, his long, graying hair tucked back behind his ears.

"Hi, Mom-Éclair." Savannah squeezed Claire around her shoulders, then moved forward to allow Richard to engulf her in his embrace. "Hi, Rich Daddy."

"You and your nicknames." Claire smiled, then sighed, moving her gaze up and down Savannah's form. "Savannah. Did you even *consider* wearing something at least moderately attractive?"

Savannah glanced down at her clothes. Her jeans and t-shirt were freshly laundered, without wrinkle or stain. Her boots, albeit scuffed and showing wear, seemed presentable.

She shrugged and smiled. "I did, *obviously*."

"I think you look as sweet as ever." Richard gripped her shoulders. "Glad you're here. I'm making your favorite."

"Do you even know what my favorite is?"

"It's whatever I've cooked, right?"

"Sure." She returned his grin.

"Finally, Savannah." Elise joined them at the door encircling Savannah's arm in hers.

Savannah smiled.

Elise wasn't Savannah's sister by blood, but the two girls, both orphaned at a young age, had shared a room at Chance House where they were known as Seven and Eight, and once adopted, shared a room again in the Jones household renamed as Savannah and Elise.

"Whatever takes you so long to get here?" Elise shook her head. "Never mind. Same old excuses I presume."

Elise had more than considered wearing something attractive. She wore a soft pink blouse and had tied her reddish-blond hair back with a wide ribbon. She had painted her nails a bright pink. Her makeup had been flawlessly applied. She was the very incarnation of lovely.

"I don't live as close as you do, remember?"

Elise waved the comment away, guided Savannah into the dining room with Richard and Claire in tow. "Grant and I have been waiting."

"Hey."

Savannah's brother-in-law finished devouring a carefully constructed cheese and cracker sandwich he had just stuffed into his mouth then smiled at her from the other side of the table around his muffled greeting.

"Hey."

Savannah liked Grant. He had a gentle smile that transformed his otherwise serious countenance, and when the gel that usually kept his hair up and off his forehead lost its effectiveness, she liked how a few locks swept down across his eyebrows giving him a boyish look.

"Everyone, everyone." Elise pulled Savannah closer, hugged her, then turned to the group surrounding her. "Grant and I have great news."

Savannah gasped. "Am I going to be an aunt?"

Elise scowled.

"Be serious, Savannah. When would we have time for that? No. Grant's getting a promotion." With her free hand, Elise motioned for Grant to move up next to her. When he complied, she slipped one arm around Grant's, still keeping one tight around Savannah's. "We always knew he had Extended potential. Not only that, but the new position could also lead to a vice presidency. Can you believe it? Within two years we all might become Tier 2 Extended!"

"More like three years," Grant said.

"Tier 2?" Claire dropped into one of the dining room chairs, her hand seeming to rise of its own accord to cover her mouth. "Tier 2?"

"That's . . . incredible." Richard took a chair next to his wife and slipped a hand onto her shoulder. "Congratulations, Grant. You deserve it."

Elise gripped Savannah's arm tighter. "Soon you don't have to look across the river at 402's Tower Estates. You could actually live there." Elise flashed a smile at each of her adoptive parents, then at Savannah, then again at Richard and Claire. "I've been trying for my own promotion. I still need to get a few more papers published. The academic world's status ladder is tougher to climb than I imagined. But my sweet Grant has come through for all of us. I guess adopting us turned out to be a good plan after all."

Savannah felt the air leave the room.

Claire's eyes widened. "What?"

"Elise." Savannah shot her sister a warning glare, but Elise either missed it or ignored it.

"I mean, we've always known why you adopted us. But we never resented you for it, did we Savannah?"

Elise turned to face her, her head tilted, her eyebrows lifted expecting Savannah's agreement.

Of course, she and Elise had discussed the reason for their adoption many times during their long talks in the dark. They had always known that Richard and Claire had adopted children as a means to raise their status.

Both were teachers at a district-funded academy for lower status children, their positions providing a joint salary which afforded them the ability to lead a decent Limited lifestyle but no career path for advancement. Neither had the skills or influence to attain a professorship at a private academy, nor the financial means to buy a higher status. Of course, buying status was rarely done. One usually met other criteria first before acquiring enough wealth to pay the exorbitant costs. A single person who couldn't raise their status on their own could marry upward. A couple could raise their status by proxy through their children's status, and if they were childless, they could invest in adopted children with strong potential.

The best candidates would be teens, minors still young enough that their education could be guided toward a high-status career while at the same time being only a few years away from joining the workforce. If the children failed to achieve a higher status through career promotion, then having them marry into status would suffice, again through proxy.

Eight had been the perfect choice. Sixteen, ambitious, stellar grades. Seven, only a year younger, was an adequate second choice and served as a backup.

For Seven and Eight, the reasons behind their adoption had been obvious, but Elise was right in saying that they had never resented it. No matter the impetus behind it, becoming Savannah and Elise Jones had given them a good education and a caring home. Whatever their initial incentives had been, Richard and Claire had been loving, supportive parents.

Savannah drew in a breath. "Mom, Dad." She decided to forego the nicknames. "Listen, we've always known, but we both understand. There's no shame in wanting things."

Richard rose up out of his chair, his wide eyes fixed on the two adopted daughters standing in front of him.

"*Things?* Is that what you girls think? That we wanted Extended status because we wanted *things?*"

Elise blinked, nodded.

Richard lifted his arm and pointed at the glass doors that opened to the balcony.

"Do you think we've been staring across the river envying those people in their palatial mansions? We don't care about that. We'd rather have an uninterrupted view of the sunset." He pointed toward the living room. "Haven't you seen what we hang on our walls? We don't want things. We want to travel to the places in those pictures, to the places we teach our students about, to see those places for ourselves. We want to experience what this world has to offer beyond our Limited access. That's the only reason we would aspire to Extended status."

Savannah exchanged a look with Elise. They should have known that. Richard and Claire had covered the walls of their home with paintings and photographs of historically significant places around the world, destinations full of wonder.

"Richard, they aren't wrong." Claire got to her feet. "It doesn't matter why we wanted Extended status. We can't deny we intended to use them to get it."

Elise shook her head, gripped Savannah's arm. "It doesn't matter why you adopted us, does it Savannah?"

Savannah shook her head. "No. It doesn't matter. It never mattered." She smiled what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "We know you always cared about us."

Elise nodded. "And you love us *now*, right?"

"Of course, we do." Claire sprang across the dining room and wrapped her arms around them. "Of course, we do. You are both our daughters. You are our family. And Grant, you, too. We love all of

you. To think you've all been working so hard, thinking we were so shallow, but still doing it all for us. Elise, working so hard at the university. Grant, giving up your music career for law. And Savannah, you've been working so hard too."

"I really haven't." Savannah mumbled the words into Claire's shoulder, unsure if Claire felt better or worse to hear it.

Claire drew back and reached for Richard who now stood by her side, grabbed the tie from his apron and dabbed at her moist eyes. Then she drew in a long breath and smiled.

"Well, then, I hope we've put all of that to rest and we can celebrate Grant's promotion with some champagne. Can we?"

Elise and Savannah nodded.

Savannah knew better than to have a second glass of champagne when she took it, and now, as she climbed under her covers and plopped her heavy head down onto the pillow, she scolded herself. She closed her eyes, waiting and hoping for the swirling sensation to subside.

Tier 2 Extended. That status would give her access to a wide array of high-end goods and services, both physical and virtual, opening an entire new library of non-GenTech world simulations to explore as well as the proprietary, optimized gear with which to experience it. She should have been thrilled at the prospect.

Instead, Trey's words echoed in her mind.

"There should be access for all," he had said. "The same stupid logic applies to everything."

Stupid logic. Richard and Claire should be able to travel. She and Trey should have been able to enter the arcade in 503. Cynda Wright should have been able to travel through 503 to 504 without having to turn her handheld off to avoid access fees.

The technology existed. Everyone should be able to benefit from it.

Savannah couldn't sleep. She retrieved her headgear and crawled back under the covers.

The voice in her ear, her own voice, sounded almost emphatic.

"Choose your world."

2 – Chance House

Even though Savannah had powered her handheld off minutes before the bus crossed over into Zone 504, she still kept it in her hand and continued to glance at it, a reflex she supposed. In her other hand, she carried the business card. Every block she looked again. The address. The map. The unresponsive black mirrored surface of the handheld. Where was she?

The streets in Zones 502 and 503 were laid out in a grid and numbered accordingly, so staying oriented was easy. But streets in Zone 504 had names. Standing on the corner of Magnolia and Dutrait gave her no clues about her location in relation to Chester Street. Trey's map hinted at a direction, but he had abbreviated some of the street names to fit the available space leaving Savannah unsure whether "Mag" was short for "Magnolia" or "Magnum" since she had encountered both streets angling east off Dutrait.

And she could hardly hear herself think.

Large trucks rumbled by, one after the other, loud horns blaring either in greeting or warning to one another. Machinery whirled and whined and clanked in nearby buildings. Hovers droned overhead. She heard people shouting from inside the building behind her, too, as if they were trying to communicate with each other over the din.

She decided to assume Trey had meant Magnolia Street and headed south again. When she reached the first corner, she stopped for a moment to consult the small map once again.

"Are you lost?"

She jumped.

She had moved some distance away from the noisy buildings and the street was empty for the moment, so the voice sounded piercing in the sudden, relative quiet.

She looked up and sought the voice, found its source standing behind her and turned to face him. A man – she assumed he was male by his form – clad completely in black, his head covered by the hood of his jacket, his face covered with a balaclava mask, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. She guessed him to be at least six feet tall judging by the difference between them.

She took a step back.

"Be careful," he said. "Don't step out into the street. I didn't mean to startle you. I've just noticed that you've walked by this corner several times."

Was he a criminal? Was he hiding from something? She understood the hooded jacket, for the morning air was brisk, and she wore something similar, but the mask and sunglasses seemed suspicious.

She swallowed.

"Yes. Lost." She held up the business card so he could see the map, as if to prove she was indeed trying to find a specific location.

He leaned down to focus on it. And then he laughed.

"It's amazing you made it this far using that scrawl."

She had to admit she liked his laugh, for even muffled she could hear the delight within it. She also liked his grin for she could just make out the shape of it under the black mesh of his mask.

Despite her trepidation, she didn't fear him, although a voice in her head told her she should.

She snatched the card out of his view. Whether she feared him or not, she didn't need him to know where she was headed. "It's all right." She held up her handheld. "I'll just pay for one-day access."

He stepped closer. She could see and hear that his smile had vanished. "No. Don't do that. Keep it off."

"It's all right. I can pay."

"As soon as you turn it on, you'll be flagged."

"Flagged?"

"As out-of-zone. You've seen the hovers? More than usual today. They're on alert."

She stole a glance skyward as three hovers flew overhead. She had never seen them fly so low to the ground before or had been so aware of their loud droning hum. When she spotted them in 502, they were flying far above the roof line of the tallest buildings, silent specks in the sky.

Savannah turned back to the masked, hooded stranger.

"Is that why . . ." She pointed at his face, made a circling gesture to indicate the entirety of his head coverings. She waited for his nod, then lowered her voice. "Are you with the AFA?"

"With them? No." He tapped her handheld. "Do you have a PIG?"

"A what?"

He shook his head. "It's all right. I'll get you a map."

He pulled out his own handheld from his jacket pocket. It was an old model, several attachments protruding from its input ports suggesting it had been modified or augmented. She guessed that one of those attachments was a so-called "PIG."

He powered it on, made his selections, then turned its display toward her showing a map of 504 with a green dot identifying their location.

Chester Street was only two blocks east from where they stood.

She looked up at him. "Thank you. I see where to go now."

He powered his handheld off and returned it to its pocket in his jacket.

"Keep your face lowered, your handheld off, and get a PIG so you can hire a car if you can afford it," he said. "And if you do come across a protest march, head indoors and wait until it passes. You don't want to get caught up in a swarm."

"Swarm?" She felt stupid for continuing to repeat his words back to him, but she didn't understand most of what he was saying. "Swarm of what?"

"Hovers. Gnats. Wasps. Security." He took a step back. "I'll leave you alone now. Be safe."

He pulled on the edge of his hood as if tipping a hat, then turned and crossed the street before disappearing into the shadows cast between two buildings.

She glanced at her handheld and the business card one more time, then put them in the bag she had slung across her body. She stood for a moment. For some reason, she felt she needed to catch her breath.

Warehouse 11 looked like a carbon copy of warehouses 9 and 10 that sat to the south of it. The building was three stories high, painted a gun-metal gray, and had two massive roller doors that opened into a cavernous space filled with trucks and loaders and stacks of crates. To the right of the large doors was a normal, person-sized door next to a sign that read "Thompson Transportation and Storage."

Three individuals stood out front, the two men holding bottles of some kind of vending-machine beverage. The woman, who stood a full head shorter than the other two, looked up when Savannah approached, shoving her hands into her overall's pants pockets, and came to greet her.

"Hello. What can I do for you?"

"Is this Thompson Transportation and Storage? I'm looking for Trey."

The woman's expression brightened, her deeply tanned and wrinkled face creasing into a smile. She withdrew her hands from her pockets and offered Savannah her right one.

"You must be Savannah. Welcome. Trey said to keep an eye out for you. The name's Dana. I'm the foreman here." When Savannah took her hand, she pumped it up and down and then shoved her hands back in her pockets. She spun on her heel to face the two men. "I'll be taking her inside. Break's over in ten." She spun back around and gestured inside toward a metal set of stairs. "He's probably in his office. I'll take you to him."

Savannah followed her up the stairs, the woman's steel-toed boots clanging on the metal steps. When they reached the second-level catwalk, Dana opened the first of several doors.

"Here you go."

Dana stepped inside the small office and gestured toward one of the two guest chairs facing one side of a metal desk. An old model computer with an oversized monitor sat on the desk next to stacks of folders and papers. A map of zone 504 covered one wall.

"Not here. He must be with the boss."

"Trey isn't the boss?"

Dana shook her head. "No, he's more like Jack's second, I guess you'd say. Jack's the boss. Have a seat. I'll go get him." She turned to leave but stopped in the office doorway. "Oh, Trey, there you are. You have a guest."

Savannah had just lowered herself onto one of the guest chairs when Trey burst into the room. Savannah stood just in time to be swept up into his embrace.

"Ah ha! You came."

Over Trey's shoulder she saw Dana backing onto the catwalk.

"I guess I'll be heading back to work then."

She gave Savannah a wink then closed the door behind her.

Trey plopped down onto the second guest chair, and Savannah took her seat again.

"I'm so glad you came," Trey said. "You must have a lot of questions."

She nodded, glanced up at the map, stifled a chuckle. No wonder the masked man had laughed at Trey's attempt to draw it. But she wouldn't scold him. She doubted her map drawing skills were any better than his.

What had the masked man told her to get?

"Trey, what's a PIG?"

He blinked. "Well, that wasn't the first question I expected from you. Look at you, learning the lingo. PIG stands for Piggyback Identity Generator. It's a device that attaches to your handheld. It scans for a Registered signal and piggybacks it, so to speak, to send a signal or a request to the network. It finds a different signal each time. Great for going undetected if you aren't Registered. Less great if you need a continuous session. Why?" His eyes widened. "Oh. I should've asked you if your Limited access included 504. I'll fix you up with one for next time."

"Next time?" She shook her head. "I don't know about that. I just came today because I wanted to see you again and because I'm . . . curious. I haven't decided to help you yet."

He nodded. "That's all right. Take your time." He jumped to his feet. "But first, let me call everybody in here to say hi."

"What?"

He opened the office door and leaned against the catwalk's railing. "Hey, come on up! She's here!"

He stepped back inside the office.

Savannah stood. "Trey, I just told you I hadn't made any decisions yet. Why are you going to introduce me to everyone?"

"Not everyone. Not yet. Just the main crew. Oh." His eyes widened again. "Oh. Didn't I tell you? You already know them."



Ace had been first. Seven years older than Savannah, he was the eldest of her Chance House siblings, and in Savannah's eyes could do no wrong. Her big, tall, strong brother would pat her head when he passed her on the stairs, wink at her across the dinner table, make exaggerated faces until she laughed, and take her side when she was in trouble. Auntie Bess and Uncle Gil had given him permission to turn the attic space into his bedroom, and on occasion he would allow some of the younger ones to enter and look at the gadgets he had been tinkering with, for he was always tinkering with something. He had straight, blond hair that he wore long and unkempt, a "style" that Auntie Bess fussed at him about to either cut, comb, or at the very least move out of his eyes.

Love had been second. Even though she was a year younger than Savannah and two years younger than Elise, she took on the big sister role. After all, she reminded them, she had been there the longest. She had deep set, tawny brown eyes and straight black hair which she kept short. Being true to her name, Love lavished affection on her caregivers and siblings, making it hard for any of them to deny her.

Diamond was fourth, arriving soon after Trey. He was the second oldest, growing taller than Ace by several inches but much thinner, the tight clothes he liked to wear accentuating his lanky form. Diamond's moods ran the gamut between frenzied excitement and sorrowful gloom, sweeping everyone in the household if they weren't careful into his emotional whirlwind. His teachers had often written on his assessments that he was outgoing, outspoken, and often outlandish, and perhaps should be cautioned about being quieter in class.

Now, after multiple, thumping footfalls sounded on the metal stairs, adult versions of Ace, Love, and Diamond squeezed through Trey's office doorway and surged toward her.

"Don't crowd her. Let me hug her first."

"Hey!"

"Hey, watch it."

The three wore matching tan work shirts, Ace with his with the sleeves pushed up on his forearms, Diamond with the collar flipped up, and Love with hers unbuttoned and untucked over a black camisole.

Savannah's eyes stung. She knew these voices, these faces, these smiles.

Diamond pushed his way past Ace and Love.

"Diamond." Savannah managed to say his name before he pulled her into a rocking, dancing hug that squeezed her breath away.

Diamond looked as if no years had passed since she had hugged him goodbye. He still wore his dark brown hair long, slicked back over his forehead and tied at the base of his neck, the shorter strands on one side of his face tucked behind his ear exposing a large diamond earring.

"Look at our little Seven, all grown up." Diamond sang the words to match the rhythm of their swaying hug-dance.

"She goes by Savannah now, not Seven," Trey said.

"No, it's all right." Savannah had trouble finding her voice, but she wanted to clarify. She hadn't been called Seven since she left Chance House, even by Elise, but she liked hearing it again. "Really. You can keep calling me Seven. I don't mind. It makes me feel part of the family again."

Love shoved Diamond aside.

"My turn." She wrapped her arms around Savannah's shoulders. "Hi, little sister."

Love had always been adorable. Now she was a genuine beauty, her silken black hair framing her radiant features.

Savannah laughed. "I'm older than you, Love, remember? *You* are the little sister, even though I think you might be as tall as I am now." She gripped Love's shoulders to hold her at arm's length. "Can that be right?"

Love shook her head, lifted a foot. "It's the boots," she said.

"You wouldn't leave me out, would you, Seven?"

As if Savannah were still five years old, Ace placed his hand on her head, smiling down at her as if he still thought of her as his baby sister.

Love clapped her hands together.

"Look at this," Love said. "We're all here. All the full-timers anyway. Oh. Except for Eight, of course. And Jack over there. Jack wasn't a full-timer."

Love pointed across the room.

A sixth person had entered the office and was leaning against the far wall next to Trey, his thumbs hooked through the empty belt loops of his black jeans. Instead of a tan work shirt like the others, he wore a white, long-sleeved pullover.

Jack, Love had called him. Jack was the boss of the warehouse, Dana had said.

Had he been at Chance House with the rest of them?

Jack gave Savannah a slight nod and an even smaller hint of a smile. "Yeah. When it comes to most topics, I seem to be the exception. I was at Chance House less than a year," he said. "I'm Jack. You may not remember me."

"Jack's the boss," Love said.

He shrugged. "Of this warehouse, anyway."

Jack.

Savannah thought back to those days, pictured the main building where the full-time residents were given rooms on the upper floors, pictured Trey and the others as they had looked then sitting around the dinner table together, passing each other in the narrow hallways and on the stairs, gathering in the living room to receive their study assignments each week.

Yes. She remembered him being there among them.

He had been the last arrival at Chance House before she left, Auntie Bess and Uncle Gil taking him in six months or so before she and Elise had been adopted. She could picture him, but she remembered very little about him except that he was a runaway and was the same age as Trey. Mostly, she remembered that Trey had spent more time with him than with her once he arrived and she had been jealous.

Just as she thought she could remember nothing else, she remembered him leaning against the front porch post as she and Elise walked away with Richard and Claire. She had glanced over her shoulder one last time and caught him watching her, his gaze as intense and indecipherable then as the look he was giving her now ten years later.

"I remember you," she said. When he lifted his eyebrows in surprise, she nodded to assure him. "Yes. You were number eleven."

"That's right."

"Number 11. Warehouse 11. Is that just a coincidence?"

"Coincidences happen," he said.

The smile playing at the corner of his mouth that tempted her to question him further also promised no additional details if she did.

Love slipped her arm through Savannah's. "Let me show you our *new* Chance House."

"All right."

"Wait." Jack pushed himself away from the wall. "Wait, before you do that. Love, Trey, all of you, remember there's no turning back once she's been exposed."

Jack stepped toward Savannah.

When he had been leaning against the wall, Savannah thought he was close to her height, but he stood at least two inches taller. Also, from across the room his eyes had looked light brown. Now, standing so close to him, she could see his eye color was closer to a golden amber.

"Trey tells me he's warned you," Jack said. He kept his voice low, suggesting his words were meant only for those within earshot. "But I want to remind you that we are all Unregistered. We could register since we're employed by this warehouse, so I don't know which might be more worrisome to you, thinking that we can't, or thinking that we can but choose not to."

Savannah scanned the faces of her Chance House siblings before returning her gaze to Jack. She shook her head.

"I'm not worried. And there's no need for any of you to worry about me divulging anything to anyone. We're family."

Jack dropped his chin, leveled his gaze on her, his expression unreadable.

"Remember I wasn't a full-timer," he said. His gentle voice had deepened.

Savannah locked eyes with the boy from Chance House that she barely remembered and lowered her voice to match his.

"All of us from Chance House are family," she said. "You are no exception."

His expression remained unchanged, although she detected a small twitch in his cheek muscle. He took a step back.

"In that case, welcome to New Chance House," he said.



At least once a year, District Five Family Support Services sent a representative to Chance House to inspect the residence and the children in its care. The siblings would walk single file into the courtyard where Auntie Bess and Uncle Gil and the inspector waited, stand in a line in order of their arrival at the house, and subject themselves to inspection and questioning. Walking the length of the second-floor catwalk toward the back of the warehouse, one behind the other, felt reminiscent of those times, the only times Savannah remembered when the group behaved in such an orderly fashion.

They passed the Manager and Foreman offices on the right, the cavernous warehouse stretching below them on their left. Two trucks had backed up to the loading dock where several workers gathered to meet each one. Workers drove loaders amongst the tall shelving units stacked high with containers. Dana, the foreman, called out orders to her crew, the engine and braking noises and loud voices reverberating throughout the large, open space.

Savannah and the others descended the rear flight of metal stairs and passed through a set of double doors that closed with a solid thud behind them, quieting the main area's cacophony.

The rear section of the building was separated from the main warehouse by a thick, concrete wall, the double doors providing a passageway between them. They had entered a central room furnished with two couches and a dining table. Doorways led to additional rooms on the right. A short hallway led to a locked door on their left.

Love extended her arm and pointed.

"We're in the lounge. There's a kitchen and a couple of vending machines in the back. The doors on the right lead to the locker room with bathrooms, showers, and bunks. The lounge and the locker room facilities are open to anyone in the warehouse who needs to rest, change, or spend the night when Jack's running three shifts a day, or if someone just needs a place to stay. And down that hallway, behind that locked door, is the space we've dubbed 'New Chance House.'"

"Don't make it sound so inviting, Love." Trey gestured toward the locked door. "It's just a vault where we store items for clients who request additional security. It's also where we do our *Unregistered* business."

Trey gestured for the group to follow him to the locked door where he entered a numeric sequence into the lock's keypad, then spoke his personal voice code.

"Trey Chance," he said.

The light turned a solid green and Trey pushed the door open.

"Boss. Boss, before you disappear in there." Dana appeared behind the group, waving her hand in the air.

Trey held the door ajar and waited.

Jack turned toward his foreman. "What is it?"

"I could use some extra hands. One of the loaders is acting up. Plus, the owner's son is on the line."

Trey looked toward Jack. "But you were tied up in a meeting with him all morning. What else could he want?"

"Good question," Jack said. "I'll go see what it's about. Ace, Diamond, give Dana a hand."

"We'll catch up with you later, Seven," Ace said.

"When we do I want to hear everything." Diamond winked at her.

"I'll be right there, Dana," Jack said. He waited until Ace and Diamond had followed Dana back through the double doors, then turned to Trey. "Trey, I don't want to pressure anyone, but we can't sit on those files much longer or they'll be useless."

Trey nodded. "Right."

Jack turned his head toward Savannah, and for what seemed like a long moment let his gaze linger on her face as if reconciling it with the one he remembered from Chance House, perhaps questioning if he could trust her.

"You can always back away," he said. "No matter what I said just now. No matter what Trey says to you, you can always back away."

He studied her an instant longer then turned and left them before she could think of a reply.

"As if I would force you into anything." Trey mumbled the words under his breath. "What is he implying?"

He pushed the door open the rest of the way, then waited for Savannah and Love to enter before following and closing the door behind them.

The lock re-engaged.

If one were to glance down the hallway when the door was open, one would only see shelves filled with containers. It was indeed a storage vault, at first glance appearing to be a single room with a high vaulted ceiling and bright lights to compensate for the lack of windows. Once inside, a short walk down a sloping ramp led past the shelves to an open space in the center of the room. A long rectangular table sat in the center of the space, strewn with papers and printed books. Two desks with the same computer models Savannah had seen in Trey's office and rooftop apartment sat against the wall nearest to them. Another ascending ramp led to another locked door which Savannah assumed led to a second room.

"Sit down here, Seven." Love pulled out a chair from one of the desks.

Savannah lowered herself onto the edge of the chair.

Trey pulled a chair out from the other desk and took a seat in front of her.

"I'm sorry if Jack scared you," he said.

Savannah shifted her focus away from the hover shells.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure that was his intention," she said.

Trey nodded. "Well, I suppose you're right. He isn't usually so intense though, right Love?"

Love perched herself on the edge of the desk next to Savannah. "He's pretty low-key most of the time, but I've seen a few glares. I guess you didn't get to know him very well before you left the house."

"No, not at all." She turned to Trey. "All I knew was that Trey had abandoned me to spend time with him instead."

Trey blinked. "What?"

She smiled. "I'm kidding. Mostly."

Trey shook his head.

"Well, Jack has a lot on his mind running this warehouse while keeping us out of trouble. Plus, I keep pulling in more people that he feels he needs to worry about."

Savannah straightened. "What kind of trouble are we talking about? Or can you tell me that much."

"That depends on whether you want to back out now, or if you want to hear why I asked you here."

She glanced at the second locked door, then Love, then Trey.

"We're family. I want to hear," she said.

Trey exchanged a smile with Love.

"Great. Okay, just remember you can tell me to stop talking at any point." Trey leaned forward. "So, I told you about the group we're with who plan to leave all of this tech nonsense behind and start fresh on a new planet. I'm sure you have questions about that, but others should give you those details if and when you're ready. For now, I'll just say that a lot of preparation is under way and our small contribution is gathering certain supplies – mostly computer parts – and building low-tech, solar-powered book readers. I say 'we' but Ace is the one with the technical know-how."

"Book readers?"

"For survival guides," Trey said. "I said it was a small contribution."

The survival challenges in GenTech's DreamSight game flashed through her mind.

"Like farming and hunting, building houses, that sort of thing?"

"Exactly like that." Love smiled. "We, and when I say 'we' I mean everyone on this planet, are a tech-dependent group. We don't know how to survive without it."

"Most of us use handhelds to read books, at least those who have handhelds, but once we get where we're going and the ship leaves us behind, we'll no longer have access to a power grid or a network." Trey shrugged. "We could take print books, of course — for those still being printed — but we can't really share unless we stay in a single community, which we could do, but even so the amount of information we want to take with us makes printed books impractical. We hope we can rely on the locals to teach us the basics, but grown adults who don't know how to do anything would raise some eyebrows."

"Locals? The planet's inhabited then?"

Trey nodded.

Savannah thought of DreamSight's in-game, non-player characters inhabiting the virtual worlds who were programmed to interact with players and provide information they needed to succeed, even in the basic survival challenges.

Except these locals would be real.

"That's why the mining Consortium hasn't established a mining colony there. To their credit, I suppose, it's against OWMC policy to move in and take over other people's planets, even when it's rich in resources. Of course, that same policy makes emigrating there an unsanctioned act. Therefore, not legal."

Trey pointed to the computer sitting on the desk behind her.

"As for the computer parts, one might think getting your hands on obsolete parts would be cheap and easy. You'd think they'd become readily available for Registered and even Unregistered

purchase once the higher-status owners upgraded. But, I guess that wouldn't keep demand for new models high enough, so the old models made obsolete by expiring access codes are either sold for a premium or carted off along with their spare parts to be recycled or destroyed."

Savannah glanced at the two computers in the room, thought of the other two models in Trey's apartment and his office. They weren't really that old. They had just been branded as old because of the number of upgraded models that had replaced them. Just like her handheld. She had only had her previous one for a little over a year before it could no longer access the network and she had been forced to upgrade. She had just assumed her previous unit would be repurposed and discounted for lower status markets. Evidently, that wasn't the case.

"So, that's where we step in." Trey turned to the desk behind him and opened its top drawer, withdrew a small plastic rectangle that Savannah recognized as an external storage drive. He held it up. "Thanks to Love's persuasive charms, we were able to get our hands on some database files from the transportation company hired to ship those parts. Again, not legal. These files should give us the delivery schedules of those shipments. That's it. We just need your help reading these files."

She glanced from the drive to his face and back again.

"Does 'stepping in' mean waylaying the delivery trucks enroute or stealing the parts once they're delivered?"

Trey nodded.

"But you don't hurt anyone, though, do you?"

"We try not to."

She nodded, refrained from asking him to elaborate. She didn't need the details. She also didn't need to know which "charms" Love might have employed to get these files.

Love slid off the desk and stood.

"Trey, that's a lot for her to take in all at once. Why don't you leave her here with me for a while, away from Jack's scary energy and your 'it will all be fine, join us' vibe." Love dropped her hand on Savannah's shoulder, pointed to the computer on the desk behind her. "In the meantime, maybe you can help me with something. This is Auntie Bess's computer. She's due to get a replacement soon because she and Uncle Gil have agreed to take in two new full-time charges. They're twins. They're going to name them Leo and Cleo. Isn't that cute?"

Savannah lifted her head, for she had been staring at the external drive in Trey's hands. She looked up at Love.

A favor for Auntie Bess? She would do anything for Auntie Bess.

She pictured her in the kitchen, baking while Uncle Gil cooked, wisps of her straight brown hair falling onto her forehead, her hands covered in flour, humming between intermittent outbursts of correctional instructions she called out to the household. Savannah loved Mom-Éclair, but no one could replace Auntie Bess.

"Of course, but won't they just restore the files from backup when they bring her new computer?" Savannah didn't wait for Love to reply. "Or maybe not. They probably didn't have a backup."

Savannah scooted back into a proper position on her chair and turned it to face the desk. She pulled the keyboard closer.

Trey stood and handed the external drive to Love.

"While you two do that, I'll go make myself useful. Dana might need some more help. Or Jack might need to talk to someone after dealing with the owners." He waited for Savannah to look up from the keyboard. "We can talk later."

"All right," she said.

Trey left them.

"I'll go grab some drinks and snacks from the kitchen," Love said. "And then you don't mind if I watch, do you?"

Savannah shook her head. "No, that's fine."

Savannah turned her focus to the computer. At last. Something she could feel confident about.

admin/admin

As she suspected, the default credentials had never been changed. Evidently, no one had taught Auntie Bess or Uncle Gil about security. That would need to be rectified. But for now, Savannah had unrestricted rights to browse the file system.

She found basic word processing and spreadsheet software and user file directories for each user account, again just using the default account names that were differentiated by a numeric suffix. User1, user2, and so on up to user8.

"I'm back." Love retrieved the chair Trey had been sitting in and placed it next to Savannah's. "I brought fizzy lemon soda and some chips. I can see about getting some real food later. What have you found?"

"Recipes, a calendar, grocery lists, that sort of thing. You can't really tell who created these files with these generic account names, although the user1 files are recipes so I'd guess they belong to Auntie Bess or Uncle Gil. But here, you can browse through the files by opening the directory of each account name. The file names give you a clue about their format. For the basic text files, you can just print them to the screen." Savannah moved the keyboard in front of Love. It would be good to give her some training, no matter what she decided about the misappropriated delivery files. "Want to try?"

Love began typing commands, each success widening her smile. She typed faster, moving from directory to directory displaying each text file's content. After a few moments she paused, her fingers hovering over the keys.

"Seven, do you remember when we were directed to write journal entries? Something about our mental health or some such. This directory has file after file of one of us droning on and on about their heart-pounding experiences and how someone's eyes were as beautiful as the sky right before complaining about the need for new shoes. It's all so embarrassing. I'd bet my next paycheck these are mine. I was so dramatic back then. Nothing like now." Love laughed. "Oh, look at these. You have to read this one, Seven."

Savannah had vague memories of writing some kind of a diary, no doubt just as embarrassing as Love's.

She reached out for the keyboard.

"Love, I don't think we should be reading these. These are private."

"Who cares, Seven? We were just kids." Love pulled the keyboard out of Savannah's reach. "But this one by user8 is amazing. I'll read it to you."

Love cleared her throat.

"She calms me. When I see her, I forget my anger. When she passes by, she is all I see. When she speaks, she is all I hear. When she smiles, her eyes are so bright that I think she must see the world differently than I do. I want to be a part of her world."

Love dropped her hands to her sides and leaned back in her chair. She didn't voice it, but she mouthed the word "Wow."

"Who do you think wrote this?" Love leaned toward her. "Who do you think they were talking about?"

Savannah stared at the screen. These words had been written by someone at Chance House? Her first guess would be Diamond, for he could grow sullen or angry for hours or days before an event or new interest snapped him back to his happy self again. Perhaps when he was in these moods, he became self-reflective.

As for who this person was writing about, she wondered if they might have been talking about Elise, or Eight as they called her then. She had been elusive and mysterious and caught up in her own world enough that she might have inspired such poetic sentiments.

"Listen to this one."

Savannah tried to pull the keyboard away from her, but Love tightened her grip.

"Today, for the first time, when she walked past, she smiled at me. She looked so directly into my eyes that I thought she might talk to me. I prepared myself, for I knew if she spoke I would tell her everything about me, even secrets I had never told anyone so that she and she alone would know me best. But she walked on without speaking. I closed my eyes and sighed, feeling ashamed that I had wanted more. I am happy to have been seen, to have been the recipient of her smile. For now, it is more than enough."

Savannah grabbed the keyboard, cleared the screen. "These are private. We'll leave it to Auntie Bess to decide what she wants to do with these files."

Love sighed. "You're right, I guess. But I think I'm in love with user8."

Savannah pushed her chair back and got to her feet. Her face felt warm, embarrassed she supposed for sharing this person's private thoughts, one of her sibling's private thoughts, no less.

What had she been thinking? She couldn't even read another person's private journal without experiencing these pangs of guilt. How could she possibly help Trey steal computer parts?

Love looked up at her. "What's wrong?"

Savannah swallowed. "I'm going to go home. Tell Trey . . ."

"Tell Trey . . . that you need to sleep on it?"

Savannah drew in a breath. Was she considering refusing to help Trey after all?

"Yes. For now, tell him I need to sleep on it."

The GenTech logo swirled into view with a trail of sparkling stars, pulsed into a three-dimensional block font, then faded into a colorful mist. The handheld's power-on sequence was followed by suggestions for new handheld models, advertisements for "you don't want to be without it" software exclusive to Limiteds, then displayed Savannah's current location and 503 access status. After a short pause, the upgrade and software recommendations repeated their cycle, and would continue to repeat until she selected an app or issued a command. She had become desensitized to ads. Most of the time, whether they appeared on her handheld or on bus screens or projected onto the sides of multi-story buildings, she could shut them out. This time, however, the ads seemed to scream at her.

The tech you have now is not enough.

Upgrade your devices.

Upgrade your status.

Access what others can't.

What they didn't say was that someday soon, trucks filled with "old" but perfectly usable computers and their parts would be dispatched to be recycled or destroyed, keeping demand high by keeping supplies low.

Savannah drew in a long breath, leaned her head against the bus window.

She was such a coward.

She couldn't leave Warehouse 11 fast enough. She had left the vault and the main warehouse as fast as she could without breaking into a run, avoiding eye contact, slipping back outside onto Chester Street without saying a single goodbye. Was she this afraid to do something illegal? Was she this afraid to let her Chance House siblings see her reaction? Especially Jack who had stared at her with his amber eyes and had given her such a stern warning?

She cradled her handheld in her lap.

She was heading home, having switched from the 503-504 to the GenTech-503, able to power her handheld back on now that she had returned to one of her registered zones. She no longer needed to worry about paying for a one-day 504 registration, or about getting a PIG device to avoid being "flagged" as the man on the street had warned her. At least she wouldn't have to worry until she went back.

And of course, she would be going back. She still had so many questions. Were all of the New Chance House siblings planning to leave? If she didn't help them build their book readers, would that jeopardize their plans? She supposed anyone who lived in a society dependent on its technology would need to learn how to survive without it. Just like the players in the virtual world of *Palas* needed the *Guide* she had voiced to help them survive the challenges of a primitive world.

The bus turned north on Sixth Avenue. The light was fading from the sky, countered by the immediate illumination of streetlights.

Perhaps it was possible to compromise?

She could still help them without accessing the files herself. She could give Trey or Love or Ace detailed instructions, similar to the ones she had given Love to access the text files. Without software, the instructions would be more complicated, to be sure, but if the database files were stored in a standard format, it would be possible. The result could be crude – a data dump that would need subsequent analysis – but it might suffice.

She could prepare the instructions tonight then return to the warehouse tomorrow to teach at least one of them before bidding all of them goodbye and good luck. She could then return to her life with a clear conscience and continue to immerse herself in the world of tech, at least the amount of tech accessible by a Limited, that they would be leaving behind.

The bus slowed to a stop. Savannah expected doors to open and passengers to disembark or step onboard. Instead, the doors remained closed.

A tone sounded. The screens overhead changed from advertisements to a static message while the audio announcement played to match it.

"Passengers. A roadblock is preventing this vehicle from proceeding. You may wait inside the bus until it is cleared or exit here."

The announcement repeated.

"Blocked? What's happening?"

The passengers who had been riding next to each other in silence voiced their questions to the static screens before turning to one another.

"Is there an accident?"

"It must be the AFA. There are protests happening all over." A man held up his handheld as if everyone could read the small text from a distance. "GUN in the Fourth District. BAR in the Third. Not only marches but fires and explosions."

Give us Unlimited Now. Ban Access Registration. The AFA wasn't the only protest group in the western sector, but from what she had read the AFA was the most active and had been accused of spearheading the actions of all three groups.

"We're getting off." Two couples stood and moved to the doors, opened them, and exited.

"I'm not risking it. I'm staying on the bus." The rest of the passengers stood and moved to the front windows to look ahead.

Savannah brought up her location on her handheld. Sixth Avenue and Fourth Street. She was close enough to walk to 503's *Best Café*. She could wait for Trey to come home while the march passed by.

She put her handheld in her bag and stood, exited through the rear doors, and stepped down onto the sidewalk.

She hadn't expected the noise. Chanting. Blaring horns. Drumbeats. And most disturbing, the droning hum of hovers, joining in a chorus as they flocked together both overhead and farther up the street.

Savannah swallowed, pulled her jacket tighter around her. The temperature had plummeted since leaving 504. Had this been a smart idea?

She hurried along the sidewalk, joined the crowd gathered at the corner of Sixth and Third. Ranks of protesters marched by them, each holding either a sign or an instrument or other noisemaker or a broom – Savannah blinked twice but verified the implements some of them carried were indeed brooms – each chanting "Access for all!"

That man on the street. He had told her he wasn't with the AFA, but she doubted the truthfulness of his answer now. Most of the protesters wore masks and caps that resembled the ones he had worn, acting as a type of uniform. No doubt he had lied to her or stretched the truth.

A small gap opened in the procession. She took advantage of the opportunity to cross to the north side of Third Street. She just needed to avoid the hovers for another block, then she could find refuge in the café.

"Hey! It's you! From the bus!"

Unconsciously, Savannah had fallen in step with a line of marching protesters. She glanced toward them, recognized the white hair streaked with shades of blue.

"Cynda. Cynda Wright."

"You remembered my name!" The girl grinned at her. "I didn't get your name. I wanted to thank you."

"Savannah."

"This is my boyfriend, Mark." Cynda pointed to the young man marching alongside her. "Exciting, isn't it? It's our first time. Want to march with us?"

Savannah shook her head. "No, I'm just trying to get to my friend's place."

Cynda nodded, smiled, returned to her chant. "Access for all!"

"What's that?" Mark pointed down the street. "Is that smoke?"

Up ahead, descending low over the heads of the marching protestors was . . . a swarm.

Don't get caught up in a swarm, that masked man had said. A swarm of hovers? No, this cloud of flying . . . *some things* . . . weren't hovers. They looked and sounded more like insects.

"Wasps!" Someone up ahead screamed the answer.

Wasps? Surely not real wasps. They weren't real insects. As they drew closer, Savannah could make them out more clearly. Hundreds of them. Mechanical, flying devices, like hovers except they were the size of butterflies.

The protestors with brooms began swinging at the approaching cloud, dispersing the buzzing, winged robots, swatting some to the ground but unable to overcome them all. Protesters began to drop to their knees, grabbing at their necks or their faces as if they had been stung. In fact, exactly as if they had been stung.

A man dressed in black, like the man she had met on the street that morning, moved among them, shouting.

"Get these people inside. They've been paralyzed. Let me know if they have trouble breathing. All of you, get off the street."

"Ahhhh!" Cynda screamed.

She dropped to her knees, clutching her throat.

The swarm of wasps had reached them.

Mark batted the cloud aside with the sign he was carrying then knelt beside Cynda. "Help us. Help us!"

Savannah knelt on the other side of Cynda just as the girl fell against her and looked up at her with wide eyes, gasping for breath.

"Get everyone inside!" The masked man was drawing closer. "Security won't call off the swarm unless everyone is on the ground or off the street."

"Here!"

Savannah found her voice, reached out and caught the hem of the man's black jacket as he reached them. When he stopped, she looked up at him. Cap. Black balaclava. Goggles. His face was completely covered.

Cynda was gasping.

"It's all right." The man knelt down beside them and pulled a small canister from his jacket. He pulled off its cap and Savannah just glimpsed the exposed needle before the man lifted Cynda's hand out of the way and jabbed her neck with it. "She's having a reaction to the drug. This will help. Get her somewhere where she can lie down."

Savannah glanced down the street. They were close to the café and Trey's place.

"My friend's place is just there on the corner."

The man nodded, then he pointed to Mark and Savannah and back again. "Do you need help getting her there?"

"Yes. Please."

"Then let's go."

Cynda grabbed Savannah's sleeve, still gasping for air, her blue eyes wide, her face wet with tears.

"It's all right." Savannah mimicked the masked man's words, dismissing the probability of whether or not they were true. "It will be all right."

Shouts. The droning hum of hovers. The high-pitched whine of a wasp swarm. The chaotic din in the street receded as they left the street, fell away completely when they moved the wounded and terrified Cynda upstairs and inside the small confines of Trey's rooftop apartment. Mark and the masked man placed Cynda on Trey's small bed and covered her with a blanket, the masked man slipping out of his jacket and folding it to serve as an additional pillow under her head.

Savannah sat on the edge of the bed and Cynda gripped her hand, her eyes still wide, her breathing still accelerated, her cheeks stained with tears. Mark knelt on the floor beside the bed holding Cynda's other hand, his face equally frightened and pale.

"Don't worry." The masked man straightened. "The medicine is taking effect. She's just scared."

Savannah heard his words, but they did little to slow her racing heart or her own rapid breathing. Her thoughts were fixated on the girl staring up at her, this girl she had only met in passing yet had latched onto her as if she were a lifeline.

If Cynda Wright were to take her last gasping breath while staring up at her, the pleading look in those frightened blue eyes would haunt Savannah forever.

"Didn't anyone tell you two to cover up?" The masked man's voice, but not its scolding tone, remained muffled by the mask. "That white hair is like a beacon for hovers."

Mark shook his head. "This is our first time. We were late. We missed the briefing."

The masked man heaved an exasperated sigh. "Well, you won't know if you were flagged or not. From now on, you'll just need to keep an eye out for hovers."

Hovers scare me, Trey had said.

Hovers. Wasps. Security. Swarms. The other masked man who had helped her find her way that morning had warned her of them. Only now did she fully understand his meaning.

Savannah's chest felt tight. As Cynda's breathing eased, hers became more labored. Her heart pounded. Her hands were sweating. She felt too hot in her jacket.

She pulled her hand from Cynda's grasp and got to her feet, unzipped her jacket. She peeled the sleeves off her arms, thrust the jacket to the floor.

She needed air.

She pushed past Mark and the masked man, feeling their eyes on her as she fumbled with the doorknob and pushed the door open.

"Are you alright? Were you stung?" Mark's voice followed her outside. "Was she stung too?"

It was dark. Very little noise rose up from the street now, quieter than usual for early evening, only the low rumble of a slow-moving street sweeper reaching the rooftop.

Savannah meant to sit in one of the chairs under the rooftop's dining canopy, but her knees buckled before she reached it. She sat, dizzy, planting one hand beside her to keep her in an upright position, the other against her chest.

What was happening? Had she been stung after all?

She heard Trey's apartment door open and close, heard the sound of footsteps, but didn't look up when she saw boots stop beside her. She was only aware of her throbbing heart, the need to breathe, and a sudden, overwhelming embarrassment.

The masked man knelt beside her.

"I'm . . . sorry." She wanted to explain, didn't know how to explain.

"You asked for help. You brought her here. You held her hand. No need to be sorry." He dropped to a sitting position beside her, showed her that he held her jacket. "When you're feeling yourself again, you'll need this. It's cold out here."

She managed to lift her head to look at him. She couldn't see his eyes, or his face. She could only focus on the reflection of the canopy's lights in his goggles instead of his eyes.

She swallowed. "What's wrong with me?"

"Panic attack? Maybe something triggered some trauma for your past? I couldn't say. But it's not a wasp. You would know if a wasp got you. The paralysis is temporary and isn't concerning in most cases, but some people, like your friend in there, can have a bad reaction."

Savannah pushed herself straighter, took a moment to assure herself that she could keep her balance.

"What about . . . you?"

She wanted him to keep talking. She would have liked to hear his true voice without the mask. Still, focusing on it kept her thoughts from spiraling.

"I don't know. I've tried to avoid testing it." He gestured toward his long-sleeved shirt and balaclava mask. Most of his skin, except for his hands, was covered. "And why I carry a counteragent with me."

A breeze sent a lock of her hair down over her eyes. She moved her hand away from her chest to poke the errant lock back behind her ear.

"You look like you're feeling better."

She nodded. Her breathing had calmed. Her heartbeat had returned to normal. She had become aware of the chill in the air.

He stood and draped her jacket around her shoulders.

"Well, I think I'll leave you then. I have some things to take care of."

She nodded again, then pointed to Trey's apartment. "What about *your* jacket?"

"Oh, right. Well, I'll have to get it back from you some time."

"How will I contact you? Do you have a network address?"

"No registration, no network address," he said. He drew in a long breath, exhaled it. "We could, I suppose, share one, an address that is. If you create it, I can use a PIG to post and download draft messages. You can leave a message in drafts letting me know where you want to meet. You can delete the account after. If that sounds agreeable, I can set that up."

"That's fine."

She retrieved her handheld and handed it to him.

As she watched him access the network with her Limited credentials, she wondered why she was trusting him. She didn't know him. She couldn't look for truthfulness in his eyes or sincerity in his facial expressions or honesty in a voice filtered and altered through layers of cloth. She could only judge him by his actions. Because of him, Cynda would be fine. Because of him, she would be fine.

"All set. Both the account name and the password are the same because I'm lazy. As long as we delete drafts once the other one of us reads them, we shouldn't have to worry." He gave the handheld back to her. "It's magnolia18."

"Magnolia18?"

"Well, I had to add a number, but I named it after Magnolia Street in 504." She could hear the smile in his voice. "You know, from this morning, the place we first met."



Despite the increased cost of hiring a car for cross-zone travel, Savannah hired two of them, one to take Cynda to Mark's home in 504 since Cynda was reluctant to return to her parent's home in 502 so late at

night, and one for herself. She had hoped they could wait for Trey to come home before they left, but several hours had passed since the masked man had returned to the street and she didn't want to wait any longer. It was even possible Trey would stay at the warehouse all night. She left Trey a note instead, thanking him for the use of his apartment.

When the car dropped Savannah at her building, she stepped out onto the sidewalk and shivered, hugging the masked man's jacket to her chest as she hurried inside.

"Young Miss, you're home."

Her neighbor Rose greeted her when she approached her apartment.

Today, Rose seemed to be playing the part of some costume period series she was watching, judging both by her choice of words and assumed accent. Other days, she had taken on the persona of a young servant offering to help Savannah with her chores, or an old woman offering Savannah a home-cooked meal or fruit cobbler, or once, a sea captain giving orders to her crew. Each time, just as Savannah would begin to wonder if the woman had finally slipped into her own illusion of reality, Rose would give her a wink.

"I was an actress, you know."

Today, Rose let her act fall away the instant Savannah turned to face her.

"You're coming home very late. I heard the elevator doors and came out to check. With all the protests going on, I started to worry for you."

"I'm fine." Savannah gave her what she knew to be a weak smile. "Did anything happen here?"

Rose shook her head. "No, not close by at least. But those protesters are frightening. I heard they set fires and stopped traffic and fought with Security."

Savannah had taken a few steps toward her own door, but now turned to face Rose.

"Did they mention the wasp swarms?"

Rose blinked. "Wasp swarms? You mean insects?"

Savannah shook her head, smiled. "No. Never mind."

She sighed. It was clear now why she had never heard of wasps before today. District Security must only allow the news to report the protester's actions, not their retaliation methods.

Savannah entered her code and pulled the door open. "I'll be going out again tomorrow, Rose, but no need to worry."

Rose smiled, the act deepening the wrinkles around her pale blue eyes. She set her shoulders back, then bowed her head, resuming her character. "Very good, Miss."

Savannah chuckled and went inside, the overhead lights illuminating as she entered.

She draped the masked man's jacket over a chair, studied it a moment. The drawstring hood, back, and sleeves were black, the front piece a black and gray camouflage pattern. The front zipper could be unzipped from the top or the bottom. In addition to hand pockets, the jacket had two inside pockets and a pocket on each sleeve, each one bulging with contents, perhaps gloves or more counteragent canisters or the sunglasses she had seen him wearing that morning. A high-quality utility jacket if Savannah had ever seen one. It was surprising that its owner, whoever he was, trusted that she would return it to him.

She felt exhausted, as if she had been the one marching and shouting and fighting off swarms. She also felt sticky from sweat. Before she changed into nightclothes, she showered, standing under the deluge of hot water with her eyes closed long enough that she used up her allotment and the water temperature began to cool. She rushed to finish and switched the shower to air dry, not waiting for her hair to dry before stepping out. She had too much hair for a normal shower dryer cycle to handle.

Towel drying her hair to keep it from dripping, she pulled on her nightclothes and crawled into bed, hoping she would drop off into a deep sleep as soon as she closed her eyes. Out of habit, she put her headgear on her nightstand and set her handheld on the mattress beside her.

She closed her eyes, only to have them pop open again.

For a long moment she fixated on the shadows on the ceiling. What had she decided then about the database files? Would she stick to the plan she had conceived on the bus and try to stay uninvolved by teaching one of her siblings to read the files? Did she feel the same way after she had been caught up in the AFA protest march and Security's wasp swarm?

Most troubling were her physical, panicked reactions. Were those powerful warnings to back away, or could they be the opposite, signs that she had unresolved issues hidden deep within her that she needed to confront?

She sat up.

She would return to 504 in the morning. She would help with the database files. On the way to Warehouse 11, she would return the masked man's jacket. She would move forward instead of backward.

She leaned back against her headboard, lifted her handheld, its light seeming harsh in the darkness.

Magnolia18, the masked man had said. She accessed the account, entered the password, then configured the settings so her face would act as the password from then on.

A draft message awaited her. She nodded. No doubt a test message from when he had created the account.

[Did you make it home?]

She checked the creation time. Twenty minutes ago. Long after they had parted ways. He had reached out first, and he was checking on her.

She deleted the draft as he had instructed, then created a new one.

I did. Can I bring your jacket to you tomorrow? In 504? Where we met maybe? What time would be good for you?

She waited, thinking she was silly for waiting. They weren't using instant messaging. He wouldn't see the message until he used his PIG again to check for a reply.

Her draft message disappeared. A new one replaced it.

[How about between 11 and noon? I'll watch for you. How are you feeling by the way? I felt maybe I left you too soon.]

She felt less silly now. He was actively checking for replies.

What had he asked? How was she?

Rather than give him the same automatic answer she had given Rose, she decided to be truthful.

My mind is spinning. I can't sleep.

As she watched, her draft disappeared, and a new one replaced it. It was the cycle that would emulate instant messaging.

[I stare at the stars when I can't sleep.]

But I can't see the sky from my window. Too many buildings around me.

[The roof then?]

I'd have to get up out of bed

[You can't hear me laughing, but I'm laughing. You'll have to close your eyes and imagine them then.]

Or go to a virtual world to look at them.

[You have headgear?!]

I do.

[I'd like to see it, but maybe we'll just sit on a rooftop together again sometime.]

Oh . . . then I'll need a name from you. I don't make a habit of sitting on rooftops with strange, masked men.

[A name? I guess I can give you a name. Tomorrow, when I see you, I'll give you a name. Then I'll ask you the same.]

Was that a poem?

[Was it? (I'm laughing again.)]

I'll see you tomorrow then. I'll trade you a jacket for your name.

[It's a deal. Try to sleep. Magnolia18 out]

She deleted his last message, turned off the handheld. The room darkened.

She fumbled for her headgear and slipped it on, laid her head back down on her pillow. She selected a nighttime scene in *Palas* where she could watch the simulated expanse of stars drift across her viewscreen. All the while, she wished she was sitting on a rooftop somewhere gazing up at real stars with the masked man instead.



Savannah liked to sleep late on Saturdays, and even later on Sundays, and depending on the number of hours she had spent the previous night playing games or immersed in a DreamSight world, she might not rise until noon. But this Sunday, she rose early. She had an appointment with the masked man. She needed to return his jacket. She needed to get his name. She didn't want to be late.

As directed, her handheld woke her with the rousing theme song from her favorite game, *Swords of Light*. Each time she played, her heart raced in sync with its bombastic opening, and she knew those thunderous drumbeats and screaming crescendos would shock her out of the deepest slumber.

She jumped out of bed, dressed, and braided her hair, pulling it to one side so it draped over the front of her right shoulder, then made arrangements for an extended stay in 504, just in case making her way home to 502 would prove difficult.

She downloaded *MetaList* from GenTech onto her personal computer and verified it would function without network access. Of all the database applications, *MetaList* could read the most database file formats. In case that failed, she downloaded a program that parsed files character by character. One way or another, she would get at the data.

She packed clothes to last several days, making sure to bring her heavier jacket.

As a final step, she set her work accounts to 'out-of-office' with created an auto-reply.

I have a family emergency. Will be out of contact for an undetermined number of days.

She wasn't concerned about falling behind. As usual, she had allocated more time than she needed to accomplish her assignments. Having no aspirations for advancement, she never wanted to raise expectations about her work output.

As she passed Rose's apartment, she stuck a note to her door so Rose wouldn't worry.

On the GenTech-503, Savannah checked the magnolia18 account one last time before shutting her handheld off and stowing it in the side pocket of her heavy backpack. The masked man hadn't left

any draft messages since the night before, so she could only assume the time and place for their exchange remained the same.

She exited the 503-504 at the same stop as the previous day, adjusted her bag across her torso and her backpack on her shoulders while the bus rolled away, and stood for a moment in the eerie quiet.

Oh. This was Sunday. She hadn't considered whether the warehouse would shut down on a Sunday. When Trey had mentioned someone would be there most days, did that include Sundays? Would her trip to 504 be short-lived?

"Magnolia18."

Her head came up.

The masked man walked up the street toward her, today wearing the sunglasses she had seen him wear the previous day, but a simple mask covering the lower half of his face instead of the balaclava. His cap covered his hair except for a few strands of brown hair attempting to escape near his right temple.

"Hello." She looked up at him when he reached her. "Am I late?"

He shook his head. "No, I came early."

"Your jacket's in my backpack." She dropped her shoulder to slip out of it, stopped when he shook his head.

"Let's get off the street," he said. "There's a courtyard a few blocks away. We can sit in the shade."

"All right."

Savannah readjusted her backpack and fell in step beside him, drawing in a deep breath to calm the fluttering sensation in her stomach. She hadn't been anxious when he had offered to help her the previous morning, or when he had calmed her on Trey's rooftop the night before. Somehow this encounter felt different.

"Right here."

He guided her down a walkway to a courtyard situated between two buildings, both owned by True Metal Manufacturing. No one appeared to be working in the buildings today; that didn't bode well for finding anyone at Warehouse 11.

Water gurgled in a small fountain in the center of the courtyard surrounded by a bed of flowering bushes. The masked man stopped and gestured to one of the four curved benches surrounding the fountain.

She slipped out of the backpack and sat, and the masked man sat beside her.

She took a moment to face the fountain, mesmerized by the sound of its gurgling water, appreciating the fragrant scent of the flowers and the breeze that passed between the buildings and stirred up a cooling mist.

She sighed, feeling more at ease.

"You look like you've recovered," he said.

"Oh, yes. Here." She retrieved his jacket and held it out to him. When he reached for it, she pulled her hand back. "But I haven't forgotten our deal. Your jacket for your name."

"You're set on that? What if we never see each other again?"

Savannah liked the amusement in his voice, even muffled through the mask.

"It is non-negotiable."

He chuckled, reached toward her and gripped the shoulder of his jacket, but didn't try to retrieve it.

"The name is Wild."

Savannah stared at the lenses of his sunglasses, trying to peer through their tint. "Wild." She repeated it, grimaced. "Are you joking?"

"Not at all. You wanted a name. A lot of people call me Wild."

"But . . . is that your *name*? Not an adjective?"

He laughed. "I suppose it could be both. You wanted a name. I answer to it."

Savannah released his jacket, and he took it from her. She expected him to check the pockets, but he draped it across his lap without further inspection.

"Your turn," he said. "Can I have a name?"

She tilted her head. She could be just as coy.

"Seven," she said.

"A number?" His inflection suggested he might have lifted his eyebrows behind those sunglasses. "Your name is a number?"

"Many people, very close, important people call me Seven. And I answer to it."

He nodded, chuckled. "Seven it is then."

He leaned against the back of the bench.

Their business then, had concluded. He had his jacket. They had exchanged names. Well, nicknames, at least. Savannah thought an awkward moment might follow, but she didn't feel awkward. Instead, she felt comfortable sitting by his side watching the water in the fountain rise and fall, the flower petals drift to the ground.

"Wild." Now that she used the word as his name, it sounded right to her ear. "Yesterday morning when we met, you said you weren't with the AFA, but you were there last night with the others."

He stared at the fountain, silent, and for a moment she thought he wouldn't answer.

"I didn't lie. I'm not with them." He sighed. "It's not that I don't agree with them. The stratification of society based on access status is nonsense. I don't blame them for protesting or making noise or shaking their fists. But it's dangerous. And useless. The system is too ingrained, the corporate grip too tight. For change to happen, you'd need someone in power."

"Then . . ."

"Why was I there? I'm watching out for my brother." He turned toward her, sat forward. "I don't need to give you *his* name, do I?"

His serious tone changed to a teasing one.

She shook her head. "No. 'Wild' is enough for this time."

"This time. So, we'll see each other again then. That's promising. Either way, I have a gift for you." He reached into one of the inside pockets of the jacket she had just returned to him, then held his hand up. A silver and black heart-shaped pendant dangled on a chain from his fingers. "For you."

"A . . . necklace?"

Her stomach flutters returned in a flurry.

He took her hand, dropped the necklace into her palm.

"It's a PIG," he said. "I noticed your handheld's a new model. It won't take physical add-ons, so you need a remote PIG. See? If you twist the pendant it changes from a heart shape to a rectangle. This activates it. The first thing your handheld does when you turn it on is search for the nearest access relay, so it will find the PIG first. When you don't need it, twist it back into a heart and no one is the wiser. It's undetectable. It will appear to be a normal piece of jewelry."

Savannah turned her hand to see the reflection in both the black side and the silver side, then slipped the chain over her neck. The heart dropped to the perfect spot an inch below the hollow of her throat.

She met his gaze, unsure how to react. No one had given her jewelry before, not the boys she had dated in school nor the one short-term boyfriend she had met through GenTech. She knew the PIG heart wasn't a romantic gift, but it was a gift, nonetheless.

"Thank you," she said. "That was very thoughtful of you."

He leaned closer, tilted his head. "Looks good."

“Wild?” She liked saying this strange name now. Her heart pounded. “If you had a chance to leave the planet – and I don’t mean to work at a mining colony – would you?”

She didn’t know why she had asked the question. She had blurted it out as if his was the only opinion outside of her Chance House siblings that she could seek.

His shoulders seemed to stiffen, but she couldn’t be sure. She wished she could see the expression on his face.

“That would depend,” he said.

“On what?”

“Who I was leaving behind.”

She nodded. She thought he might ask her to elaborate. Instead, he got to his feet.

“I suppose you can delete that account now,” he said. “If you want.”

She stood up beside him, shook her head. No. She didn’t want that.

“If I remember correctly, you said we might look at the stars together.”

He nodded. “We did say that.” He pulled his cap down farther on his forehead. “Let me know when. I can come to you wherever you are.”

“Let’s do it soon,” she said.

He nodded. “See you then, Seven.”

He left her, his jacket cradled in the crook of his arm, and she watched him until he reached the street and turned out of sight, rolling the PIG’s heart between her thumb and forefinger.

4 – Parts

Like the other warehouses on Chester Street, the rolling metal doors of Warehouse 11 were sealed shut. The Thompson Transportation and Storage sign on the business office door had been turned to its “Closed,” business hours, and contact information side. Savannah touched her heart pendant at her neck and considered powering on her handheld to call the emergency contact number, but who would answer? If the owner answered, she couldn’t very well characterize her visit as an emergency.

First though, it would be foolish not to try the announcement buzzer.

“Savannah?” Trey’s voice sounded through the security camera’s speaker. “Wait right there. I’m coming.”

She sighed in relief.

Loud boot falls, the ascending tones of an opening lock, and then Trey stood before her exuding his seemingly boundless, joyous energy.

He grinned. “You came back. I was worried we had scared you away for good, especially after that protest last night. I got your note. Feel free to use my place any time. I don’t have anything of value there except my models. Let me help you with that. Whoa. What do you have in here? Are you moving in?”

Savannah grinned.

When Trey was excited, he often talked non-stop until someone interrupted, or he needed to take a breath.

“I brought my computer and software and extra clothes.” She followed him inside and he locked the door behind them. “I didn’t think about the warehouse being closed today. Are you the only one here?”

“Diamond is here, and Jack is here, at least he’ll be back soon. He went to get us some lunch.” He led the way toward the back of the warehouse, turning to wink at her. “You brought your computer. Does that mean what I think it means?”

She nodded. “It does.”

“Haha! I told Jack you’d come through for us.”

“I thought you were worried.”

He laughed.

“I was confidently worried.”

They entered the back area and Trey opened the vault and descended the ramp, then set her backpack on the floor next to the second desk. Then he retrieved the external drive he had shown her the previous day and set it next to the keyboard.

Savannah joined him. She pointed to the computer’s monitor where a video clip of spaceship launches played on a loop.

“I see you know how to set personalization options.”

“I can follow prompts. Okay. Do you need me to leave? Jack will be bringing food, so if you haven’t eaten, you can join us in the kitchen. Jack always brings plenty. Diamond is upstairs in the office, but he’ll come down for food.” He paused. “You might think I’m grinning because I’m anxious to get those files opened, but I’m just really happy you came back.”

She punched his shoulder.

“Oof!”

“That didn’t hurt you.”

"How do you know?"

She laughed, took a seat at the desk.

"Let me know when the food arrives. I'm starving."

Savannah made room on the desk for her own computer, connected its power and fired it up, then attached the external drive.

"Leaving you alone then?"

Trey left the vault.

Since she had made her decision, she didn't hesitate. She launched *MetaList* and selected to open the files on the external drive. An error message displayed, but she had expected it. The files weren't in GenTech's proprietary format. She chose to import alternative format files instead.

The success message popped up before a progress bar could load.

Fast. Easy. Embarrassing. Had Trey and the others really needed her? Of course, no one here even had Registered access to software. If they didn't need her for her skills, they probably needed her Limited status.

She could leave it to Trey now, or one of the others, with a bit of instruction to display the contents. She had one last chance to distance herself from this cause, but too late. Her muscle memory had taken control. Import. Display. The second command always followed the first.

Details of scheduled shipments resolved into view. Dates and times, pick up and destination business names and addresses, cargo descriptions, driver names and contact information. By default, the list sorted by date then business. She scrolled, not expecting to recognize any names. She didn't know anything about hardware manufacturers . . . except for . . . GenTech.

GenTech. What surplus was GenTech shipping off to oblivion?

Unsold headgear inventory, including the model type she used, was scheduled to be carted away to a recycling facility soon, the date aligning with the new model release date and the lead time of her project deadline.

The vault door opened.

"Food's here," Trey said.

"Coming."

The door closed.

Savannah shouldn't be surprised GenTech used such tactics. The seductive ads radiating from every device in 502 were blatant evidence of it. She knew if she continued to scroll, she'd find other GenTech shipments in the list, for the company's product portfolio was long and diverse.

A gnawing sensation in her stomach reminded her that a buttered flaky pastry and coffee wasn't the heartiest of breakfasts. She needed to eat.

She changed the sort option to ascending date, adjusted the print options, and sent the schedule details to the printer. She stood, gathered the printed pages, folded them to fit into the back pocket of her trousers, then left the vault.

The enticing aroma of hot, fried chicken greeted her, followed by the sound of two chairs scraping the floor as Jack and Diamond exploded to their feet.

"Wha-?"

"Oh, right." Trey finished chewing his bite of chicken and swallowed. "Forgot to tell you two. Savannah is here."

"Right. You forgot." Jack twisted his mouth to one side, sent Trey what Savannah was coming to know as his signature glare, then turned back to Savannah. "Welcome back."

Diamond wiped his hands with a napkin and came around the table to wrap his arm around Savannah's shoulders. "I get to see you two days in a row? This is great. Sit down right here between me and Jack. Scoot over, Jack."

Before she could protest, Jack had changed seats and Diamond had guided her to the chair Jack had just vacated.

"Here." Trey handed her a plate. "There's fried chicken, some mashed potatoes and corn. Jack got a salad, too. I'm sure he'll share it with you."

She ate.

If she had known a chicken restaurant in 504 served such delicious food, she would have ventured here much sooner. Tender meat, creamy potatoes, flavorful corn, and a salad with fresh greens, peppers, and onions.

"So good," she said. She hadn't directed the statement at any one of them in particular. The words had fallen unbidden from her happy mouth.

"Look at that. You both pull off the skin." Diamond gestured with his drumstick toward her plate and then Jack's. "You're both missing the best part."

Savannah and Jack looked at each other's plates, then exchanged a smile.

"The skin is too greasy, right?"

Jack nodded.

Diamond shook his head then resumed eating his drumstick, tearing at the breaded skin with his teeth as if demonstrating exactly what they were missing.

Savannah wiped her hands and pulled the printed pages from her back pocket. She handed them to Trey who had finished eating long before the rest of them.

Trey leaned forward. "What's this?"

"The delivery schedule," she said.

He lifted his eyebrows. "Already?"

"I could pretend it was harder and make you wait?"

Trey grinned, shook his head, then unfolded the pages and spread them out on the table.

Jack stood and moved around the table to lean over Trey's shoulder.

"How soon?"

"Oh," Trey said. He pointed to the first line of details with his forefinger. "It's tonight. The first shipment is happening tonight."

The kitchen fell into a thoughtful silence. Whatever concerning thoughts or calculations or timetables reeled through the minds of Savannah's siblings went unvoiced. Instead, Trey and Jack exchanged a long look as if communicating telepathically before both turning to exchange a similar look with Diamond.

Savannah resisted the temptation to question them. She had done her part, although it seemed clear that it would have been better if she had done her part a day earlier.

Jack shook his head.

"We can't skip this one. We need the parts from those handhelds." He inclined his head toward Diamond. "Do you have a uniform?"

Diamond nodded. "I got the same brand Eastside Trucking uses. Ace was going to embroider a name tag for me, but he didn't have time. I could try but I need to cover our truck's logo."

"We can't switch in a driver without Love, though." He waited for Jack and Diamond to turn toward him. "She was going to place the calls while we're enroute. We can't have Diamond do it. The driver will recognize his voice when he gets there. Jack, I don't think either of us could pull it off. Love was our best bet."

"Where *is* Love?"

"On a date, with our unsuspecting database files benefactor. We can't really call Love in without placing suspicion on her, and it would be risky for her to sneak away to do it." Trey looked toward Savannah as if he had suddenly remembered she sat among them. "Maybe . . . Savannah . . . no . . ."

"In that case," Jack said, "we'll need to take a more direct approach. We'll call Ace in. We'll use his hovers to get the driver to stop the truck. We have wasps, too, don't we?"

Savannah rose up out of her chair. "Hovers and wasps? Like Security uses?"

"Similar," Diamond said. "Just to get the driver to stop."

"But that will be dangerous, won't it?" She didn't wait for them to answer. "If I took Love's place, what would I have to do?"

"Place three calls," Trey said, "as if you're calling from Eastside's dispatch office. Love's on a date with Greer, the office head, right now. Tell one driver he has the night off. Tell the other driver that he'll be riding with a replacement. Tell the receiving recycling plant the schedule has changed. If Love had a script ready, we don't have it, so you'd have to come up with one."

"Trey, we shouldn't ask it of her," Jack said. "She's in deep enough as it is."

"It's all right, Jack. I'll do it." Savannah flashed what she hoped was a convincing smile. "It's nearly what I do for a living anyway. Voiceovers using scripts."

Jack leveled his gaze on her. "If you're sure."

"I can do it. I'm good at convincing myself that what I'm saying is real."

"All right. That's the plan then." Jack waited until he received nods of agreement from Trey and Diamond. "Seven, we'll need you to place the calls about an hour before the pick-up time. We want it to sound like a last-minute change. We don't want anyone having too much time to think about it. Trey and I will follow Diamond with our truck to help transfer the load. It will take a couple of hours to get to the pick-up point in 502, a few more to grab the shipment and come back, so you'll be alone in the warehouse. And it will be late. You might want to stay over if you can. Use your handheld for the calls. Do you have a PIG?"

Savannah nodded. "I can stay." Savannah lifted the heart pendant. "And I have a PIG."

Trey whistled. "Whoa. A remote PIG? Where did you get it?"

"It was a gift," Savannah said. She knew a smile flickered across her face for Trey lifted a curious eyebrow. "I haven't tested it yet."

"Test it then," Jack said. "Write your script. And don't worry. We'll put Ace on standby. If they aren't expecting Diamond when he arrives, then we'll take a more aggressive approach."

She pressed her lips together, nodded.

"I know Auntie Bess tried to teach us all to embroider at one point, but I was very bad at it." Diamond put his arm around Savannah's shoulders. "How about it? My alias is D.C. Gilbert, so D.C. would only be two letters."

Auntie Bess had praised Savannah's attempts at embroidery, but then Auntie Bess always praised them for trying.

"I can try," she said.

"Let's get to work then," Jack said.

Diamond smashed a bit of chicken, potatoes, and corn into a single stack on his fork, stuffed it in his mouth in one last bite, then retreated to the vault. In a few moments he returned with a gray work shirt and a sewing kit.

"It will be dark, so no need for perfection," he said.

He handed the items to Savannah and headed through the double doors to the main warehouse.

"I'll work on the script first." Savannah pointed to the locked door. "If you'll let me back in the vault."

"Before you do that, let me show you where you can stay tonight." When Savannah glanced toward the locker room, Jack shook his head. "Not there. I think you'll be more comfortable upstairs."

Savannah followed Jack up the metal stairs to the Manager's office. There he led her through the main space, then through an inside door that led to a small adjoining room.

"You can stay here. We'll bring your things up. You can use my desk."

She glanced around the small room. It contained a single bed and a nightstand that held the only personal belongings she could see, a small stack of books and one photo frame that was turned away from her.

"Do you stay overnight often?"

A small smile flickered on his face. "Pretty often," he said.

"What about tonight though?"

"I'll be getting back late. I'll use a bunk in the locker room for the few hours before the warehouse opens."

She nodded. "Will you wake me and let me know when you get back? I'll be worried."

He nodded, a shock of his light brown hair falling across his amber eyes. He pushed it back into place. "I will. But don't worry. Diamond's going to use his charm to get the driver to stop, and if there's one thing Diamond is good at, it's charm."

"Still, be careful."

"Always."

After Jack left her and Trey brought her computer and backpack, Savannah wrote her script for the three calls she would be placing.

The embroidery took longer. By the time she finished, she had stabbed both forefingers and thumbs several times.

Testing her PIG was her last task.

She twisted the heart into its round-cornered rectangle form, assumed the slight warmth against her skin attested that it had been activated. She powered her handheld on, watched its initiation sequence, and waited. If the handheld didn't find the PIG, she would be prompted to pay for 504 access. No prompt appeared.

As a final test, she logged in to magnolia18.

[Seven. Not available for stargazing until Saturday. Family obligations. See you then?]

She drew in a quick breath. Would every contact with this mysterious masked man cause nervous flutters now?

Jack poked his head into the office.

"We're leaving now. Turn out the lights and close both doors when you turn in. There's a small lamp by the bed though if you want to use it."

She nodded to him, and he left, and soon she heard the warehouse door rolling and groaning back down into its locked position. The warehouse fell silent. She was alone.

Savannah took a seat at Jack's desk and opened her computer, placed her hands on the keyboard. When it was time, she set the handheld to hands free, speaker-mode, and propped her script up next to her.

She forced her shoulders to relax, drew in long, calming breaths, the same ritual she used when recording for DreamSight.

For the next few minutes, Savannah would be "Darlene," a gregarious, fast-talking young woman, confident of her duties, so busy that one could hear her fingers racing over the keyboard as she managed multiple tasks at once.

Savannah placed the first call.

"Hello. Am I speaking to Victor Chen?"

"You got him."

Savannah pictured the owner of the voice to be a man in his mid-fifties with a receding hairline. It didn't matter if her imagination matched reality. She just needed a face in mind.

She smiled. He wouldn't see it, but he would hear it in her voice.

"So glad I caught you. This is Darlene from the dispatch office? Mr. Greer asked me to call you to let you know we've had a last-minute schedule change over here and we won't be needing your services tonight. We'll be sending a revised schedule tomorrow. All right, Mr. Chen?"

"Sure. Fine."

Savannah had prepared answers for questions the drivers might pose, but Victor didn't seem interested in details.

"Hello. Am I speaking to Rick Trevor?"

"Yeah."

"So glad I caught you. This is Darlene from the dispatch office? Mr. Greer asked me to call you to let you know we've had a last-minute schedule change over here and instead of Rick Trevor you'll be paired with a new hire, Mr. D.C. Gilbert. He'll meet you at the pick-up location."

"A new hire?"

"Yes. Mr. Gilbert comes highly recommended. Mr. Greer wants to pair him with a reliable veteran for his first drive."

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. I can show him how we do things."

The last one.

"Is this Trizone Salvage? This is Darlene from Eastside Trucking's dispatch office? Mr. Greer asked me to call you to let you know we need to reschedule tonight's delivery."

"Reschedule? But I'm paying overtime to receive it. Let me talk to Greer."

Savannah had prepared for this contingency. Still, she had hoped to avoid this part of her script.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Greer isn't available at the moment."

"Give me his number then."

Savannah felt her chest tightening, but Darlene knew how to handle it.

"I'm afraid I'm not allowed to give out his number. Besides . . ." She paused, stopped typing, sniffed. "You see, Mr. Greer . . . well, there's been an . . . emergency. He . . ."

"Oh." The woman at Trizone Salvage fell silent. When she spoke again, her tone had changed. "That's all right. We have other work to catch up on. Thanks for letting us know."

The call ended.

Her heart pounding, Savannah pushed the chair away from the desk. Her hands were trembling.

She changed into her sweatpants and oversized sweatshirt for bed, locked both outer and inner office doors, then slipped under the covers in Jack's bed.

Since the PIG was still active, she replied to Wild. She would meet him on Saturday night atop her building in 502. Then she turned her handheld off and twisted the pendant back into a heart.

As soon as she closed her eyes her mind offered up visions of hovers, a swarm of wasps, swirling lights accompanied by sirens emanating from large, angular District Security vehicles. She dismissed them. Visions of delivery trucks careening around corners dodging oncoming traffic took their place.

She sat up. She couldn't sleep. Maybe she could find something hot to drink in the kitchen.

She left Jack's office and made her way on bare feet down the metal walkway and stairs to the lounge and the kitchen, paced back and forth across the cold floor while she waited for water to boil, then sat on the couch while she sipped a weak and unsatisfying cup of tea. Without finishing it, she set it aside.

With her head draped over the back of the couch, she must have fallen deep into a dreamless sleep, for in what seemed like the next instant, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Seven?"

She swallowed, lifted her head, and brought the face in front of her into focus.

Jack.

She drew in a breath and blew it out in a relieved sigh.

"You're back," she said. She had kept her voice to a whisper as if she might wake someone up if she didn't.

"We're back," he said.

Diamond and Trey came through the double doors, each guiding a dolly carrying a stack of crates.

"Hey, Savannah." Trey paused at the end of the couch. "Everything went as expected thanks to you."

He smiled and continued pushing his dolly down the hallway toward the vault.

"Yeah. It went great," Diamond said. He pointed at the crates on his dolly. "Thanks, Seven."

"No hovers? No wasps?"

"Not one," Diamond said. "The driver was expecting me. Talked my ear off with advice. I thought he'd never take a sip of the drugged coffee I brought, so that was a little nerve racking, but when he finally did I feigned stomach problems and asked him to pull over. I got out and waited for him to pass out, then Jack and Trey pulled up and we moved the goods from one truck to the other. Before we drove off, I left good old Rick a note saying I was sick and had to call for a car to take me home. Hopefully, he'll think we were both affected by the coffee. Then we took a circuitous route back here, just in case."

"Thanks to you, Trizone won't be expecting a delivery, and the driver should sleep for a good long while. Now we need to unload and burn these crates. They've got Eastside Trucking stamps on them."

Savannah pushed herself up to her feet. "Can I help you unload?"

"Sure."

Savannah followed Diamond and his dolly into the vault and through the inner door to the second room where Trey was already unloading handhelds onto one of the empty workbenches.

While Diamond positioned his dolly and opened his topmost crate, Savannah surveyed the room. It contained workbenches and peg boards holding wire cutters and soldering tools and electronic devices Savannah couldn't identify.

A pile of parts that resembled mechanical corpses caught her eye on one of the workbenches, parts that looked like they could be unshelled hovers.

"Are those . . . hover parts?"

"Exactly," Trey said. "Still scary if you ask me, even pulled apart. Ace is rewiring them. Consider yourself exposed."

Exposed indeed. Only District Security and Corporate Military were allowed to possess and operate hovers.

"And what are these boxes?"

Black metal boxes, about the size of three handhelds stacked together, sat in various stages of completion in assembly line fashion on the long worktable that ran the length of the room.

"Those are the book readers waiting for these handheld parts," Diamond said. "We've fitted them with small solar panels on top. Once they're assembled, we'll put each one inside another solid box for protection, then pack them in a stainless steel box. Lots of work to do still but now that we have these babies we can really start to make progress."

Boxes within boxes within boxes.

Savannah nodded, smiled. An exciting prospect imagining their future discovery. Even so, the first few handhelds she touched felt heavy in her hands. They had been stolen. She shouldn't be touching them. Not only was she exposed, she was complicit.

Trey finished unpacking his first crate and paused before opening the next one.

"Savannah," he said. "I don't know whether you might even consider going with us, but you've certainly earned your ticket to the theater."

"The theater?"

“Quinn’s – “

“Trey.”

Either Jack had followed them inside or had just arrived, but Savannah hadn’t noticed that he was standing in the doorway.

“What?”

Savannah couldn’t see Jack’s face very well in the shadow of the doorway, but she thought she saw something pained in his expression, that he was fighting with himself to find words for his mouth opened and closed several times until he finally sighed.

“Nothing.” Jack turned his gaze to Savannah then. “I’m headed to a bunk in the locker room. I’ll say goodnight then.”

Before he turned, the overhead light reflected in his amber eyes and she felt a tightness in her throat.

“Good night, Jack,” she said.

5 – Gwendolyn

Savannah woke to the warehouse's life signs. Engine rumbles, shouts, clangs, and the whines of loaders coaxed her into consciousness, reminding her that she wasn't lying in her own bed even though she felt comfortable and warm and loathe to move. She conjured the events from the day before as if loading data into computer memory, reliving the scenes of meeting Wild, accessing the delivery files, standing in for Love, waiting alone in silence, then helping to unload stolen handhelds.

She listened, decided she preferred the constant, background noise to the lonely silence of an empty warehouse.

She stretched and turned away from the wall. And felt a presence.

Her eyes flew open.

"Who are you?"

A face resolved in front of her. It was a small face with dark, wide eyes and pink cheeks framed by wisps of hair that shone like spun gold.

Savannah pushed herself up to a sitting position.

A little girl stood before her, her head tilted, her mouth opening to ask a second time.

"I'm Savannah. Who are you?"

"Gwendolyn." The girl locked eyes with her, tilting her head to the opposite side. "Why are you in Uncle Jack's bed? Did you sleep together?"

Savannah swallowed. "No." She shook her head a few more times than she intended. "Jack . . . he just let me use his bed."

"Are you his girlfriend?"

Responses and explanations offered themselves, but Savannah chose the simplest.

"No. Just a friend," she said.

"Like Uncle Trey and Auntie Love and Uncle Ace and Uncle Diamond?" The girl counted them off on her fingers.

Savannah nodded, smiled. "Yes."

"Gweny?" Jack peeked his head through the open doorway, sighed. "Here you are. What are you doing? Leave Seven alone. Sorry about this. She got away from me."

Jack stepped into the room and took Gwendolyn's hand, pulled her toward him.

"Seven? But she said her name's Savannah."

Jack nodded his head several times in succession, continuing to pull her hand. "Yes, well, she has two names. Like you. Gwendolyn. Gweny. Like that."

"Oh." Gwendolyn turned toward Savannah, twisted her face as if considering a myriad of options before nodding decisively. "I'll call you Sevenanna then."

Savannah stifled a laugh. Not only did the combined name, spoken in Gwendolyn's exuberant, high-pitched voice, amuse her, the flushed look of exasperation and embarrassment on Jack's face was delightful.

She gave Gwendolyn an approving nod. "That will be fine."

"Let's go now, Gweny. Uncle Ace is making you breakfast."

"Okay!"

Gwendolyn was the one to pull on Jack's hand now, leading him through the doorway toward the office, giving him just enough time to glance back over his shoulder. "Sorry."

As the two hurried down the metal catwalk, Savannah could still hear Gwendolyn's stream of questions.

"Are we having pancakes? Is she having breakfast with us? She said she wasn't your girlfriend. Should I call her *Auntie Sevenanna*?"

Savannah put her hands on her cheeks. Who was that little girl? Who did she belong to? The energy radiating from her was both intoxicating and exhausting.

Savannah forced herself out of bed and dressed, straightened the covers, then left the office. She might not have been as excited as Gwendolyn, but the possibility of pancakes quickened her steps.

The kitchen was as lively as the main warehouse, figures in matching uniforms milling around the kitchen table, working the vending machines, pouring coffee, exchanging greetings before finishing drinks in long swigs and food in large bites before exiting back through the double doors. Savannah's siblings sat around the kitchen table watching as their honorary niece, who knelt on a chair at one end of the table, piled her plate high with a stack of pancakes.

"You can't eat all that, Gwenny," Ace said.

Gwendolyn pulled the plate closer to her. "Yes, I can."

Jack rose up out of his chair and stood, placed his hand on Gwendolyn's head. "Eat and then wash up. I'm going up to the roof, but I'll be right back. Be nice."

Gwendolyn beamed a smile at him.

"Savannah, come eat." Trey gestured to the empty chair next to him. When she sat, he leaned close to her ear. "Thank you for last night."

"What happened last night?" Gwendolyn could hardly get the words out around a mouthful of food.

"Savannah helped us out with something," Love said. She grabbed a pitcher and drenched her large pancake stack with syrup.

Gwendolyn nodded, unable to make any sound as she swallowed.

Diamond looked up from his meticulous carving of his pancake stack into bite-sized squares to smile at Savannah and then at Love. "The understudy might have usurped the role from our star."

Love's scowl was brief before it transformed into a grin.

Savannah leaned toward Trey. "Last night, you were going to say something about a theater?"

She had tried to whisper, but Gwendolyn continued to demonstrate her exceptional hearing.

"Can I come?" Gwendolyn swallowed her current bite and took a quick sip of juice. She pointed a sticky forefinger at Trey. "I want to go to the movies."

"It's not that kind of theater," Trey said. "Are you finished? I think you've had enough. Why don't you go wash up?"

Gwendolyn pursed her lips in a pout, then set her fork down and slid off her chair. As she headed for the locker room, she wiped her hands on the butt of her jeans.

Savannah laughed, glanced at Trey and Love. "I'll help her."

She picked up one of Gwendolyn's abandoned pancakes and rolled it like a crepe, took several large bites to finish it off, then followed Gwendolyn into the locker room.

Restrooms, showers, bunkbeds, lockers – the room was just as Love had described it.

Gwendolyn was already wiping her hands on a towel when Savannah reached her.

"All done," she said. She held up her hands as evidence.

Savannah cocked her head. "Should I trust you?"

"Uh huh."

Gwendolyn nodded and spun on her heel, and Savannah thought she would return to the kitchen. Instead, she walked toward a set of stairs Savannah hadn't seen before, lifted one foot onto the first step and stopped.

Savannah washed her hands and dried them, stealing glances at the small girl who stood staring up the flight of stairs.

Savannah joined her, looked up at what must have seemed a steep climb to someone so small, then glanced back down at the girl's face. Gwendolyn wanted to go up those stairs. Savannah could sense that. She was also afraid. Savannah could sense that most of all.

Savannah cleared her throat.

"Do these stairs go up to the roof?" She waited for Gwendolyn's nod. "Did you want to go up there with Uncle Jack?"

Again, Gwendolyn nodded.

"I see. Well, I'd like to talk to your Uncle Jack, but I've never gone up to the roof before." She held out her hand. "Would you go with me?"

Gwendolyn looked up at her, her eyes wide, a tentative smile pulling at her mouth.

"All right," she said. She took Savannah's hand. "I can go with you."

"Thank you."

They climbed the two flights of stairs together, Gwendolyn's steps measured at first, but more confident by the time they reached the exit at the top.

Jack stood near the middle of the roof's flat surface in an open space amongst air conditioning units and exhaust vents. He was situating a large cantilever umbrella over a round table and a set of chairs.

"Uncle Jack!" Gwendolyn dropped Savannah's hand and ran to him.

Jack turned at his name and scooped Gwendolyn up in his arms, a grin igniting across his face, his usual serious expression transforming in an instant to one of unconditional affection.

"What are you doing, Uncle Jack?" Gwendolyn pointed to the umbrella.

"Setting up a place for you to color. Did you come up here by yourself?"

"No. I helped Sevenanna up the stairs." Gwendolyn pointed.

Jack turned toward Savannah, his affectionate, endearing expression still lingering.

Jack set Gwendolyn on her feet. "That was nice of you to help Seven out like that," he said. He knelt down to meet her eye line. "Shall we go get the sketch pad? And I think you left some crayons in my desk last time."

"Okay, Sevenanna can go with us."

Gwendolyn found Jack's hand and tugged.

Jack and Savannah followed Gwendolyn's bouncing, golden head down the stairs to the locker room, back through the kitchen and up the metal stairs and walkway to Jack's office, Jack able to resist the insistent tugging on his hand just long enough to whisper a "thank you" in Savannah's direction.

When they reached Jack's office doorway, Gwendolyn stepped through first and came to an abrupt stop.

Jack moved around her. "Go on in. Why – ?"

Gwendolyn backed up until she bumped into Savannah.

A tall woman stood in front of Jack's desk, peering at the stacks of papers, moving them apart from one another with a gloved forefinger. She turned when they entered.

"Here you are at last . . . Jack." The woman pulled one glove off her right hand, then the second one from her left, then aligned the two gloves together thumb to thumb before assigning the pair to the palm of her left hand. Her gaze, at once searing and indifferent, fell on Gwendolyn. "I see he's left her with you again. How are you child?"

Gwendolyn tried to take another step backward as if she wanted to meld with Savannah and disappear.

Her voice sounded so small. "Grandmother," she said.

The woman lifted her gaze from Gwendolyn to Savannah and smiled a practiced, uncanny smile.

"What have you done with your manners . . . Jack?" Again, she had paused before saying Jack's name, as if she resented using it. "I don't believe we've met."

The woman's erect posture, hairstyle, and outfit reminded Savannah of Mom-Éclair's overall elegant demeanor, although a Limited's budget could never rationalize purchasing such expensive fabrics for a matching set of slacks, vest, and knee-length overcoat. But where the kindness in Mom-Éclair's eyes never faded, this woman's true emotions, whatever they might be, lay hidden behind the guarded intensity of her narrowed eyes.

Savannah snaked her arm around Gwendolyn's shoulders. "I'm Savannah Jones. Jack and I were at Chance House together."

As soon as she said it, she wondered if she should be offering that information to this woman. Would she know about Chance House?

The woman lifted an eyebrow. "I see. Another orphan."

"She's just visiting," Jack said. He took a step closer.

The woman glanced at him, ignoring his cold glare, then turned her attention back to Savannah.

"I'm Gwendolyn Thompson. I own this warehouse, along with many others, as well as other more lucrative businesses. The child is my namesake, either my son's idea of flattery or simple laziness." Her smile widened. "My friends call me Mimi. I prefer Ma'am."

Jack took another step closer and positioned himself between the woman and Savannah and Gwendolyn. "What brings you here?"

Gwendolyn Thompson turned her smile to Jack.

"I've come to fetch you to join me on my business inspections."

"I can't today," Jack said.

"Because you've been coerced into babysitting?"

"I wasn't – "

The owner waved her hand. "Whatever the arrangement with Thomas, your arrangement with me takes precedence. You have more than enough recruits from that place . . . and visitors . . . to babysit in your stead." She tilted her head. "Or should we track Thomas down – you must know where he is – and have him fulfill at least one of his responsibilities, either as my son, or as her father?"

Jack didn't answer. His silence seemed to be answer enough.

"Good, then I'll wait for you in the car." She waited for Jack to move, then again for Savannah to pull Gwendolyn aside, before stepping out onto the catwalk. "And you, Savannah Jones, if you happen to see my son when he reclaims the child, tell him . . . you can tell him . . . never mind . . . What am I thinking? He never listens to anything I say. Goodbye . . . child."

The woman reached out to touch Gwendolyn's hair, her fingertips caressing a few golden strands before she pulled her hand back and left them.

Jack grabbed a black leather jacket from the coat rack, slipped his arms into the sleeves. He knelt on one knee in front of Gwendolyn and took her face in his hands.

"Gwen, I have to go. Your aunts and uncles will be with you. You can color on the roof if someone goes with you. I'll be back as soon as I can." He waited for her silent nod, then stood. "Seven, I hate to ask you, but Ace and Love are busy in the vault working on last night's . . . merchandise. Diamond is out on a delivery. Trey – "

Savannah put her hand up. "Don't worry. I'll be here with her. No one's expecting me to be anywhere else today."

Jack drew in a deep breath. "Thank you." He stroked Gwendolyn's head. "I'll be back."

He stepped away and followed the owner's retreating form toward the front stairs.

Savannah and Gwendolyn stared after him until he was out of sight.

Savannah took Gwendolyn's hand. "Shall we color then? Maybe we can draw an extra special picture for Uncle Jack, or your Daddy, or both. How does that sound?"

"Daddy doesn't like my pictures." Gwendolyn looked up at her. "They make him sad."

"Why would they make him sad?"

"Because I always draw a picture of our family."

Savannah gave Gwendolyn's hand a gentle squeeze. "Well, then, we can just draw a picture for ourselves then. Do you want to color on the roof or on Uncle Jack's desk?"

Gwendolyn's eyes grew wide. "Can I sit in his chair?"

"I don't think he'll mind."

Gwendolyn dropped Savannah's hand and ran to Jack's desk, pulled open a drawer and produced a sketch pad and a box of crayons, then climbed up into Jack's chair. After she situated herself, she flipped through the pages of the sketch pad looking for a blank page, pointing out her previous creations to Savannah.

"Oh, let me show you these," she said. She flipped back to the first few pages. "Uncle Jack told me he drew this one of a garden a long time ago, but these are new ones. He was trying to show me how to draw a tree."

"Can I see that one of the garden again?"

Gwendolyn turned back to it.

Savannah smiled. "That's the courtyard at Chance House."

Gwendolyn nodded. "I asked him why he didn't draw Auntie Love or Uncle Trey or anybody. He told me he can't draw people."

"Well, he did a good job on the courtyard," Savannah said.

Gwendolyn turned back to her blank page and began to draw, and Savannah took a seat in the guest chair across from her and watched as a crude, but recognizable beach scene took form, complete with two figures holding hands and a shorter one standing in front of them.

"Grandmother has a house on the beach. Mommy and Daddy took me there once. Do you like the beach?"

"I've never been."

Savannah felt a bit envious. She had never been to a beach, not in real life, and a virtual *Palas* beach couldn't compare. She could only imagine how lovely it would be to walk barefoot on the sand and feel waves wash up around her ankles.

The older Gwendolyn Thompson had to have Unlimited status to own a home next to the ocean. Just visiting was an expensive feat.

"Grandmother didn't like Mommy very much," Gwendolyn said.

Savannah's head came up.

"Really? Why not?"

Gwendolyn lifted both shoulders toward her ears and then allowed them to drop. If she had been answering a different question, Savannah might have laughed at the exaggerated gesture.

"What happened to your Mommy?"

Again, Gwendolyn's shoulders rose and dropped. "I don't know." Satisfied with her beach scene, Gwendolyn turned to a blank page in the sketch book and began a new picture, her head bowed in earnest. "Daddy doesn't know either, but he's looking for her."

Savannah and most of her siblings had been orphans. Whatever circumstances had left them alone in the world, they understood that their parents were gone and that they needed to make new families, starting with the one at Chance House. Looking back on it now, there had been a certain contentment in that knowledge. Gwendolyn came from a high-status, blood-related family, and yet her life seemed to be full of questions. Where was her mother? Did her grandmother act so cold toward her because of her mother? Did her father leave her often to search? Was he searching now?

Mesmerized by a shaft of sunlight falling across the page, as if it shone from the sun Gwendolyn had drawn in the top corner, Savannah's eyelids drooped.

"Savannah?"

Someone touched her shoulder. She lifted her head off her forearm, blinked.

At some point, she had fallen asleep, just like Gwendolyn who sat slumped in Jack's chair, her head listing to one side at an uncomfortable angle.

Savannah sat up, straightened, looked up at the figure standing next to her. It was Trey.

He put his finger to his lips then moved to the other side of the desk, scooped Gwendolyn into his arms and carried her to the inner room and laid her on the bed. When he returned, he sat in Jack's chair and grinned.

"Nice nap?"

Savannah failed to stifle a yawn. "I don't know when that happened. Some babysitter I turned out to be."

Savannah rubbed her face, pushed her hair out of her eyes. Both Auntie Bess and Mom-Éclair would be appalled to see her with such an unkempt appearance. She could only presume "Ma'am" had had a similar reaction.

She gathered the tangle that was her hair and tried to smooth it with her hands.

Trey straightened the papers that the owner had shoved apart. "Where's Jack?"

"The owner took him with her."

Trey lifted his eyebrows, then his head before dropping it in a nod. "Ah. So, you met Ma'am then. Did she tell you her nickname is Mimi?"

"Yes."

"It's a funny story, but I should let Jack tell it. Ask him sometime."

Savannah thought of the cold stare Jack had given the owner, wondered how willing he would be to talk about her.

"So, Gwendolyn's dad is the owner's son. He and Jack must be close then?"

Trey shrugged. "Jack doesn't tell us much, and we don't ask. Chance House etiquette. But I suppose so. He and Tom have similar relationships with their parents, so they have that in common. Jack was a runaway, remember." At Savannah's nod, Trey leaned forward. "Before I forget, we didn't get a chance to talk about the theater. If you still want to know about this plan of ours, that's where you can hear all the details. It's a meetup for new members. An orientation I guess you'd call it. Assuming you're interested at all after last night."

Savannah leaned forward. "Yes, I'm definitely still interested. With trepidation, though, I admit."

"Sure, of course. Great. I'll take you then. Maybe one of the others will go, too. Hey, I can take over here if you want to go get something to eat. I don't think that one pancake you had is going to last you much longer."

"Oh, yes. Very hungry now that you mention it."

Trey pointed at Gwendolyn's picture. "Hey, these two look like you and Jack. Sunglasses. Wavy hair."

Like the first picture, Gwendolyn had drawn two figures holding hands and a shorter one standing next to them. One tall figure looked to be wearing sunglasses judging by the filled-in circles drawn for eyepieces. The other tall figure had been drawn with long, brown, squiggly lines for hair.

"I'm sure those are her parents."

"As I heard it, her mother is blonde." Trey flipped the pages back to the beach scene. "See? These are her parents."

Long streaks of yellow adorned the mother figure. Brown dots represented the eyes for the father figure who also sported a wide-brimmed hat.

Savannah turned back to the second picture. Sunglasses. Wavy hair. Two figures holding hands. Had Gwendolyn really drawn her and Jack together?

"She did ask me if I was his girlfriend. I told her no."

"You must not have been very convincing." Trey laughed. "Oh, by the way, it's Saturday."

"What's Saturday?"

"The meeting in the theater. Are you busy?"

Savannah's hand flew to her pendant. Saturday night. The rooftop of her building in 502. She had told Wild to meet her there.

Trey rose, placed his hands palm down on the desk and leaned his face closer to hers.

"Look at your face." He grinned, pointed at the heart around her neck. "Savannah, do you have a date with the fancy PIG gift-er?"

Savannah swallowed. She didn't know how to answer that. Was it a date?

Mimicking Gwendolyn, she lifted her shoulders as high as she could, held them there for a long second, then let them drop.

6 – The Theater

Quinn's Repertory Theater sat near the intersection of 502, 503, and 504, 502 being the taller zone to the west, and 503 and 504 stacked beside it to the east, a prime location to attract an audience ranging from Unregistered to Extended. According to the flyer, tonight's offering would be a three-act play, "The Waxing Moon," performed by a small cast on a bare stage, a single violin accompanying the opening songs of each act.

What the flyer didn't mention was that an invitation-only discussion was to be held afterward.

Savannah spent three days at Warehouse 11. Each day Jack was whisked away by the owner, leaving Gwendolyn in Savannah's care. While Ace and Love continued to work in the vault and Diamond and Trey managed the warehouse, Savannah and Gwendolyn spent their time making use of the table Jack had set up on the roof, baking cookies, and visiting the courtyard with the fountain and flowers where Savannah had met with Wild. Gwendolyn continued to call her Sevenanna, while Savannah, like everyone else in the warehouse, differentiated between the two Gwendolyns by calling the younger Gwenny and referring to the older as "the owner," or "Ma'am" when accompanied with an eyeroll.

Each night after crawling up onto a top bunk in the warehouse locker room, Savannah exchanged messages with Wild.

Something has come up. I'm going to be really, really late on Saturday.

[The stars will really, really be out by then. I'll wait for you.]

Was she being reckless? For there was no question that their meeting would be a date. No one would consider stargazing together alone on a rooftop to be anything other than a romantic encounter. She knew next to nothing about this wild, masked "fancy PIG gift-er," as Trey had called him. She didn't know his real name, where he came from, or what he did for a living. He could be married. He could be a criminal.

Yet, the single alarm in her head that might have warned her away was just the one worrying that no other alarms were sounding.

Perhaps she knew all she needed to know for now. He had been helpful, and kind, and she liked talking to him, both through magnolia18 and in person. And Saturday when they met it would be dark enough for him to expose his face.

Each night she processed the same cycle of thoughts. And each night in his last message, Wild described the scene he was imagining playing out in the night sky. Then Savannah would drift off to sleep picturing him lying on a rooftop somewhere under the stars.

Sometime during the third night while Savannah slept, Gwenny's father came to take her home.

Savannah shoved the theater flyer into her backpack, bade her siblings goodbye, then returned home to the small, silent confines of her apartment, missing the noise and voices and energy of the warehouse as soon as the door closed behind her. She missed Trey's grin, Diamond's and Love's hugs, Ace's wink, and Gwenny's insistent tugs on her shirt sleeve. She even missed the grateful smile and nod she received from Jack when he returned each evening from what appeared to be a grueling day spent in the owner's clutches.

With two days to fill before Saturday, she distracted herself by reviewing the new Guide scripts for the upcoming DreamSight expansion that would be exclusive not only to Unlimited users, but also to the new DreamSight headgear model that would send scores of older models to a scrap heap. She wondered if the four J's knew about that detail. She wondered too if they would care.

Saturday morning Savannah lay in bed staring at the place on the wall where she had first seen Trey's signal. Tonight, she would meet Trey at the theater and attend the special session. She would learn the details about the plan to leave this life behind. She presumed she would be offered the opportunity to join them, a choice that made accessing stolen files pale in comparison. But could someone who avoided the world as much as she did have the courage to consider it?

She drew the covers tighter around her. It would be hours before she needed to get ready. She could sleep a little longer.

Except, did she have anything to wear? Even a date on a rooftop warranted better clothes than her casual wardrobe, if one could call a hodgepodge collection of things to wear a "wardrobe." She needed to shop. In person.

Savannah made a point to avoid GenTech Shopping Plaza, an easy accomplishment when one kept to one's apartment, but she had little choice today. Weaving her way through the noisy, oppressive throng of shoppers and the constant bombardment of ads, she ducked into the first clothing store she came to and purchased a simple, long-sleeved white blouse, dark blue jeans, and a long, black cardigan. Her PIG heart necklace and a pair of heart-shaped earrings to match would have to suffice to elevate the look, along with a thorough job of hair brushing and some makeup.

Having slept late and shopping taking longer than she had anticipated, she feared she might be late if she took a bus, so hired a car.

The theater was a modest, two-story building decorated by a rectangle marquee display announcing the theater's name, the name of the play, and the current date, time, and temperature, along with a loop of video clips from past performances. A small crowd milled about the entrance. The faint notes of a violin emanated from inside.

Savannah spotted two male figures standing apart from the rest on the theater's front steps, one lifting a hand to wave, the other straightening and lifting his head but keeping his hands in his pockets. They both looked clean shaven and showered, and wore identical dark brown, long-sleeved, buttoned shirts.

Trey and Jack.

She excused herself through the crowd's clusters and joined them on the steps.

Trey gave her a surveying glance and smiled. "You look nice," he said.

"You always look good, Trey. And you look nice, too, Jack."

"Thanks. I borrowed a shirt from Trey."

"I expected Love or Diamond to join us instead. I thought you said you were 'Always the exception.'"

"I didn't expect him to come either," Trey said. "He just followed me here."

Jack shot him a glare. "I already told you. I came to talk to Hadley." He turned back to Savannah. "Hadley is one of the coordinators of this venture. He's the one who hired me to oversee the book readers."

Savannah nodded. "Are all of these people going?"

Trey gave a slight shrug. "Well, these are the people considering it. Who knows how many will actually end up going by the end." Trey smiled. "No need to be nervous. This isn't a cult. Think of it as just a group of people making plans to move."

Jack shook his head. "You act like it's an extended vacation instead of something completely life changing. But I suppose your take on things is the reason people like you."

Trey offered the crook of his arm to Savannah, and she took it.

"Savannah likes me, anyway."

Jack released an exasperated sigh but exchanged a small smile with Savannah.

Savannah couldn't help but giggle. If she had been nervous, she felt less so now.

"Trey," Jack pointed toward the theater. "I'd like to catch Hadley before things get started. Let's go in. They won't let anyone in the front doors until the play is over and the audience has been cleared out, and when they do, they'll be scanning faces, so let's go to the side entrance. Rosemary knows us. She'll let us in."

Trey smiled. "Sure. That's a great idea."

Trey led them to the theater's side door and knocked. A woman wearing stage makeup peeked out, smiled when she recognized Trey and Jack, then opened the door wider to let all three of them enter.

"This is Rosemary," Trey said.

"Hello," Savannah said.

The woman nodded to them, then led them down a backstage hallway to an alcove next to the stage. She gestured for them to wait before leaving them.

"Trey. Jack. Good to see you. Who have you brought with you?"

The whispered greeting came from a man dressed in a long-sleeved striped shirt and light blue vest who had appeared behind them. He was a short man, older, his abundance of gray curls turning white at his temples. Savannah was not at all surprised to see that he wore a bow tie.

"Hi, Hadley." Trey followed the man's lead and whispered in return. "This is Savannah. She was with us at Chance House. Savannah, this is Hadley Stineby."

"Hello," Savannah said.

The man smiled, took Savannah's hand in both of his. They were warm hands, like his eyes and his smile.

"Happy to meet you and welcome." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze then released her. "I'm glad you're here, Jack. I'm going to be explaining this to everyone in a few minutes, and I plan to visit the warehouse in a few days, but as a heads up, our timeline has been cut in half. We only have three months to prepare now."

"Three months?"

Hadley nodded. "I don't know if we'll be able to get the data ready in time even if you do finish those readers unless we just bulk-load every tech-free survival reference we can find, but I was hoping we'd have more time to make them more accessible. Plus . . ." He dropped his already quiet whisper to one that was almost imperceptible. "We may not have enough time to add our additional information, let alone testimonials."

Applause erupted from the audience. The play had ended. The house lights illuminated. A cast member returned to the stage and thanked the audience for coming. As the violin reprised the play's medley of themes, crew members escorted the audience to the exits.

Hadley straightened. "We'll talk later." He smiled at Savannah as he walked away. "It's time to introduce everyone to Palas."

Savannah shot a glance at Trey, then at Hadley's retreating form, then turned back to Trey.

"Did he say 'Palas'?"

Trey nodded. "Yeah. I guess I never mentioned it. It's the name of the planet we're going to."

"But . . . Palas isn't real."

"What?"

Savannah left Trey and Jack staring after her and hurried after Hadley, caught up to him just as he approached the stage steps.

"Mr. Stineby?"

He stopped, turned. "Please, just call me Hadley."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Trey and Jack take seats in the front row facing the center of the stage, leaving a seat open between them. People who had been waiting outside began filing in through the front door past the security scanner. They entered by twos and threes, talking within their

small groups or shouting greetings to one another across the theater. Savannah guessed by the number of rows with filled seats that the gathered attendees numbered at least a hundred.

Savannah pressed her lips together.

"Hadley." She drew in a steady breath. "You know there's a virtual world called *Palas* in GenTech's DreamSight system, right?"

Hadley lifted an eyebrow. "There is? No, I didn't know that, frankly, but I'm not surprised. Our largest OWMC patron is a game designer, so they could have acquired the naming rights as well as the image rights and used them in a game."

"Hadley. It's time."

The woman they had met earlier, Rosemary, walked to the edge of the stage and motioned to him.

"Coming," he said. He turned back to Savannah and smiled, the wrinkles around his eyes creasing. "You look as if you're worried this is all some sort of ruse, but I can assure you that *Palas* is very real."

Rosemary waved her hand to signal the stage crew, and the house lights began to dim.

Hadley started up the stage steps, turned back to give Savannah a wink.

"I know it's real because I've been there."



During the countless hours Savannah had spent exploring the unspoiled climes of *DreamSight's Palas*, she had assumed that the game's imagery, world settings, and mechanics were based on old photographs and historical records from the past as reference, then expanded and embellished to create a virtual world for optimum enjoyment. Just like the other worlds of *Dawn's Mist* and *Garnet City*, she had assumed *Palas* was a product of fiction, only loosely based on reality. Never once had she considered that *Palas* could be based on a co-existing, physical world.

But Hadley Stineby had said he had been there. If he was to be believed, then a real *Palas* existed. Instead of experiencing its virtual representation, she could choose to walk its deserts and swim in its oceans and feel its breezes on her face. She could stare up at its night sky.

She could, in fact, choose that world over this one.

"Sa-van-nah."

She turned. Trey was calling her in a hoarse whisper, gesturing toward the seat next to him.

As the house lights extinguished, Savannah inched her way toward the front row and took her seat beside him.

Trey leaned close and whispered. "What was that all about?"

She turned to look at him, her eyes adjusting to the dark to make out his features.

"Do you believe Hadley, that *Palas* is real?"

He lifted his eyebrows and nodded. "Yes. Don't you?"

She glanced up at the stage where Hadley stood with Rosemary. Hadley Stineby had warm, kind eyes. In fact, he exuded warmth and kindness, in the same way Trey exuded joy.

She nodded, leaned back in her seat. "Yes. I think I do."

Savannah saw the flash of Trey's grin before he, too, leaned back in his seat.

"Welcome!"

A man had joined Hadley and Rosemary on stage and his booming voice echoed through the theater. Like Hadley, he had dressed for the occasion, wearing a black shirt, gray pants, and a dark gray blazer, but unlike Hadley, he didn't wear a tie. His shirt was open at the throat. His long, dark hair was tied back into a ponytail.

The audience quieted, and the man smiled.

"Good evening. Thank you for coming. Many of you know me, but for our newcomers, let me introduce myself. My name is Zachary Quinn. I run this little theater group. I also help to coordinate this upcoming journey of ours. With me tonight is Hadley Stineby, and my wife Rosemary."

Hadley and Rosemary nodded.

"If you're here, you know that our group is rejecting this society's tech-access discrimination, and that we are preparing to relocate to a tech-free planet."

Savannah noticed Trey joining in with the applause that followed. Jack crossed his arms over his chest.

"If you are considering joining us, you should know a few things."

Rosemary signaled to a hidden crew member. "Video please?"

A large display above and behind the three flickered to life, the first scene opening in the middle of a dirt road that extended across a vast, wide-open landscape. A horse-drawn vehicle rumbled into view then retreated into the distance, its outline distorted by shimmering heat waves.

Savannah drew in a sharp breath. She recognized this place. This was the arrival spot from the game.

Whether entering for the first time or respawning after an unsuccessful attempt to survive the previous game day, players would materialize on this road. One direction led to a small, primitive town where supplies and transportation could be purchased. The opposite direction led to adventure, and the game's survival challenges and dangers – starvation, exposure to the elements, wild animals, bandits. Even users with special privileges, like Savannah, still materialized on the road.

The video continued. A train weaved its way along a mountain pass, a ribbon of white smoke trailing behind it as it passed by small towns, ranches, and farms, separated by what appeared to be miles of open land. There was no cement, very little glass. Nothing looked to be powered by electricity, not even faint, flickering streetlights. Each daytime scene played out under a clear, blue sky, each night scene under a sky riddled with a spectacular display of stars.

Yes, this was Palas, the real Palas. Unlike the game's rendered images, these were real recordings.

Zachary Quinn turned and gestured toward the display.

"There are no cars or buses or planes here. Nothing is instant. Everything is slow. The only options for traveling are horse, train, or ship, horses and horse-drawn conveyances being the most prevalent, able to cover a mere 30 miles a day. You will be without modern medicine, although, before we leave, we will arrange for vaccinations against known diseases and hope that they are effective in the new environment. You will need to learn the local language of the area where you choose to settle. You will need to provide for yourselves or make enough money through manual labor to buy from others. You may need to learn to farm or work in the fields, to build shelter, or craft weapons – skills mostly forgotten in our age of convenience."

He turned back to the audience.

"Be prepared, in other words, to work harder than you have ever worked in your lives merely to survive."

Savannah heard a few whispered conversations behind her, but most of the audience remained silent.

Quinn pressed his hands together.

"Relocating to another planet may seem to be an extreme move. The AFA, and groups like them, may feel we are cowards for choosing to flee rather than fighting for change. Some of us who leave may come to regret the decision at some point. Others may thrive." Quinn drew in a breath and smiled as the video ended behind him. "As for me, even if some hot day I'm standing in a field behind a plow wondering why I chose such a hard life, I hope that I'll take a moment to breathe in the fresh air and let my gaze settle on an unobstructed horizon and remember my dream. So, leaving tech behind is my choice. Each of you are free to decide if you want to join me."

Rosemary took a step to stand beside him and took his arm in both hands. She and Quinn exchanged a smile and a nod.

Rosemary looked toward the audience.

"With those warnings in mind, let's move on to some details about where we're going and how we're going to go about getting there." She smiled. "Hadley?"

A new image resolved on the screen of a blue and white planet.

Hadley stepped forward and pointed toward the display. "This is Palas." A picture of a spaceship appeared to the right of the planet. "And this is the *Nighthawk*, the ship that will carry us there.

"The *Nighthawk* is an OWMC scout ship based at Fringe Point Mining Colony. The Off-World Mining Consortium, or OWMC as you've no doubt heard it called, sends out scout ships like the *Nighthawk* to explore and discover planets and small celestial bodies such as moons and asteroids for mining opportunities. Ten years ago, the *Nighthawk* discovered Palas, a planet rich in resources. Since the planet is inhabited, however, the OWMC placed it on a watch list, which means every ten years the *Nighthawk* will return to reassess the possibility of stealth operations, and host scientific research as well if the OWSF, the Off-World Science Foundation, provides funding for it. Approximately six months from now, the first ten-year cycle will come around."

Hadley paused and scanned the rapt faces in the audience.

Savannah wondered if any of them had heard much about either of those organizations. She knew the initialisms, but, like most of the public, she only knew that mining colonies – some acting as prison colonies – existed, and that scientists researched other worlds, but that's where her casual interest ended.

"Benefactors have arranged for our group, ostensibly a research group, to board the *Nighthawk* at Fringe Point and travel to Palas. However, there has been a small kink in our plans. Instead of having six months to prepare, we only have three."

Savannah heard a few gasps followed by a growing din of whispers.

Hadley motioned for quiet.

"The *Raven Wing* transport ship takes colonists and supplies to Fringe Point every six months. That's the time frame we had planned for. However, due to contamination in the colony's food supply, the *Raven Wing* has moved up its return date. There's nothing to be done about it except be on board or wait for the *Raven Wing*'s next trip and miss our rendezvous with the *Nighthawk*."

The display changed to a diagram with three circles connected by dashed lines. The first circle was identified as Home, the second as Fringe Point, and the third as Palas.

Hadley pointed. "To get to Palas, we need to apply to be normal colonists at Fringe Point. Our original plan was to rendezvous immediately with the *Nighthawk* once we arrived at the colony, bypassing any need to sign work contracts or make living arrangements. Now, we'll each need to sign a 3-year contract with the Consortium. We'll need to live and work in the colony while we wait the remaining three months."

Hadley dropped his arm and faced the audience again.

"This means you must request a position and qualify as a colonist at Fringe Point one month in advance. Usually, mining colonies accept anyone who can learn to operate mining equipment or support the colony in some capacity, however, in the case of Fringe Point there is one additional requirement."

Hadley drew in a breath. "Since the colony is so isolated, Fringe Point has had its share of mental breakdowns and violent outbursts among its work force. To mitigate these problems, the colony now only accepts couples and families, unless applicants file a waiver with their request. So, factor this into your decision.

"Also, I should point out that even though the change in timeframe does complicate our plans, there is one benefit. If, during those three months, you change your mind about continuing to Palas, you may simply complete your contract and return home. Of course, you could change your mind even after we reach Palas by staying onboard the *Nighthawk*, but in that case, you would be facing some legal difficulties once you return home."

Hadley gestured toward Rosemary who stepped forward.

"First and foremost, Breach of Contract. We'll only be three months into that 3-year contract when the *Nighthawk* leaves. If you abandon property or breach rental contracts or default on any other payments by leaving home, those could be problems as well. In any case, once you board the *Nighthawk*, it will not be easy to return home."

"Not to mention that the Consortium doesn't condone colonizing inhabited planets," Hadley said. "Whether they'll view what we're doing as emigration or colonization is hard to foresee, but we would rather not put it to a test."

Zachary nodded. "Thus, our security measures at the door."

Savannah swallowed.

Her options were clear now. Stay and continue to live her isolated life wasting away in virtual worlds. That was the easiest choice. Venture out as far as Fringe Point and work for three years at the mining colony before returning to her same life. The frightening but safer choice. Or join Quinn and Hadley and the rest and experience the real world with all its hardships that had inspired the virtual one she loved. The life-changing, heart-pounding choice.

Hadley put his hand up.

"But now that you've heard all of our warnings, I want to assuage your concerns a bit in one respect. Zachary and I were fortunate enough to have been OWSF members of the research group when the Consortium discovered Palas ten years ago. You should know that many of our number volunteered to remain on the planet, not only to continue our research, but also to act as scouts. They've had ten years now to learn how that society works and how to function within it, and they'll be helping us integrate into our new environment when we arrive. With this support, along with the training materials we plan to provide, we should be able to get a good head start. You will not be abandoned. We will all be pursuing this endeavor together."

Rosemary signaled to the crewmember again and the house lights came back on.

Quinn drew in a long breath. "I know that's a lot to take in. Are there any questions?"

Hands flew up.

Savannah felt a tap on her arm, and she turned to see that Trey was staring at her.

"Savannah," he said. He pointed to the display toward the center circle representing Fringe Point Mining Colony. "Would you consider marrying me?"

7 – Options

Savannah stared into Trey's chocolate brown eyes and waited for a tell-tale twinkle that would confirm that he was joking, that an admission was coming that his question had been some kind of an amusing scheme to see her reaction. But his expression remained serious.

"What?"

"Don't misunderstand," he said. "Let me explain."

Jack rose out of his seat. "Let's talk outside. People are just asking questions that have already been answered anyway."

Trey nodded and he and Savannah rose and followed Jack to the front doors of the theater and outside.

A brisk breeze blew leaves and loose theater flyers across the parking lot toward them. Savannah shivered and pulled her cardigan tighter.

Jack stopped at the bottom of the front steps and waited for Trey and Savannah to join him, then tilted his head toward Trey. "Okay. Explain away. Unless this is your idea of a romantic proposal." He gestured toward Savannah. "Explain it to her, I mean."

Trey drew in a breath, turned to face her. The lights from the marquee danced across his face.

"I'm sorry I just blurted that out. I was thinking about the colony's requirement for couples or families, and sure, if Fringe Point was just a quick stopover, it wouldn't matter if you went as a single. But, like Hadley said, we'll be waiting in the colony for three months. Accommodations for couples and families will be much nicer than the ones for singles which will probably be some sort of barracks. So, I thought it would be better if we went as a couple. Nothing from here is going to carry over to Palas anyway. Money from here won't matter. Access status won't matter. Marriage contracts won't matter. Nothing will be recognized there. It would just be for Fringe Point, for three months, to keep you comfortable." He shook his head. "Of course, it wouldn't have to be me. It could be Diamond or Jack here or somebody else. Not Ace, though. He's already married."

Savannah blinked. "Ace is married?"

Trey nodded. "Her name's Zoe. She's a nurse who helps out at Chance House with the new kids. Ace still lives there, by the way. Anyway, I know you haven't even said you might go, but it was just a thought."

Jack sighed. "Maybe you should have thought of how you phrase things before speaking."

The twinkle returned to Trey's eyes. "All right. You're right." Trey touched Savannah's shoulder. "I apologize for startling you."

Savannah felt as if her head was spinning. Palas was real. Trey and the others from Chance House were going to Palas. Trey was talking about arrangements as if she would be going, and if she didn't go, she would be left behind and she would never see him again. Hadn't she known that? Yes, of course, but she must not have truly believed it until now.

She gripped Trey's shirt sleeve, lifted her head to look into his eyes. Her expression must have concerned him for his smile faded.

"You're really going," she said.

He didn't answer in words. His small smile was his answer.

She nodded. "I think I should head home now."

"Right. You have a date."

Her date!

She dropped Trey's sleeve and withdrew her handheld from her bag to check the time. Yes. Wild would be waiting for her.

"I'll drive her home in the van." Jack handed Trey a key. "You can take the bike."

Trey lifted his eyebrows. "You mean Tom's bike? Tom loaned you his bike?" Trey laughed. "I shouldn't be surprised though. For all you do for him, he should just give it to you."

"Yes, he certainly owes me a lot, but bring it back in one piece by Monday." Jack clapped him on the back. "Enjoy the tech while you can."

Trey grinned. "I will." He turned to Savannah, his grin retreating. "Again, I'm sorry I startled you, but think about it. I'm hoping you'll go with us. I'm hoping you'll consider what I said. We have some time, and lots of work to do, but if you decide to go as a single, you'll need to decide that soon."

"All right." She smiled at him. "I appreciate you looking out for me."

The grin returned. "I'm off then. See you Monday, Jack. Savannah, come back to the warehouse soon. I'm sure Jack will treat us to some chicken if you do."

He lifted his hand in a wave and left them, heading toward an area of the parking lot reserved for motorcycles.

Jack gestured in the opposite direction. "The van is this way."

"Isn't 502 taking you out of your way?"

He shook his head. "It isn't that far from here. Plus, I thought you could use a break from Trey's . . . enthusiasm."

"He means well," she said.

They crossed the theater's front courtyard, and Savannah spotted the Thompson Transportation and Storage van in the corner of the parking lot.

Jack matched her stride. "Don't tell him I said this, but Trey is as good as they come." He stopped walking, waited for her to look up at him. "I'm serious. You won't find anyone better."

Savannah felt unsure how to respond, gave him a simple nod. She agreed with him, but why was he telling her that? Was he referring to Trey's proposal? Was he encouraging it?

When they reached the van, Jack opened and closed the passenger door for her, then circled around to enter the driver's side and started the engine.

He looked over at her. "You live in 502. That's as much as I know," he said.

"Right. You can take Lux Motors Highway."

"That's R129, right?" He flashed her a fleeting smile. "I can't keep up with the latest name owners."

Jack pulled the van out of the parking lot's driveway.

Savannah leaned her head against the window and watched the endless city blur beside and behind them as they raced past. Cement, glass, lights – so many lights. She didn't hate or resent this world's conveniences or tech. At least, not all of it. But the constant bombardment of the senses was often exhausting, and the hovers and wasps she had encountered during the protest in 503 had proven just how oppressive tech could be.

"Trey said you have a date with the person who gave you that PIG."

Savannah turned away from the window. "Oh. He told you that."

"Was it a secret? Trey can keep secrets if you make sure he understands something's a secret. Otherwise, well, I can't say that he'd tell everyone, but he'd tell me at least."

She smiled. "Trey told *me* that you have a funny story about the owner's nickname. Is that a secret?"

He chuckled. "Well, I wouldn't share it too widely. Her friends started calling her Mimi because when she was a little girl, she thought everything should be about her, and she would always cry out 'Me! Me!' Tom doesn't think she knows the joke behind it. He says sometimes he calls her Mimi and laughs, and she doesn't understand what he finds so funny."

Savannah laughed. "Oh, no. I had better stick with 'Ma'am' when I'm around her or I'll start laughing and she'll think I'm rude." She straightened. "How's Gwenny, by the way? I miss her."

"She's good. She's back home with Tom." He glanced over at her. "I take it you'll be visiting us at the warehouse again?"

"Of course." She stretched her shoulders back. They felt stiff, as if she had been tensing those muscles all evening without realizing it. "I'll want to see all of you as much as I can before you go. And . . . if I . . . decide to go, I'll need to keep up with the plans. Either way, I want to help out."

Jack didn't answer for a moment. When he did, he kept his eyes fixed forward. "Good."

"Oh, turn onto 16th Street." Savannah pointed to the van's navigation display. "Then it's just a few blocks."

They rode in silence for the remaining minutes it took to reach her building. At her direction, Jack found a place to stop the van near the front entrance.

"Thank you, Jack."

Savannah opened the door and stepped out, closed the door behind her. The window descended.

"Good night," Jack said. "If you go out again, you might want a heavier coat or jacket."

Savannah nodded. She could feel the cold through her cardigan as if she wore nothing at all. She would need to stop by her apartment for a jacket before she headed to the rooftop. It would give her a chance to send a message to Wild through magnolia18 that she was home.

"One more thing," he said.

Savannah stepped closer and leaned her head into the van so she could hear him, for his quiet tone was hard to hear on the noisy street. She swallowed. Sometimes, like now, her gaze would be drawn to his amber eyes, taking her breath away.

"Yes?"

"When you're considering those options Trey gave you, you should know that I can't be one of them."

Savannah felt a strange sensation in her chest, as if she were hearing something she didn't want to hear. She took a step backward and pulled her head back outside. The window began to rise back into place.

"Keep warm," Jack said. "I'll see you again soon."



The first and last time Savannah had been on the roof of her building was the day she had been given a tour by the landlord when she had rented her apartment. One of her neighbors still maintained a small vegetable garden. Another kept a stack of several large storage crates. Yet another stored painting easels and containers of paints and brushes in a shelving unit, and someone had placed a round table and two chairs in one corner for an optimum view while sharing morning coffee or a late-night snack. The roof space had been promoted as one of the building's amenities, but Savannah had never taken advantage of it. She didn't garden or paint or have any other reason to take the short, three-floor elevator ride. Now, standing bundled in her jacket looking up at the stars, she wished she had.

She cupped her hands and blew into the space between them to warm her fingers, wishing she had grabbed a pair of gloves along with her jacket. She had been in a hurry, she supposed, and more focused on her message to Wild.

I'm home now. I've set a guest code of magnolia18 on the front door lock. I'll be waiting.

She took a tentative step closer to the rooftop's guardrail and glanced over.

"I never look down. I always look up."

She turned.

A man dressed in black stood in front of the rooftop door as it completed its slow, automatic close behind him. The man took a few steps forward.

"It's me, Wild, by the way," he said.

She recognized his muffled voice, and despite her hope that he would come unmasked, he still wore his face coverings, a cloth mask covering his nose and mouth, and goggles covering his eyes. The hood of his jacket hid his hair and forehead.

"You came," she said. A silly, obvious thing to say, she knew, but he seemed to understand her to mean that she was glad he had come. "I'm sorry it had to be so late."

He shook his head, came closer. "It's all right. Turned out I couldn't come any earlier either."

She hadn't felt awkward when she had met him in 504. Now her stomach twisted. Her heart raced. When he drew closer, she lifted her head as if she could meet his gaze, saw the reflection of the rooftop's night lights in his goggles instead.

"Oh," she said. "Maybe I should turn those lights off so we can see the stars better."

She spotted the light switches on the panel next to the door, skirted around Wild and flipped the switches one by one until all the lights turned off. She waited a moment for her eyes to adjust, then returned to him.

"There. Nice and dark." She pointed at him. "You can take all that off now."

Embarrassed that her hand was trembling, she dropped her arm to her side, shoved her hands in her pockets.

She heard him draw in a long breath. "No, I can't, actually."

She exhaled a sigh in a puff. "Why not? Are you a criminal?"

She regretted the question as soon as she asked it.

"Why would you agree to meet me," he said, "if you thought I was a criminal?"

"I didn't. I don't. I just can't come up with another explanation, that maybe you're afraid I might betray you to Security."

"I'm not a criminal. Besides, I trust you."

"Then . . ."

"Let me show you," he said.

He placed his hands on both of her shoulders and spun her around to face the edge of the rooftop, then stepped up close behind her.

"Close your eyes for a second," he said.

She meant to protest, then complied.

A headband slipped down over her head, and she reached up to feel it. He was putting his goggles on her.

"You can open your eyes now."

She opened her eyes to complete darkness. He took hold of her right hand and guided her forefinger to a small, sliding switch on the goggles' eyepiece and slid the switch up a notch.

She could see again, as if she wore a pair of glasses with transparent lenses. The view of the city expanse and the streets below appeared as if she wore no goggles at all.

"That's one setting," he said. His voice was close to her ear. "Here's night vision."

He guided her finger again and slid the switch up to the next notch.

What she had seen before as shadows, she could now see in detail.

"This is infrared." He guided her finger again to what seemed to be the final notch.

Cars, trucks, people. She saw their heat signatures glowing red, parked cars glowing a variety of colors ranging from red and white to blue and purple depending on how much time their engines had been cooling.

He used her finger to slide the switch back to normal view.

"Now look up."

She lifted her head. She saw the night sky, the stars.

He moved the switch back to infrared, and the sky exploded with red dots. She gasped.

Savannah couldn't count them. There were too many. Some appeared higher in the sky than others judging by the size of the dots. She closed her mouth for she realized it had dropped open.

"Hovers," he said. "They're flying in stealth mode. Too high for us to hear them without special equipment. They're flying using night vision and infrared, so they don't need lights. I assume there are some watching the weather and traffic. Some are doing surveillance. More are searching for people who have been flagged, and they're searching day and night. And I have no proof, but I have a strong suspicion I'm one of those people."

She ran her tongue over her dry lips. "Because of your brother and the AFA?"

She whispered the question. When he took so long to answer, she wondered if she should have asked at all.

"That's part of it. And I should warn you. The AFA and similar groups are gearing up to fight back if Security goes after them. I can't blame them, but I fear things will escalate if they take down a hover. Disabling one quietly is one thing. Shooting one down is another. But I didn't come here to talk about any of this." He switched the goggles back to normal and the red dots disappeared. "I came to look at the stars with you."

If she looked now with the goggles in normal mode, would she be able to make out his features in the dark under the shadow of his hood?

Savannah spun around to face him.

He gripped her hand, and for an instant she saw the outline of his eyes above the mask before he switched the goggles to the position where she couldn't see at all.

He moved her hand away.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I couldn't help myself. Can we . . . go inside, away from the hovers? I can see your face then, can't I?"

Again, she had to wait for him to respond, as if the question was too hard to answer.

"You could, yes." She felt his warm hand alight on her cold cheek. "Seven. I know I'm torturing you. Who knows what you must be thinking. But to answer your question, yes, we could go inside now, and I could take this mask off, but then . . . well, then, I would have to face you."

He lifted her hand to his mask and placed her fingers on its folds.

"It's only because I hide my face that I can talk to you like this, like some anonymous fan in some online chat room."

Even muffled as it was, she could tell his tone of voice had changed.

"Because I'm behind this mask, I can tell you that I like you, that I like talking to you, being around you, seeing your smile. I can make these confessions straight out instead of using any kind of vague terms." He moved her hand back to her side and released it. "But now that I've said it, the next time we meet, I won't hide my face from you. I promise. You can look upon my face as long as you like . . . before you slap it."

She swallowed, her mind racing to catch up. He liked her? He promised he would reveal his face the next time they met? And . . .

"Why would I slap you?"

"I'm going to remove the goggles now. Promise me you'll keep your eyes closed?"

She gave him the slightest nod of her head. She didn't want to keep her eyes closed. She wanted to see his face. But he trusted her. She closed her eyes.

He removed the goggles.

"Anonymity can make one brazen. I'm going to allow myself one final, brazen act, and hope once you slap me, you'll forgive me."

She didn't hear him remove his mask, but he must have, for she felt his breath on her cheek before his lips touched hers. Warm, soft, sweet. Gone.

Savannah's eyes flew open, but not soon enough, for Wild was no longer standing in front of her. He was opening the rooftop door, his back to her, about to disappear.

"That was you, right?" She choked the words out, her nervous joke sounding unrecognizable to her own ears.

He paused, his hand on the door handle, and Savannah heard a faint chuckle.

"Yes, that was me," he said.

Then he went through the door, once again leaving her on a rooftop watching him go.



The face of Savannah's last resort looked back at her from her handheld, and it was covered with face cream.

"Savannah?"

Savannah didn't really think of Elise as a last resort, but she had tried her usual distraction methods to no avail. She had tried working, but once she had started reviewing DreamSight documentation, she couldn't help but think of the real Palas and the decision plaguing her. She had logged in to *Swords of Light* but had fallen victim to a shadow beast when her mind wandered. She considered watching a movie but ended up scrolling through the options without selecting one. And she couldn't bring herself to check magnolia18. She feared no message would await her. She also feared one *would* be waiting, for she didn't know how to respond.

"Hi, Elise. What's that on your face?"

Elise leaned closer to her handheld's camera. "What's on *your* face?"

"What?"

"Just kidding." Elise backed her face away. "Grant is away on a business trip, so I'm treating myself to a spa day at home. I should be working on my contribution to the department's joint paper, but I'm not in the mood."

Savannah smiled. "It's nice to hear that you aren't driven *all* the time." She sighed. "In fact, I think you look prettier when you're relaxed."

Elise leaned closer again. "Savannah, are you alright?" Her eyes darted from left to right as if she were trying to see through the connection and beyond Savannah's camera. "You never call me."

"That's not . . . well, I don't really call anybody, I guess."

"Something's up. Something's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong."

Elise wiped the cream from her face with a towel.

"I'm coming over. I'm spending the night and taking tomorrow off. You take the day too." She wagged her forefinger. "Don't argue."

Elise closed the connection.

Savannah watched the handheld's animation as it returned to the main screen, then placed it on her nightstand face down. Elise was coming. When she arrived, they could order food, and drinks, maybe something that would slow her thoughts for a while.

Elise was coming. For once, Savannah hadn't wanted to argue.

Elise arrived wearing a long, cream-colored coat, and at first glance appeared to have dressed for her visit, but she wore no makeup, her hair looked freshly washed but in disarray, and under her coat she wore baggy leggings and one of Grant's shirts.

Elise dropped her overnight bag on the floor and pulled Savannah toward her to hug her.

They sat on the floor facing one another, reminiscent of the days they had spent sharing a room at Chance House and with Richard and Claire. Except, unlike those years, today they sat with food they had ordered on their own along with a 12-pack of sparkling wine.

Savannah knew the questions were coming and met Elise's direct gaze.

"You look good, anyway," Elise said. "Physically you look fine, so that's a relief. So, what is it? I guess it could only be one of two things, work, or a man, and you don't care that much about work, so it must be about a man."

Elise lifted her eyebrows and waited for Savannah's confirmation.

Savannah sighed.

A man? She couldn't deny that many of her troubling thoughts centered around Wild, the mysterious masked man who confessed feelings for her, kissed her, and left her wanting more. But he wasn't the only man in her thoughts. Not only had Trey offered her a temporary marriage contract, but he had also offered her an opportunity to change her life, a chance for adventure, a chance to experience the real Palas. And then, most surprising, her thoughts often returned to Jack and his confusing statements about Trey and her marriage contract options. And when she thought of him, she realized why she always noticed his eyes. Those amber eyes focused on her like no others.

"You don't need to tell me," Elise said. "I can see it on your face. You have man troubles."

Savannah tilted her head before giving her a small nod. She wanted to confide in Elise. The trick would be to elicit her advice without telling her any details.

"Yes, but there's more." She drank several more sips of wine, finishing the can. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve, regretted it, for now she would need to wash a pink stain out of her sweatshirt. "Elise, I have a chance to . . . change my life . . . to break out of my cocoon and . . . move away from . . . 502 and the Fifth District and . . . move far away."

Elise's eyes widened.

"Deciding to do that would mean leaving you and Mom-Éclair and Rich Daddy behind." Savannah didn't add the word "forever." Adding that word would skew Elise's reaction in only one direction. Savannah chuckled. "And it would also mean leaving some of those 'man troubles' behind, so I don't even know why I'm worrying about it."

Elise opened her mouth, closed it, then finished her can of wine before speaking.

"I don't know what to react to first. Let's start with 'some' of your man troubles. There's more than one man?"

Savannah shook her head. "Not . . . exactly."

Elise waved her hand. "Alright, fine, we'll say that's complicated. Now, you're trying to decide to change jobs and move? And far away? And you're having trouble deciding?" She leaned forward. "Is it about status, because any day now Grant is going to get that Tier 2 Extended depending on how successful he is during this business trip. So, if you're considering moving because of access status –"

"No. It's not about status."

No. That wasn't right. It had everything to do with access status. Access for all, ban access registration, grant unlimited now.

"Then what is it about?"

"I just feel compelled to consider it. And I need to decide soon."

Elise popped open a second can.

"Well, setting aside my personal feelings about you moving away, I can tell you how I feel about decisions. Basically, I try not to make any." She smiled. "That's an oversimplification, but I've found when I've racked my brain weighing pros and cons and imagining consequences, it turns out to be a waste of energy in the end. I realized if I just take the actions I'm compelled to take, I'll end up making a choice. At one point, I couldn't decide which specialization to choose – behavioral psychology or social psychology. I was interested in both but I needed to focus on one or the other. Rather than deciding between the two, I just let my actions guide me. I found myself spending most of my time reading about non-verbal communication and body language. When it came time to write my thesis, I realized all my research led me to social psychology. Not quite analogous, I guess."

Elise laughed.

"So, my advice is 'to procrastinate as long as you can,' my point being that I think your actions will lead you to a clear choice." She crawled on her hands and knees to sit beside Savannah, wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Now, about this man. Is he handsome?"

Savannah had taken a sip of wine, managed to swallow it before she choked. She couldn't tell Elise that she had never seen his face.

"Or I should ask are *they* handsome since it sounds like there might be more than one?"

Savannah could only answer the question about two of the three men occupying her thoughts. She pictured Trey's grin, Jack's intense, soulful, beautiful eyes.

"Yes," she said.

Elise smiled. "Not that it matters, but it's fun to ask." Elise pulled Savannah closer. "Feel free to ignore anything I've said, Savannah, but I know decisions are hard, and I don't want to be the one begging you to *not* move away when it could be where your heart takes you. Whatever you do, remember your big sister, though, okay?"

"Okay."

Savannah's eyes stung. She was going to miss Elise.

And the decision that thought implied formed a knot deep in her gut.

Part II

"You must select a world to continue. Do you need more time?"

The Guide

8 – Yuta Tensai

Tutorials.

Of all the swirling thoughts to have surfaced in her mind pushing all others aside, this one seemed the most surprising. Instead of Wild's kiss, or Trey's proposal, or Jack's *un-proposal*, or her newfound discovery that Palas was real, or the idea of uprooting her life when so many questions were still unanswered, her first thought upon awakening the morning after Elise went home was about the survival tutorials in DreamSight's *Palas*. When Trey had first told her about the book readers and their purpose, she had been reminded of those in-game tutorials, but she hadn't thought of them since.

But thinking back now to Hadley's comments about how the accelerated timeline would affect the survival information intended for the book readers, and how he was concerned that the group wouldn't have time to translate lengthy, factual descriptions into digestible, how-to instructions, she realized that if Hadley was looking for step-by-step instructions, they already existed in the virtual world of *Palas*.

Make a fire. Build a shelter. Craft clothing. Make a weapon. Mine for valuable minerals.

Every task required to survive and thrive in DreamSight's *Palas* game had a corresponding tutorial. Savannah should know. She had voiced them all. She hadn't memorized them, though, and she no longer had access to the scripts. Once the recordings had been released in the game, all project files were locked away, even from the project team.

Except *someone* had to have access.

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, Savannah slipped into her work pod, selected her one and only avatar, and sent a message.

Immediate meeting request to 4J's from Savannah

She waited, drumming her fingers on the earpiece of her headgear. What day was this? Was it only Tuesday? Splitting her time between home and Warehouse 11 disrupted her internal calendar.

"Invitees have connected."

The avatars of the four J's took time to materialize. It might have been Savannah's imagination, but the expressions on the avatar's faces appeared annoyed. And sleepy. Savannah had to admit it was early for their group.

"We have answered your summons, Great Guide," Jimi said. His avatar closed its eyes and bowed its head.

Jeri huffed. "Great Guide, right. Anyway, what's up, Savannah?"

"I need to reference the Palas tutorial files," Savannah said.

"They're locked," Jeri said.

Jeri's avatar looked to have been chosen at random from a selection of defaults. A cartoonish sketch. For the first time, Savannah thought her avatar might have the most intentional-looking representation.

"I know." Savannah shrugged her avatar's shoulders. "But someone must be able to get at them. I need them."

Jeremy yawned. "Sorry I was late. A little early for me to be talking to people. But yeah, from what I hear, only the creator has access once they're locked."

"Just the creator? Not even project managers?"

"Project managers get authorization from the creator."

"Seems a little like a god complex," Jimi said.

"Well, that's what I heard. By the time we're assigned to something, the authorizations are in place. But you know more about locked files, though, right, Janine?"

Janine's avatar nodded, its long ponytail flipping from one side to the other. "Yes. The creator maintains tight control over finished game files, but anyone can request access to them. They just need to ask the creator 'in game' – an eccentric quirk, I guess. Of course, that requirement eliminates most people. I don't know anyone other than Martina who's done it, but then she's our project manager."

Savannah knew from some of the conversations she'd had with their department members that most shied away from the open-world nature of *Palas*, preferring the focused-area settings of the other worlds instead. Savannah had always been the odd one, preferring *Palas*. So, even if they wanted to request something from the creator, the others would have been reluctant to enter the game to do so.

"Where in game?" Savannah leaned forward, as if the action would enable her to hear better. "And how would the creator know to meet me?"

Janine sounded as if she were chewing on something. She swallowed. "Checking. Hold on."

"Do any of you know anything about the creator? Is there a name in the credits?" Jimi shared the closing credits of the game to the meeting's display. Savannah felt confident no player had ever seen these credits scroll by, let alone taken the time to read them. Jimi paused the scroll. "Here it is. Same name credited for original concept, game design, background images, text, and music. Other people were involved with non-player character designs, voice acting – that sort of thing. Here you are Savannah as 'the Guide.' Scrolling back up. The creator's name is Yuta Tensai."

"That makes sense, then." Janine's avatar nodded. "I found this. 'Requests requiring creator approval must be submitted in-game from Yuta Island.' Does that location sound familiar?"

Savannah nodded, her avatar mimicking the action. "Yes. I haven't had any reason to explore it, but it's on the map."

"It doesn't mention details about making the request, but you could ask Martina."

Savannah nodded her avatar's head but didn't speak in response. Involving Martina meant providing a detailed justification for needing the files, and if she were to be turned down, any attempts she made to submit the request on her own would be flagged, to use Wild's term. She would involve Martina only as a last resort.

"This creator person sounds crazy," Jeri said. "Good luck, Savannah. I'm disconnecting."

"Later." Janine's avatar waved goodbye.

Jeremy chuckled. "This was worth connecting for. Savannah, let us know what happens."

Jimi's avatar bowed again. "Great Guide, until you summon us again. Or until Thursday."

Savannah didn't wait for the meeting to announce its conclusion. With several quick selections in succession, she disconnected from the meeting and switched to game mode.

The welcome screen and its world options enveloped her senses.

"Choose your world," the Guide said.

She had never felt so thrilled to hear her own voice in her ear.

She was going to meet Yuta Tensai, not only the creator of *Palas*, her favorite DreamSight virtual world, but also, most assuredly, the one who had named its real-world inspiration.



No player had any reason to travel to Yuta Island. It contained no treasure. It was so small that its map representation as a small dot exaggerated its size. Savannah hadn't recorded any instructional or location detail content concerning it. It was an island in every definition of the word. Isolated and detached from

regular game play, it existed for the sole purpose of contacting the game's creator. Savannah assumed a similar location existed in each of the other worlds as well, for Yuta Tensai had created them all.

Materializing on the arrival stretch of road, Savannah viewed her surroundings with new eyes. Somewhere on the real planet of Palas, this very stretch of road existed, traversed by its inhabitants pursuing real-life tasks instead of game quests. Members of the OWMC and the OWSF had seen it and documented it and Yuta Tensai had recreated it.

Teleportation wasn't a mechanism in *Palas*. Nothing magical or technologically advanced beyond the rules of its world could exist. Yet, exceptions were allowed for time-saving purposes. No player wanted to walk for simulated hours down the same road each session to return to a location in the game they had reached in a previous session. A fast-forward mechanism, earned as an early in-game reward, gave players the ability to move from one previously explored location to another in a quick montage of travel scenes. And those with special privileges, like Savannah, could fast-forward to any location on the map without previous exploration conditions. Even Yuta Island.

By horse-drawn coach, by train, by wagon, Savannah traveled through the virtual landscapes as they receded behind her in a blur, at last deposited on a strip of beach with a narrow, dilapidated, wooden dock with several dinghies stacked at one end. Savannah selected one to take her on the final leg of her journey from the mainland to the island. With every stroke of her oars, she imagined their group's project manager, Martina, mumbling unflattering epithets about the creator under her breath.

A white beach. Clear cyan and turquoise waters lapping up on the island's shores with an edge of white sea foam. Tall, swaying palms. A plume of white smoke drifting skyward from the center of the island indicating that someone tended a fire in a clearing among the trees.

Savannah rowed her dinghy up onto the beach and stepped out onto the sand. Would she find it thrilling to have an experience like this in real life, or would she find the sun too harsh, the sand too hot, the water too cold. Perhaps. But she couldn't deny her longing to find out.

A small path wound its way through the trees to a center clearing where a fire burned in a stone pit. A canvas hammock hung suspended between two palms. Three flat rocks for seating circled the fire pit. An array of handheld instruments sat on a table next to a large bronze gong in a stand, its mallet hanging from a hook on one side.

Insanity, some might have said. Savannah couldn't help but smile.

For a time, she took a seat on one of the flat rocks and watched the fire, considering how her request was to be submitted. Did she say it aloud to be recorded and forwarded? Did she need to choose an instrument and select to play it to trigger the next step? Since instruments had been provided, it seemed a logical assumption. Did she have to choose the right one? She smiled again. Martina must have hated this.

She considered the recorder, the ocarina, the guitar, and the tambourine. By the time she had reached the end of the table, she had made no decision, so picked up the mallet and chose to strike the gong.

The bronze shimmered, its tones reverberating throughout the clearing.

Savannah retook her seat on the flat rock, uncertain what she awaited. And then she saw the dragon.

Savannah stood.

It appeared overhead, circling over the clearing once before landing in front of her, flapping its majestic wings.

"Who summons me?" The voice boomed as loud as the gong.

So, insanity was the right word after all.

"A dragon? There can't be a dragon in *Palas*."

The dragon's large, incandescent eyes blinked. "How right you are. Wrong game." The dragon dematerialized. For an instant, a winged horse took its place before transitioning to a black stallion with a rider in a long coat and wide-brimmed hat riding on its back. "Better?"

Savannah stared. If she had stood before this horse and rider in real life, she would have taken a step back. Instead, she took a virtual step forward.

"Yes. Are you the creator? Are you Yuta Tensai?"

"I am. And you, if I'm not mistaken, and I am rarely – well, only occasionally – mistaken, sound like my Guide."

"Yes." She nodded.

The rider tipped his hat in greeting. "I am beyond excited to make your acquaintance. I have been listening to your voice during final approval reviews for years. You have a request?"

"Yes. I'd like access to the locked tutorial files."

He made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "Granted. And done. Anything else?"

Savannah blinked. That was it? "You don't want to know why?"

He laughed. "You are the Guide. You should always have access to all tutorial files." He snapped his fingers. "Again, done."

"Well, thank you, then."

"My pleasure." He tipped his hat again and the horse and rider began to flicker. "No one ever believes me, but there's a real *Palas*, you know."

"I know," Savannah said.

The horse and rider disappeared.

Savannah meant to turn away, but a new image resolved into view.

It was a man. A . . . normal man, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with a DreamSight logo across its front. He had black hair that framed his face in a feathered hairstyle. She couldn't judge his age, but she would have guessed he was in his mid-forties.

"You know?" His voice had changed. No longer the booming voice of a dragon, nor the deliberate enunciation of the rider's words. He sounded closer to a real person, one from her own time and place. "*How* do you know?"

Savannah bit her lip. What could she tell him without revealing too much?

"I've . . . been to Quinn's Theater."

"Zachary Quinn?"

"Yes."

He smiled. "Haven't heard his name in . . . well, I guess it's been ten years. I wonder what my old buddy Zachary is up to." He rested his chin on his fist, his eyes fixed on some distant point only he could see, then turned his attention back to her with a sudden turn of his head. "Can you wait right there a minute? I'll be right back."

His image winked out.

Savannah waited, watched the clouds drift overhead, wondering if their shapes and sizes were randomized by some internal algorithm, then turned her attention back to the instruments on the table. She picked up the guitar and strummed an open chord, played random notes on the ocarina, triggered an octave run on the flute. Then she sat back down on the rock and contemplated how long she would give the Creator before she gave up her vigil.

Yuta Tensai returned as himself again, only now she saw that he was seated at a desk surrounded by monitors.

"Oh." He pointed to the virtual musical instruments. "It doesn't matter which one you choose. Each of them sends me an alert. I just give options to make everyone think it's a puzzle to solve. Don't tell anyone. Speaking of secrets, I just talked to Zachary."

She lifted her eyebrows.

"So, he's arranging an exodus to the real Palas. I scolded him for not letting me know. I could have been helping with these tutorials all this time. I'm assuming that's why you want access to them, to prepare for the real Palas?" He waited for her nod. "But, why the text files? Why not just have everyone learn using the tutorials in-game? That would be much faster, wouldn't it?"

She stared back at him. He spoke even faster than Trey.

"There won't be power for headgear," she said.

"Not when you get there, no, but it takes a long time to get there."

"But we won't have access to the network."

"No, but you wouldn't need it. Just download the game into the headgear."

"You can do that?"

"Of course. You just need to unlock the built-in memory storage. Oh . . ." He leaned back and stroked his close-cropped beard. "That will work with the current headgear, but not the new models. The new, *improved* models only work with network access. Can't have anyone cheating, now can we, GenTech overlords? If you can get access to enough current inventory, your fellow travelers can run through those tutorials all the way to the real Palas."

She shook her head. "But the current inventory is scheduled to be recycled."

He frowned, nodded, shrugged. "Well, let Yuta Tensai take care of that." He smiled. He had a wide, almost devilish smile. "What good is a Creator if he can't help his Guide?"



Yuta – for the Creator had insisted that he and his Guide continue on a first name basis – wasted no time exercising his influence on Savannah's behalf. Savannah couldn't imagine the amount of clout his position afforded him within GenTech as a whole, but she knew the Creator maintained complete creative control over the DreamSight project. Marketing and deadlines were beyond his scope, but if the Creator said he needed headgear units, old or new, for playtesting, no one questioned him.

When Savannah left Yuta Island and exited the virtual world of *Palas*, she received a notification alert sent to all DreamSight employees. The Guide, it said, had been granted access to all current and future tutorial files. When she connected Wednesday morning, the day after she had ventured in-game to Yuta Island, she received another notification alert, this time sent to Martina and all members of Savannah's department, including the four J's. Until further notice, it said, Savannah Jones would be on special assignment and would be taking instructions directly from the Creator. The message that followed, addressed solely to Savannah, contained her first task. She was to take receipt of 500 DreamSight virtual headgear units, model 7A, scheduled for immediate delivery to Thompson Storage and Transportation, Warehouse 11, Chester Street, Zone 504, 5th District. An access code to hire a cross-zone car to take her to that location was attached.

Savannah read each notification twice, holding her hand to her mouth, stifling her instinct to exclaim aloud, even though no one would have heard her. She wasn't connected to any virtual meeting or chat rooms, and her work pod was soundproof.

When she had accessed the database files for Trey, the task had been so easy that she felt she had been given a task just to make her feel needed rather than one only she could do. But gaining access to the tutorial text files to load onto the readers, and providing 500 headgear units for virtual training, was different. Whether she joined the exodus to Palas or not, this would be her unique contribution. She would be helping those who couldn't access DreamSight worlds on their own, let alone the required

headgear, and they would have access to step-by-step instructions instead of needing to wade through history texts.

Her caution-conscious inner voice reminded her that this special assignment would deepen her involvement, that it could result in unwanted consequences if she stayed behind, but her optimistic voice countered that she needn't worry. She had the backing and protection of Yuta Tensai.

When she had thanked him for his help, just before his image disappeared into the tropical island background, Yuta had smiled at her.

"I'm happy to help my Guide see the real Palas."

Savannah disconnected, showered, dressed, and called for a car, delighted that for the first time she could add the phrase "I have an access code."

The ride to 504 felt slower than taking the bus, but she knew her instincts were off. She drummed her fingers on the arm rest. If the delivery arrived before she did and no one from GenTech was at the warehouse to receive it, the drivers might return the shipment. Unless Yuta had foreseen such a possibility. If he had, he would have added a stipulation that the drivers should wait for her. She drew in a breath and leaned back against the car's luxurious upholstery. Yes, Yuta would have seen to everything, she was sure. Either way, she could only get there so fast, even in a hired car with access code amenities.

At last, the familiar Magnolia Street came into view and the driver followed it to Chester Street and pulled up in front of Warehouse 11.

"Thompson Storage," the driver said.

"Thank you."

Ace was the first one to lift his head as she entered through the large warehouse door.

"Seven." He dodged two pallets and one loader making a path toward her, pulling a bandana from his pocket to wipe his face and hands before he reached her. His hair, wet with sweat, appeared light brown instead of blonde, and had spiked upward from his forehead. He reached out and held his hand over her head, as if threatening to pat it, then let his hand drop. "Hello, Little Seven."

She tugged on his shirt sleeve. "Ace. They let you out of the vault?"

He grinned. "Every once in a while, they let me out to fix a loader. Diamond does his best, but sometimes they just need my expertise." He wiped his hands a second time and shoved the bandana into one of his back pockets. "What brings you here? Should I tell Jack to go get some lunch?"

Savannah laughed. "Oh, well, I wouldn't mind that at all to be truthful, but I'm here to sign for a delivery from GenTech. I think I have good news for Jack and Trey and the rest of you."

"In that case, I'll escort you to the lounge."

"I think this is a vault-type discussion."

He lifted his head and nodded, grinned. "Understood. You just want to send me back to the vault, don't you? Let me call everyone." He crossed to a wall-mounted intercom and pushed its talk button. "Vault meeting in five to meet Seven. Vault meeting in five to meet Seven."

Savannah saw Dana and several other workers lean their heads around stacks of crates to listen, then retreat when Ace's announcement had ended, looking satisfied that the call to meet was only for those who had vault access.

"Oh." Ace had released the button, but now he pushed it again. "Also, please buzz us if a delivery for GenTech arrives."

Dana stepped out in full view. "*For* GenTech, not *from* GenTech?"

"Both, I think," Ace said.

Dana shrugged. "Okay. Will do."

She disappeared behind the crates again.

"To the vault," Ace said.

Much like her first visit, her Chance House siblings hurried to greet her, and again Jack arrived last, assuring that the vault door had closed securely behind them before joining the semi-circle around her, Love pushing her way past the others so she could be the closest to Savannah.

"What's happening, Seven?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"She's smiling. It must be good."

She leaned against the desk, still occupied by Auntie Bess's computer, and drew in a deep breath, wondering once she started speaking if her words were tumbling over one another too fast to follow, but Ace and Diamond and Love and Jack had experience following Trey's excited, streaming speeches, so she continued unabated. By the time she finished explaining who Yuta Tensai was and about the headgear and the tutorials and how they could be used for training while enroute to Palas and how the text files could be loaded onto the readers without modification for easy consumption, and how she was on special assignment to receive the headgear, she felt she needed another, deeper breath.

"And, oh yes, GenTech will be paying the warehouse a rental fee."

Trey and Jack exchanged wide grins, a common sight from Trey, an unexpected one from Jack.

Jack rubbed his hands together. "All right. Let's make room in here for that headgear. I'll contact Hadley and tell him the good news. He can tell Quinn."

"Quinn probably already knows," Savannah said. When Jack looked back toward her, she shrugged. "I'm guessing he's the one who told Yuta where to send the headgear, because I didn't. I should have made that clear from the beginning. I didn't tell Yuta anything."

Jack smiled at her and nodded.

The intercom by the vault door buzzed.

"Ace? Boss?" Dana's voice. "Your GenTech shipment is here. Lots of crates and one huge container with something heavy."

Jack ascended the ramp and pushed to talk. "On our way," he said.

"What's in the container, Little Seven?" Ace headed up the ramp to follow Jack, turning back to look at Savannah.

A big, heavy container? She shook her head. "I have no idea."

As a group they left the vault, letting Savannah lead the way toward the warehouse's large open doors and the large truck that had backed up to the receiving dock. A young woman with a short bob haircut stepped from the back of the truck to the dock to greet them.

"Hello. My invoice says to turn this shipment over to a GenTech employee?"

Savannah pulled her handheld from her bag, selected to display her credentials, and stepped forward. The young woman scanned Savannah's display with her own handheld and smiled.

"Great. We'll unload."

"Is that big container included?" Savannah pointed. The container sat at the very rear of the truck. The crates had been stacked behind it.

"Oh, yes. Almost forgot." The woman reached into a pouch strapped around her waist and removed an envelope that she handed to Savannah. "For you. We'll get started."

Savannah opened the envelope. It felt contradictory to receive a message on paper from someone who spent so much of their time in a digital world, for she could see that the message was from Yuta as soon as she removed the letter from the envelope and unfolded it.

Savannah. It occurred to me that you probably don't want to have to cart all of this hardware to your place, so I've sent along a work pod. It's been configured for narrow-channel access to GenTech from any location, so no need to worry about status. Too bad I didn't think of it until after you had already disconnected this morning and had

called for the car. Another note - the headgear lock I talked about is some kind of physical switch inside, so someone will need to figure that out. Can't help you there. Good luck. Yuta

Savannah smiled.

She looked up to see Jack's raised eyebrows and pained expression as he pointed toward the container. She spoke before he could ask.

"It's a work pod," she said. "If you don't mind me working here, I can do everything I need to do here in the warehouse from the pod."

Jack nodded, turned to survey the dimensions of the container.

"That's great. But where do we put it?"

After much discussion and occasional debate, the New Chance House siblings decided that the only viable location for the large work pod to sit and connect to power was the southwest corner of the lounge. Once extracted from its container, Ace and the others milled around it, taking turns seating themselves inside its cocoon-like interior, adjusting its high-backed, swaddling, cushioned seat to fit their bodies, and closing the door until the next one of the group pulled the door open and shooed them away.

Savannah's work pod at home was serviceable enough. She could work in it for long hours without too much fatigue, but it couldn't compare to this model's comfortable features. The seat was soft yet supportive. The footrest could be angled, raised, and lowered. Large displays could be set at any height and any distance and any angle. A microphone could be lowered into position or raised out of the way. All adjustments could be made from a control panel situated in both arm rests. The door could be locked and set to either opaque or transparent mode.

The availability of a work pod of this caliber had to be restricted to the highest Extended Tier, or perhaps Unlimited. Savannah assumed the latter since it had been requested by Yuta Tensai.

Ace hadn't stopped grinning since he laid eyes on it. "This is phenomenal."

Savannah laughed. "Yes, all it needs is a computer." Her first thought was that Yuta had forgotten something, but each GenTech computer was configured for a single employee, unlocked by a combination of a finger scan and private passkeys. Yuta would have known that sending her a different computer, even if it had been a more powerful one, would have been a waste of time. "I'll need to go home to get my computer. But while I'm doing that, Ace will have time to unlock the internal storage in the headgear units."

Ace came around from behind the pod to face her. "I can do what?"

Savannah dropped her voice. They weren't in the vault. They were just in the lounge. Any one of the warehouse workers, curious about the work pod, could join them at any moment.

"I'm assuming that's something you can do." She stepped closer to him. "It's some kind of hardware switch inside those headgear units that needs to be switched."

Diamond leaned his head out from inside the work pod. "How many units are there?"

"500."

Diamond exchanged a look with Ace, then turned back to Savannah. "You know we're building other things, right?"

Savannah nodded, picturing the boxes laid out in an assembly line on the long table in the vault. "I know, but I won't need all of the units at once, and I can make the adjustment myself once you figure it out and teach me how."

"And Diamond and I can help you with the boxes, Ace," Love said.

Ace twisted his mouth to one side, then nodded. "Fine. I'll figure it out."

Savannah gripped his arm with her left hand and reached up with her right to pat the top of his head, although, he was too tall for her to do a thorough job of it.

"Seven."

She dropped Ace's arm and spun around.

"Yes?" She wasn't sure why Jack had startled her. She had known he stood among them.

"Before you leave, can you go with me to the courtyard with the fountain down the street? Tom is dropping Gwenny off again, and Gwenny wanted to show her Daddy the courtyard you took her to. So, I thought I would just meet them there." He tilted his head and smiled. "If she finds out you were here and she didn't get to see you, I'll be hearing about it. No one here likes a grumpy Gwenny."

"I'd love to." She shooed Diamond out of the work pod, then closed and locked its door. She turned back to the group. "I think if anyone asks, we can just say I'm here to work on a GenTech project."

Trey nodded. "I'll let everyone know."

"Great. I'll head home after meeting Gwenny, but I'll be back tomorrow, and I'll probably be here so long after that you'll get tired of me."

Diamond stepped toward her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "If anything, our dear Seven, you will be the one to grow tired of us." He glanced at the work pod. "Of course, all you'll need to do is lock that door. Of course, if you do, we'll be offended."

Savannah chuckled.

"Let's go, if you're ready," Jack said. "Can the rest of you – "

"Clean up and get back to work?" Trey smiled. "Diamond, help me with this container."

Jack turned toward the lounge doors and Savannah fell in step beside him.

When Savannah and Jack stepped outside, Jack pulled a cap and sunglasses from his back pocket and donned them, casting a quick glance up at the sky.

“Sunny, today,” he said.

“Have you been to this courtyard before?”

“Sure. Never thought to take Gwenny there though. That was a good call.”

They reached the corner and turned onto Magnolia Street.

Savannah wondered if there had been magnolia trees here at one time, before industrialization and motor vehicles had encroached upon the area and stripped it of its flora. She remembered seeing a magnolia tree in the courtyard, so maybe her speculation had merit.

Soon they reached the spot where Savannah had first met Wild, when she had stood staring at the scrawled map Trey had given her, no doubt looking lost and confused. She fingered the heart pendant around her neck, drew in a long breath. She still hadn’t checked the magnolia18 account. Would he think she was angry?

“So, it seems like you’ve decided to go,” Jack said.

Savannah had fallen a couple of long strides behind so hurried to catch up.

“What? No. I haven’t decided anything. I just thought of a way I could be helpful.”

He nodded. “Yes, this is very helpful. Hadley will be very happy. Those text tutorials will use up less space than the textbooks he thought he needed to use. That will leave plenty of extra readers for the other information he wants to load.” He glanced down at her and smiled. “But if you’re working from the warehouse, you’ll be exposing yourself to Trey’s enthusiasm on a daily basis. He can be very convincing.”

Her laugh was a smaller one than she had anticipated. Trey was leaving. They were all leaving. She quickened her pace again to catch up with Jack’s long strides.

“Did *you* need convincing?”

Jack glanced down at her again. “Oh, I’m not going. Exception, remember?”

“Oh.”

She studied the sidewalk in front of her, cast quick glances at trucks that rumbled by. So, Jack wasn’t going to Palas. That would explain his comment that he couldn’t be one of her options for a marriage contract.

She looked up, lifted her hand to shade her eyes but couldn’t find the right angle to shade them completely. She needed a cap or sunglasses. She wanted to see Jack’s face, his expression, his eyes. She wanted to know why he wasn’t planning to join Hadley and Trey and the others. She wanted to know if his reasoning would be more convincing than Trey’s. But she let the question die on her lips. If he hadn’t offered the reason, maybe he didn’t want to tell her.

She cleared her throat.

“What other information does Hadley want to add?”

“Warnings, lessons learned, cautionary tales. Palas has primitive technology now, but over time they’ll advance, and Hadley wants to help them avoid the mistakes we’ve made. Everything from poisons and explosive substances we tried to use and learned about the hard way, to how our society ended up trying to control access to technology instead of allowing it to benefit everyone. The warnings won’t mean anything to them now, so Hadley plans to bury those boxes, including the testimonials, in a place where they’re sure to be discovered at some point, but not too soon. Hadley’s already chosen a spot.” They had reached the entrance to the courtyard. Jack stopped and turned toward her. “That’s the real

purpose for the book readers, by the way. Hadley came up with the survival reference idea to sell the idea because Quinn would never agree with a plan to interfere with the locals' advancement. Here. Let's go in. There's some shade."

Jack gestured and they walked together to the fountain and sat next to each other on a bench covered in the west building's shadow.

Savannah studied the fountain, mesmerized by the rise and fall of the water and the resulting swells that radiated from each splash, before her thoughts returned to Hadley.

"Now that the timetable has been pushed up," she said, "Hadley sounded worried he wouldn't be able to get all his additional information ready in time."

Jack shrugged.

"I'm sure Hadley can find some help compiling his warnings. The testimonials might be harder. It's hard to convince people to write statements about why they're choosing to emigrate."

"Do you think some of them might be more willing to record an audio statement? That work pod Yuta sent is perfect for it. I can translate the audio to text."

Jack nodded. "Yeah, I bet Hadley will like that idea. I'll pass it on to him." He smiled. "If you recorded a testimonial, what would you say?"

Savannah lifted her eyebrows. "Me? But I haven't decided about going yet."

"Oh, right." He grinned. "That's what you said."

Savannah pursed her lips. Was he implying he knew more about what she wanted to do than she did?

She shook her head. She had to turn the conversation back to Hadley.

"Do you agree with Hadley or Zachary Quinn, about the warnings, I mean?"

Jack shrugged. "I can see it from both sides. All I know is that I agreed to get those readers ready to accept data, work using solar power, and still work after being buried for a long time. Of course, Ace and the others are doing the work. When the job's done, I'll have to find something else to occupy my time." Jack rose to his feet and gestured toward the courtyard entrance. "In fact, here she comes now."

Savannah turned toward the entrance just as a motorcycle came to a halt along the curb. Two riders wearing helmets sat atop the bike, an adult driver and a child sitting behind them with their arms wrapped around the driver's middle.

Savannah stood and moved next to Jack who had stepped out of the shade into the sun.

The adult rider parked the bike on its kickstand and dismounted, then lifted the child to the ground and removed their helmet, revealing golden locks of fine hair. Gwenny.

"Uncle Jack! Sevenanna!"

Gwenny ran to them, squeezing Savannah around the waist then running to Jack to do the same.

"Hi Gwenny," Savannah said. "You brought your Daddy to see the fountain?"

Gwenny nodded and pointed. "There he is. There's Daddy."

Savannah turned back toward the entrance.

The adult rider, Gwenny's Daddy, pulled his helmet and gloves off and set them on the motorcycle's seat next to Gwenny's helmet, then turned and entered the courtyard, reaching up to remove his goggles and push his balaclava down off of his forehead and the lower half of his face until its folds encircled his neck. He was dressed completely in black – jacket, jeans, balaclava.

When he reached Savannah, he locked his hazel eyes on her before covering them with sunglasses.

"Hello. I'm Tom," he said. He offered his hand. "You must be Sevenanna. I feel like I know you already."

Savannah drew in a quick breath, knew the reaction was purely instinctive. She had seen dozens of figures wearing the same type of garb the night of the protest march in 503, and she knew motorcycle riders often wore the same type of protective clothing. Still, for the briefest flicker of an instant, she

thought Gwenny's Daddy might be Wild, thought she heard something in his voice that sounded familiar. But he couldn't be. He was Tom, the owner's son.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Savannah." She took his hand and smiled. "I feel I know you too. I've seen your likeness in many drawings."

He laughed.

"Daddy, come see the fountain. Uncle Jack made me a paper boat."

"I'm coming."

Tom released Savannah's hand and joined Jack and Gwenny at the fountain where a boat made from folded paper bobbed in the fountain's current.

Savannah watched them. Father, daughter, beloved "uncle," each face alight, Jack's smile as wide and unrestrained as the one she had witnessed on the warehouse rooftop when he had swept Gwenny up into his arms. Tom was smiling, too, but his face held a cast of melancholy. Savannah wondered if he thought of Gwenny's mother at times like these.

"Sevenanna!" Gwenny left her two male admirers to tug on Savannah's sleeve. "I want to draw the fountain when we get back to the warehouse. Will you help me?"

"I can't tonight, Gwenny. I have to go home to get something."

"Home to GenTech City?"

Savannah nodded. "But I'll come help you tomorrow if you're still there."

Gwenny turned to look at Tom. "Will I be, Daddy?"

Tom and Jack followed Gwenny to join Savannah by the bench, Jack retrieving the paper boat before he came.

Tom nodded. "Yes, you'll be spending the night with all your aunts and uncles." He smiled, then turned to Savannah. "I should warn you to get home early and stay inside. I've heard the AFA will be out in force tonight."

"In 502?"

"Yes. GenTech lies at the heart of the AFA's grievances."

"Tom." Jack gestured toward the courtyard entrance.

Standing midway between the street and the courtyard stood Gwendolyn Thompson.

Savannah wondered how the woman could inspire both admiration and trepidation in the same instant, her erect posture, tailored, matching outfit, and perfectly coiffed hair contributing to her striking silhouette. As she stepped into the courtyard's shade, she pulled her oversized sunglasses from her face and let them dangle from one hand. The earring that the ear piece had brushed past jangled as it swayed to and fro.

"Mother." Tom straightened, turned, waited for his mother to enter the courtyard and take a rigid stance between him and Jack. "What are you doing here?"

Gwendolyn gestured over her shoulder to a man wearing dark trousers and matching blazer standing next to Tom's motorcycle.

"We were driving by. Simms recognized that machine." She folded her arms across her chest. "If you never come to see me, I have to resort to hunting you down."

"It's good to see you." Tom spoke the words but didn't accompany them with a smile.

"Unfortunately, I was just leaving. I was dropping Gwenny off with Jack."

"I see. Go then. I've seen you. Even though you dress like a hoodlum, drive that death machine, and burden others with your responsibilities, you look healthy. So go."

Tom gave her a slow, steady smile. He had heard her rhetoric before, it seemed, and he would not be baited.

He ran his hand over Gwenny's head. "Goodbye, Gwenny. Be good. Goodbye Sevenanna." He took a few steps toward the street. "Jack, can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure. Gwenny. Here's your boat. I'll be right back."

Jack handed Gwenny the paper boat and followed Tom toward the street. Gwenny placed the boat back into the water and sat on the fountain's edge to watch it.

Savannah looked up at Gwendolyn, wondering if the woman had noticed her granddaughter's hair, how it shone like gold, or her sweet, innocent expression of pure delight as she watched the boat dance on the water.

But Gwendolyn's attention was focused on the two men headed toward the street instead, watching as Tom readjusted his balaclava and switched his sunglasses for goggles before mounting his motorcycle and turning to continue his conversation with Jack.

A strand of Gwendolyn's hair escaped from its elegant, bejeweled clip, a small breeze teasing with it across her forehead and eyebrows. She lifted her hand and brushed it back, but it resumed its fluttering with the next breeze an instant later.

Gwendolyn sighed.

"Savannah Jones," she said. She turned her head to cast her gaze on Savannah.

Savannah lifted her head to look up at the tall woman, squinted into the sun.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Some advice. I wouldn't set my sights on my son if I were you."

Savannah blinked. "What?"

"I saw the way you looked at him, and I know the look on my son's face when he's considering something stupid."

Savannah stared back at her. The way she looked at him? Her son? Tom? Savannah hadn't looked at him any particular way, had she? Unless her momentary suspicion that he could be Wild had reflected on her face in some way that the woman had misinterpreted.

Savannah shook her head. "No, I didn't . . . we just – "

"Oh, I'm not threatening you, if that's what you're thinking," she said. "I have nothing against you. My words are literal. I am offering advice, woman to woman."

"But – "

"As much as I would like to think otherwise, you see, he is his father's son."

Savannah swallowed her words of denial. Gwendolyn Thompson had no intention of letting her defend herself, at least not until she had finished her warning, although it was becoming apparent that the object of her grievances had ceased to be her son.

"Like his father," Gwendolyn said, "he will always put you second behind his passions, however important or trivial they may be. Whatever flush of new love you're enjoying now, I can guarantee will become a distant memory all too soon."

As Gwendolyn stared toward the street, her gaze unfocused, a smile played at the corner of her mouth, then disappeared. And just as Tom roared away on his bike, she motioned to Simms her driver and headed out of the courtyard, her final words to Savannah almost lost in the noise.

"Take care, Savannah Jones."



Sirens blared from every network-accessing device – Savannah's handheld, the driver's handheld, the car's entertainment system – each series of blasts interspersed with District Security safety announcements. Every building display and banner interrupted its stream of ads to broadcast the announcement's text in large, bold font.

**GenTech residents.
Stay off the streets.
Follow alerts, updates, and instructions.**

"This may take some time." Savannah's driver pulled his cap from his head and threw it down on the seat next to him, as if the concentration level he needed to achieve would be hampered by his headwear. "I know some back roads. We'll get you home."

Savannah gripped the handhold above her head just in time before the driver careened the car through traffic, leaving little margin for error.

She should have left the warehouse earlier. Tom had warned her, and she hadn't intended to underestimate the warning, but she had convinced herself that the protesters would wait for dark to start their march.

A narrow alley intersected Tenth Street and the driver halted, honking a warning, then leaning out his open window to shout at the throng of black-clad figures blocking the way, the sound of the car's horn adding to the chaos of sirens and shouts and chants.

"Fight the oppression!" "Ban registration!" "Access for all!"

Hovers appeared overhead followed by a cloud of what Savannah knew to be wasps.

"Here they come!"

Three figures dropped to their knees, slung their backpacks to the ground and withdrew large weapons, aiming them at the sky using their bent legs as support.

"Out of the way!"

The driver shouted one final time and closed his window, guiding the car behind the kneeling figures while others finally scurried out of the way.

"Never seen the like," the driver said. He had muttered the words under his breath. Now he glanced up at his mirror to look at Savannah. He smiled. "Almost there."

A few parking lots and alleyways later, the driver pulled up to the side entrance to Savannah's building and stopped. He turned and threw one arm across the back of his seat.

He grinned. "Let's see an auto-drive do that! Welcome home, Miss. With that access code you have, you can ask for me by name. Just ask for Chet. Davis if they offer more than one." He replaced his cap to his head. "Go straight on inside and have a good night."

"I will. Thank you."

Savannah opened the door and exited, closing the door just in time before Chet turned the car around to race back the way he had come.

The chaos hadn't quite reached her building, but she could hear it coming. She hurried inside, stepped into the elevator as soon as it arrived, then closed her eyes to block out the sirens and safety announcements assaulting her senses from the ad display.

When she reached her floor, she escaped into the quiet of her apartment. This was one time she was thankful that she didn't have the access status to own a large entertainment system, for it too would have greeted her with warnings, one of the many touted safety features that Savannah could do without.

She set her bag on her kitchen table and collapsed in her recliner.

Home. Safety. Silence. No matter what violence raged outside, she felt safe here. But what of Wild, and his brother, and the others? Wild had said protests would be escalating, that Security would strike back. Was it worth it? Could the AFA and groups like them really hope to change anything? Trey didn't think so. Wild didn't think so: he was only out there with them to protect his brother.

Could a Limited like herself truly understand the protesters' frustrations? Before Trey had contacted her, the only thought she had given the situation was wondering if members of the AFA and groups like them really had it so bad. She had assumed they protested because they couldn't get better

games or fancier toys or expensive luxuries. But she realized now that they didn't want *things*, at least not all of them. Just like Rich Daddy had said. It wasn't about things. It was about the freedom to choose. It was about having equal access to technology that should be serving everyone.

She couldn't blame anyone for being angry, for fighting back, for staying to help those in need. Or for leaving it all behind.

Her door chime sounded.

Savannah jumped. Who would be at her door now? Was Security warning people in person?

She jumped out of her recliner and went to the door, activated its intercom.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"Oh, good, it's you Savannah. It's me, Rose. I was just checking to see who entered your apartment. You left me a note saying you'd be gone for a while, so I didn't expect you."

Savannah opened the door, and the diminutive Rose smiled up at her. She wore no costume or persona today, unless a robe and slippers emulated some character Savannah didn't know about.

Savannah returned the smile, opened the door wider. "Want to come in?"

"Oh." Rose looked a bit startled. Had Savannah never asked her inside before? "Why, yes, thank you."

Rose entered and Savannah gestured for Rose to sit.

"Can I get you . . . well, I don't know that I have anything to offer you."

Rose sat on Savannah's couch, smiled, shook her head. "Don't worry about me. Did you just come home through all of that commotion?" When Savannah nodded, she sighed. "I was watching the reports on my computer. Then it all got too loud so I turned it off. I'm glad to see you're safe. You're really the only one I have to worry about, so I'm glad I can stop worrying now."

Savannah sat on the couch across from her. "No family then?"

Rose shook her head. "Not anymore. The mister and I didn't have any children, and he's been gone a long time." Rose winked. "I have you. And my dramas keep me company. Also, that man who runs that last little newsstand down the street gives me a twinkly eye every morning. That's nice."

"No other friends in the building?"

Rose chuckled. "Do *you* have other friends in the building?"

Savannah smiled, shook her head. "We aren't very social, I guess."

Rose pushed herself up to her feet. "I'll be going. You just came home through that ordeal, so you probably want to settle in." She moved to the door and opened it, turned back to Savannah before she stepped out into the hallway. "You're a sweet girl, Savannah. You know where I am if you need me."

The door closed and locked behind her.

Rose was alone. Savannah had never been alone, not really. She lived by herself, but she had family. Two families, in fact. She had work colleagues. She had Rose. Savannah couldn't imagine being so alone that she relied on infrequent interactions with a neighbor and a newspaper vendor for companionship. And if Savannah left for Palas, Rose would have no one to worry about at all.

The door chime sounded again.

Savannah bounded to her feet and pulled the door open. "Rose, did you forget – "

Her heart stopped. At least, it felt as if a fist had gripped it and threatened to stop it.

A black-clad figure stood in her doorway. Cap, balaclava, goggles, jacket. The figure stood straight and rigid as a statue, his head facing straight ahead as if it were locked in place.

"Seven," the figure said.

Savannah drew in a quick, deep breath. "Wild?"

She thought he would tilt his head to look down at her, but he didn't move. He still faced forward. If he had cast his gaze downward without moving his head, she couldn't tell. As always, his goggles covered his eyes.

"Can I come in?"

She yanked the door open wide, held it open while he stepped past her, then released it.

"Wild. Is something wrong? Something's wrong. Are you injured?"

"I'm going to sit on your couch," he said. He moved one measured step at a time toward her couch, turned when he reached it and lowered himself to a sitting position, all the while keeping his neck stiff on his shoulders. He drew in a careful breath, sighed. "I made it."

His muffled voice sounded different, yet even more familiar than it ever had before.

Savannah knelt down in front of him to be at his eye level.

"What happened? What's happening?" She tried to keep her voice calm.

"I was swarmed," he said. "I managed to bat them away, but one persistent little bug somehow got inside the folds of my mask."

Savannah leaned back to get a better view of the balaclava, felt her stomach turn.

She could see the wasp's squirming, fluttering movement under the cloth. She could hear its buzzing too, each time it squirmed.

She swallowed again. "Oh."

"I was close to your building. I didn't want to collapse out on the street, so I thought if I could make it, it would be better to collapse here instead. I'm lucky you're home." He paused. He had been speaking quietly, keeping his breaths short and shallow. "Maybe you'd do me a favor?"

"Yes. What can I do?"

"I have a counteragent syringe in my right front jacket pocket. If you can find it . . . no, I have extra masks in that one . . . yes, that one, good. Now, just keep it ready. Don't inject me until I'm stung. It's not good if the drug has nothing to counteract. Also, as soon as the wasp flies free, throw a blanket over it or something, then smash it. It will come for you if you don't. Do that first, then give me the counteragent. I won't be able to do either myself."

A blanket. The throw on the back of her recliner would do. She stood, slipped the syringe into her front pants pocket, then grabbed the throw.

"If you're ready, I'll try to release it. Maybe it won't sting me, but it's persistent, so I doubt I'll get *that* lucky. Are you ready?"

Savannah's breaths were coming too fast. Her throat felt dry. She kept feeling the need to swallow.

She nodded, realized he wouldn't be able to see her nod since she had stood up outside of his eye line. "Yes," she said.

He reached up and found the bottom edge of the balaclava with the fingers of both hands, then rolled the cloth upward. The buzzing sound rose in pitch.

"Ah!" Wild gasped. "Yep. Yep. It got me."

The wasp flew free.

Savannah screamed, tossed the throw in the air above the flying robot and both fell to the floor.

The wasp fluttered and writhed under the throw and Savannah raised her foot and slammed it with her boot, heard and felt its plastic parts and electronics crack, stomped it a second and third time.

"That should be enough," Wild said. "My arms are feeling a bit numb."

Savannah pulled the syringe from her pocket. "Where?"

"Neck," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said.

She pushed the button to expose the needle and plunged it into the side of his neck through the folds of the balaclava, continued pushing to dispense the drug.

"Thank . . . you."

Was he losing consciousness?

She unzipped his jacket and pulled his arms free, tossed the jacket to one end of the couch. She needed to free him of all this gear so he could breathe, for she could hear him starting to struggle for breath.

She pulled his cap off, then his goggles, and tossed both to the floor. She reached for the bottom hem of the balaclava.

"Seven."

She paused. She stood above him, her fingers in the cloth ready to pull.

"What? I need to take this off of you."

"I just wanted to ask another favor. Maybe you could wait before you slap me?"

"Be quiet. Save your breath. I'm not going to slap you."

She pulled. The balaclava rolled up over his face and eyes and forehead and finally came off in her hands. She threw it to the floor next to the goggles.

"Lie down. Let's get your jacket under your head. Are you cold? I'll get a blanket."

He grabbed her hand.

"Seven."

She hadn't looked at his face until this moment, but here it was, exposed, at last.

She had no words.

"Seven." A trembling smile twitched onto his pale, handsome face, long, dark eyelashes closing slowly over his beautiful amber eyes. "Forgive me."



The man sleeping on Savannah's couch didn't seem to be in distress. His breathing sounded normal. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. She had wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a cold, wet cloth, pushing his light brown hair out of his eyes while she cooled his face and neck. Since the time she had taken a blanket from her bed and covered him with it, tucking it around his torso and shoulders and pulling it up under his chin, he had stopped shivering. The counteragent must have been doing its job while he slept.

The cloth still in her hands, she sat across from him and stared.

The man sleeping on her couch was Wild. He had to be. He had known the code to enter her building, giving him access to both the roof and her floor. He had mentioned the slap he expected to receive. He had a counteragent syringe in his jacket – the same jacket she had returned to Wild in the 504 courtyard by the fountain.

And yet how could he be?

This man was Jack, number 11 from Chance House, now the boss of Warehouse 11. He was Jack, the man with the amber eyes, the one who was always the exception, Trey's friend, Tom's friend, Gwenny's beloved Uncle Jack. He was the one who had driven her home from the theater and told her he couldn't be one of her options. How could he be the same man who only minutes later told her he liked her and trusted her, then placed his soft, warm lips on hers and kissed her.

Jack had kissed her?

Why hadn't she recognized his voice? Even muffled behind and through his different masks, she should have recognized it. She was the DreamSight Guide, wasn't she? She made her living recording and listening to her own voice and to those of her colleagues. Had she so separated the man who was Wild from the man who was Jack in her mind that her ears hadn't recognized the familiarity?

The man on her couch drew in a sudden, deep breath. Perhaps something had startled him in a dream.

Until he woke, all she could do was stare at him and try to resolve the face in front of her with the amorphous face she had conjured for Wild. It hadn't been a clear picture at all, just a sense really, of clear eyes, a dutiful, strong expression, an honest, heartfelt smile, a description, she realized, that fit Jack. Yet she couldn't meld the two faces, real and conjured, into one.

She forced herself to leave his side. Staring and waiting was a waste of time.

She cleared away the crushed wasp, reacting to its guts as she would if it were organic, shuddering as the bits of plastic and wire and tiny actuators dropped into the trash can. She disconnected her computer from her work pod and packed it with its accessories into a rolling suitcase along with clothes and toiletries in preparation for her return to the warehouse. Then, she ordered chicken.

"Seven."

He was awake.

She returned to the kitchen chair she had been using for her vigil, sat, leaned back a bit to give him air.

He had spoken before opening his eyes. Now they fluttered open, and he allowed them time to focus before he turned to find her.

He gave her a small, tremulous smile. "Seven. Are you alright?"

Jack. This was Jack. His eyes, his smile, his voice.

"Me? I'm fine. I should be asking you that question. Are you thirsty?"

He nodded.

She jumped up, pulled a bottle of water from her refrigerator, and brought it back to him.

"I can't quite lift my head yet though," he said.

"Well, it's here when you're ready. And I have chicken coming if you're hungry."

She sat.

His smile melted away. "I was worried that you might have had another panic attack." When she didn't answer, he continued, as if he needed to clarify. "Like that night when your friend was stung."

He had to be Wild. Only Wild would know how she had reacted to Cynda's gasps for breath, back when she thought the masked man was a total stranger, back when she thought her only tie to him was their meeting on Magnolia Street.

She leaned forward, fixed her gaze on his, focused on the color variations in his amber eyes to keep his identity grounded in her mind. Jack. She was talking to Jack.

"How can you be Wild?"

She had whispered it, even though the question had been poised on her lips since she had first seen his exposed face.

He tried to raise up on one elbow, groaned, laid back down. He sighed a deep sigh.

"I'm sorry. I want to say that I never meant to deceive you, but I've been doing it ever since I first saw you were lost on Magnolia Street. I recognized you. I knew you were headed to the warehouse. At first, I just watched you, but then I decided to help you before you gave up and fired up your handheld."

"Jack could have helped me find the warehouse."

He nodded. "Yes, but there were hovers. I had just come from meeting my brother. I couldn't risk exposing myself if I had been followed. I could have told you who I was, I suppose, but I didn't even think you'd remember me."

She turned the water bottle in her hands, watched drops of condensation slip down its sides.

"Why didn't I recognize your voice? Later, I mean, by the fountain, or on my rooftop?"

"You mean this voice?"

Her head flew up. Wild's voice?

"My brother and I practiced mimicking each other when we were kids to confuse our mother. When she called for one of us, the other would answer. We got so good at it she couldn't tell the difference. When I ran away, my brother would call her and tell her I was with him, 'prove' it by mimicking my voice, so I was gone a long time before she realized I had run away and started looking for me." He pushed himself upright, winced. He ran his fingers through his hair. "So when I wear a mask, I change my voice. It's an instinct I guess, after all those years. All part of disguising my identity, I suppose. I don't even think I'm conscious of it."

The facts forced themselves into alignment.

"You have a brother."

"Yes."

"You like to sit on rooftops and watch the stars."

"Yes."

She pulled the cap off the water bottle and took a long swig, forgetting that she had brought the bottle for him.

She swallowed, ran her tongue over her lips.

"The other night, on the roof, Wild told me he liked me." She looked up to stare into the eyes that she had so wanted to see, never imagining they would be Jack's amber eyes. "*You, Jack, you* said you liked me."

He swallowed "Yes."

"I see," she said. She handed him the water bottle, rose up out of the chair. "Of course, I don't really see – at all. Right now, I'm going to use the restroom. I haven't since I've been home. I need to wash my face, or something. If the chicken comes, tell them to leave it at the door."

"You're angry," he said.

She shook her head, thought a moment, shook it again. "No. Not angry."

She hurried to the restroom and closed the door behind her, turned the water on in the sink, and splashed her face.

What was this feeling if it wasn't anger? Which emotion was clutching at her chest and radiating a dull ache through her torso and shoulders? Which cloying emotion made her eyes sting? She let the water pool in her cupped hands then lowered her closed eyes into them before turning the water off and drying her face with a towel.

Her door chime sounded.

The chicken delivery had arrived.

She listened for Jack to give the delivery person instructions but heard nothing.

"Jack?"

She returned to her living room, her empty living room. Jack was gone, along with his jacket and cap and goggles. His balaclava lay forgotten on the floor under the chair.

He was gone.

Savannah retrieved the bag of chicken from her doorstep and ate alone.

As expected, chicken delivery in 502 could not compare to 504's chicken restaurant, and since she had ordered for two, she had much more food than she could eat. She put the leftovers away, planning to give them to Rose before she left in the morning. For she still planned to go to the warehouse. Headgear units waited for her. If nothing else, if for no other reason, she had been assigned by Yuta Tensei to load the *Palas* game onto 500 headgear units.

Jack would be there, tomorrow, at the warehouse. What she would say to him then, in front of others, she couldn't contemplate. Even harder to contemplate would be what she might say to him if they were alone.

She picked up the balaclava from the floor, smoothed it between her hands, then sat with it in her recliner, holding it in one hand while she sought out the heart pendant with the other.

Wild was gone. There was no Wild. He didn't exist.
She understood now. She was grieving.

10 – Confessions

“And then the drones came.”

Savannah expected the testimonials to include stories about oppression and access restrictions and being hounded by hovers and swarmed by wasps, of exorbitant fines or incarcerations for violating access policies, but she hadn’t expected the recurring accounts of drones.

The idea to record testimonials had spread from Jack to Hadley, and the “leavers,” the name Jack had coined for those planning to leave tech behind, had begun visiting the warehouse individually or in pairs or groups of three every day since Savannah had returned with her laptop, taking a seat one by one in Savannah’s work pod, closing the door, and recording their stories.

It wasn’t until Savannah processed the audio files and validated the resulting text that she became aware of the encounters with drones.

Savannah had always assumed the term drone was just another name for hover, but she soon learned that although they were similar in construction, they were quite different.

Hovers, except for the ones Ace had reconfigured for remote piloting, were automated. They were programmed to scan a particular area for faces matching a “flagged” list, record any suspicious individuals such as out-of-zone access users or protest marchers, and dispatch the wasps it carried when it received a command from District Security. Drones, on the other hand, were twice the size of hovers and were controlled by District Security pilots. They not only carried scanners and cameras and wasps, but they were also outfitted with sirens, speakers, and stun darts. Most terrifying to those in their sights, however, was the fact that once its pilot chose a target, the drone, unlike a hover, couldn’t be distracted from its pursuit.

Savannah felt like an imposter. Until recently, she had avoided hovers, had never seen anyone collapse from the sting of a wasp, had never known anyone like Wild who felt compelled to hide his identity under a hood and behind a mask. Her special DreamSight privileges had afforded her the luxury of escaping into a virtual world. Only now was she learning about the real world around her. Like a dripping faucet or slow-falling raindrops, each revelation added to the last and now a lake of uncertainty was forming.

Perhaps she *couldn’t* live in this world any longer.

Three days had passed since Wild had appeared at her door with a wasp caught in his balaclava, and the days had passed without a message from magnolia18 or a sighting of Jack.

Based on the conversations Savannah overheard from Dana and her crew, and over meals with Trey and the others, Jack had been at the warehouse. She just hadn’t seen him. And as far as she knew, he had made no effort to find her in the lounge or the vault or her work pod.

Even though she had been busy with the testimonials and working her way through the headgear units making the switch adjustments Ace had discovered just inside each headgear unit’s physical access panel, downloading DreamSight onto each one’s on-board memory, then testing that the units would work without a network connection, she jumped each time she heard a voice in case the voice was Jack’s voice or his affected, muffled, Wild voice. For Jack and Wild, as she needed to keep reminding herself, were one in the same.

In school, in math class, she had learned about the transitive axiom. If a thing known as A was equal to a thing known as B which was equal to a thing known as C, then A had to be equal to C. It was the rule that had been the simplest to remember but like other math rules she had never thought it applied to real life. And yet, it applied now.

Wild had saved Cynda Wright and loaned her his jacket, had exchanged messages with Savannah, told her about his brother, met her on the rooftop to look up at the stars where he told her he liked her and kissed her. If Jack was Wild, then by the axiom's rule, *Jack* had said and done those things. Her attraction to Wild applied to Jack. Her attraction to Jack applied to Wild.

She gripped her forehead with both hands, exited her work pod and deposited the latest tested headgear unit into the "finished" crate.

Was Jack avoiding her? Or was that a selfish assumption. After the last AFA protest, he could be preoccupied with its aftermath and any effect it might have had on his brother.

"You have a brother," she had said to Jack.

"Yes," he had said.

Who *was* his brother? He hadn't offered his name or told her *how* involved he was with the AFA, although she sensed that it had to be more than just general membership. When she only knew Jack as Wild, she hadn't questioned his brother's anonymity, but now she wanted to know more about the brother Jack protected in his "Wild" disguise.

Taking a seat on the couch in the lounge, she pulled out her handheld, twisted her heart pendant to activate the PIG, her heart fluttering each time she touched Wild's gift, and began to search for news of AFA activity, waiting until the PIG found an Extended registration to piggyback so she could find articles and reports beyond just eye-catching headlines.

The AFA had been quiet since the march on GenTech HQ, but many sources speculated that plans were being hatched, for Ban All Registration and Grant Unlimited Now had been active in their respective districts, and analysts posited that these were diversionary tactics to take focus away from the AFA. No suspected leaders were named, but the articles highlighted images of masked protesters carrying signs, brooms, and anti-hover firearms. Article authors offered differing opinions about whether or not any of the group's grievances were justified, but each article came to one common conclusion: the landscape was shifting from protest to violent activism.

Savannah turned her handheld off and returned the PIG to its heart shape.

Yes, Jack might very well be distracted by his brother's AFA involvement. Accusing him of ignoring her or deceiving her about his identity was selfish. His reason for hiding behind a mask, she reminded herself, had never been about her.

"Hey, Savannah."

Dana and two of her crew members joined her in the lounge.

"Dana. Frederic. Liz." Savannah returned their nods in greeting.

She had learned all the crew member names during her time in the warehouse. If a crew member hadn't introduced themselves to her, either one of their coworkers had done the honors, or she had noted their names on their uniforms. A few gave her work pod and crates a long, curious stare, but no one asked questions except Frederic, a young man barely out of his teens who had started to form a question, but Dana had shooed him away.

"Attention, everyone."

Jack's voice.

Savannah bolted upright.

"A vault customer will be visiting today. As usual, I'll be treating the crew to a long lunch. If you aren't in the middle of something, you can take off now. Chance House members – join me in the vault."

"Yes!" Dana grinned. "I love it when a vault customer comes to visit."

"Who do you think is coming?" Frederic glanced toward the vault door.

Dana shrugged. "I don't care. I also don't care about whatever they're storing in the vault. It's none of my business." She clapped Frederic on the back. "All I care about is Jack treating us to a long lunch break. How about we try out that new all-you-can-eat place on Rosemont? I hear they accept Registered."

Dana led Frederick and Liz toward the double doors where she looked back over her shoulder at Savannah and winked. "See you later."

Love and Diamond came through the double doors from the main warehouse and Savannah followed them into the second room of the vault where Trey and Ace looked up from the table laden with in-progress readers.

Trey smiled. "Hadley must be coming," he said.

Savannah took a position between Love and Trey at the end of the table and waited until the door opened again and Hadley entered, followed by Jack.

Jack.

She sought his gaze and their eyes locked. She held her breath, wondering if he might look away before she did, giving credence to her speculation that he was avoiding her, or if he would just stare at her as he often did, his expression unreadable.

It was the latter. Unreadable as always, his expression was Jack's expression, the beautiful amber eyes were Jack's eyes, yet the persona that radiated from him and shot across the small space like lightning was every bit Wild's.

"Hello, everyone," Hadley said. "I brought the files for the special boxes. I was able to get help preparing the text and was even able to get translators to help us out, too, in five languages."

Hadley was grinning.

Savannah tore her eyes away from Jack to turn to Hadley.

"But . . . the people of Palas won't know *any* of our languages," Savannah said.

Hadley nodded. "True, but I'm hoping there might be enough similarity that scholars in their world will be able to decipher some of it, and I'm hoping we'll increase the odds by giving them several languages to work with."

Savannah nodded. Different character sets and alphabets, pictographs. Perhaps the evolution of language would be similar enough. Especially, if they provided them with help.

"Are you including some kind of primer?"

Hadley lifted one of his bushy eyebrows. "A primer?"

"Like school children learning to read. We all started with a primer with pictures representing basic words as building blocks."

Hadley nodded, scratching an eyebrow as he continued nodding.

"Yes, I see. Yes, that's a great idea. We can dedicate one of the readers to contain a primer. We can start loading what we have while we ask our translators to prepare primer content." He nodded a final time and slapped his hands together. "Excellent idea. And excellent progress on these readers. I actually think we're going to be ready in time. Now, I'm going to leave all of you to your work, but before I go I want to extend an invitation. The OWSF owns several parcels of land in the mountains as a forest preserve. There are no structures, no paved roads, no encroachment of modern civilization of any kind within its boundaries. Zachary and I have secured special permission to lead small groups into its heart for weekend camping trips."

"Camping?" Love leaned across the table. "You mean, in tents, with campfires?"

Hadley smiled. "Exactly. I'd also characterize it as practice. If we can't go two days without our conveniences, what hope do we have to survive on Palas without them?"

"Oh, campfires?" Savannah pointed to the crate of loaded and tested headgear units that Ace and Diamond had moved into the vault. "*Palas*, the game, has a how-to-make-a-fire tutorial. With the detail level set to maximum, it will include every minute detail."

"Again, excellent," Hadley grinned at her.

"I won't need one," Jack said.

Hadley gripped his shoulder. "Now Jack, before you turn me down, I have one thing to say to you."

Jack looked up at him. "And what's that?"
"Stars, Jack. You'll want to come to see the stars."



Other than the Unregistered homeless who had no choice but to sleep outdoors or in makeshift shelters, camping was an activity reserved for those with upper tier Extended and Unlimited status. Only a small number of undeveloped mountain, beach, and desert areas as well as resort-style campgrounds still existed but these were privately owned, contributing to their high-status-only availability. If Chance House had been better funded or had been sponsored by a private, Unlimited-access organization, then Savannah and her siblings might have had the opportunity to go on camping trips. As it was, they could only pretend to camp by erecting tents from sheets and blankets in the courtyard still under the protection of Auntie Bess and Uncle Gil who fed them sandwiches and provided an electric heater instead of risking a campfire. Even so, once the day grew dark and cold, the kids would abandon their adventure and climb back into their warm beds inside.

Excited as Savannah had been in the days leading up to their trip, she met the early morning wake-up call from Hadley with a momentary reluctance. Leave her warm cot in the warehouse's locker room? No, too sleepy. But when she managed to force her eyes open, she heard Ace and Trey in the kitchen calling to one another as they packed, and she threw the covers aside. Camping under the stars. It would be like a quest in *Palas*, except in real life. And Jack would be there.

They would camp in pairs, each carrying a shelter-half in backpacks Hadley would provide. Each pair would combine their shelter-halves into a single tent, build their own campfire and cook their own meal – albeit a very simple affair of heating soup over the fire – and brew their own coffee or tea. This would all happen, of course, Hadley pointed out with a smile, after a two-hour hike into the forest from the trailhead starting in Zone 500, a three-hour ride from Warehouse 11.

The sun had peeked up over the horizon by the time they climbed into the van, but it had yet to warm the night air. Ace and Trey took their places up front, for Ace would be driving, and the rest of them climbed into the back. Savannah sat against the far side of the van while Jack sat on the other, with Love and Diamond sandwiched in-between. Savannah stole glances at Jack whenever Love or Diamond leaned out of the way, but if Jack had looked her way, she hadn't noticed.

She drew in a long breath and sighed, leaned her head against the side of the van. Despite the awkwardness with Jack, she still felt a sense of contentment being with her siblings, not only at this moment, but also each day since she had been working and living at the warehouse, waking up each morning to the sounds of activity and camaraderie. She had lived alone too long. She hadn't realized how she missed the bond they had shared at Chance House, the bond deepened now by their shared, secret goal as they prepared for a life-altering adventure. If she and Jack were ever to overcome whatever this rift was between them, she felt she could call herself truly happy.

Except the happiness would be short-lived. When the *Raven Wing* left the planet – and that was only five weeks away now – she would either mourn the loss of those who left or those who stayed behind.

Neither she nor Love had a clear view out the front or side windows, so tired of straining to see how the scenery changed as they traveled north, they closed their eyes instead, using each other's heads as pillows, and slept.

"Wakey, wakey."

The van's passenger door slid open, and Ace and Trey smiled up at them.

"I think we're here, everybody."

Jack, Diamond, and Love exited the van and Savannah followed.

"Beautiful," Trey said.

Behind them was the road that led to the endless cityscape of paved thoroughfares and buildings and vehicles and throngs of people. Ahead was the forest preserve, a lush, verdant, pine-covered mountainous patch of unspoiled landscape, the lovely sight interrupted and marred by a fence and gate providing a much higher level of security than the lock on the warehouse's vault.

Savannah let her gaze drift up the mountainside, looking past the fence, and drew in the sweet smell of pine and damp earth.

"Over here."

Savannah turned. Hadley was waving at them from his own van parked nearby, a collection of backpacks near his feet. When they joined him, he pointed to the packs.

"Good morning. You're right on time. Take a backpack. Doesn't matter which one. They all contain the same provisions. Shelter half and stakes, bedroll, a cooking pot and some basic dinnerware, a spade, some drinking water – that's why the packs are so heavy – and some dried soup mix and coffee. The missus and I brought some eggs and bacon for everyone for breakfast. Oh, this is the missus, Bev."

"Hello." A woman came around the front of the van to stand next to Hadley. "Nice to meet you. Don't be angry with me, but Hadley has asked me to take charge of your handhelds and any other devices you might have on you."

Bev held up the empty box she was carrying.

"We can use them if there's an emergency, but the whole point is to learn to live without them." Hadley smiled. "Drop your devices. Pick up a backpack."

When each of them had followed Hadley's instructions and donned their large packs, Hadley unlocked the gate and they entered the preserve, the clang of the lock's reengagement as it closed behind them signaling the official start of their tech-free weekend.

Savannah should have known that leading a sedentary life had done nothing to prepare her for physical activity, that carrying a backpack weighed down by provisions would tax her limited strength and endurance. Still, her heavy legs and heavy breathing surprised her.

The narrow trail led them up steep and often slippery slopes covered with mud and pine needles. More than a few times, a hand would grab hers and pull her up when she slipped, but her gaze stayed focused on the ground ahead of her, so she never identified her benefactors. She only knew there had been more than one judging by the feel and strength of the fingers that had grabbed hers.

As they walked and climbed, Hadley explained how he and Zachary were taking turns leading small groups on these trips each weekend, hoping to expose as many Palas-participant hopefuls as possible to mitigate future regrets. He stopped to let them rest often, much to Savannah's relief, even though her breathing never quite returned to normal before it was time to move on.

At last, the trail flattened, and they reached the clearing where they would set up camp.

Savannah was the first to drop her backpack to the ground.

"Bev and I will set up our site here, and we can show you how to join your shelter halves and get your tent set up and get your fire going, then you can pair up and spread out to set up your own camp sites. Ace, maybe you can help me out while Bev fetches some small sticks for the fire."

Savannah watched while Hadley and Ace demonstrated joining Hadley's shelter half with Bev's. They used the grommets on the top of each half to attach poles, then used the spade to drive the stakes into the ground through the bottom grommets. Then they used the spade to dig and pile up the soil to seal the gap between the base of the tent and the ground. Then the two tossed in the bedrolls and turned to making a fire.

Bev returned with an armful of twigs and sticks from fallen branches, and Hadley showed Ace how to pile the twigs and smaller sticks as kindling and arrange the larger sticks over the top of the pile.

Then he struck a match, also included in everyone's backpack, and held it to the kindling to start a small fire.

"Good job, Ace," Trey said. "Now that you have hands-on experience, we can count on you to help us out when we get to Palas."

Ace rose to his feet, for he had been squatting in front of the fire encouraging the flames to light the larger sticks, then turned to face Trey. He drew in a breath and visibly swallowed.

"About that, Trey," Ace said. "There's something I need to tell you. All of you."

"What?" Trey lifted his eyebrows, waited. When Ace didn't speak, Trey took a step closer. His usual joyful grin had disappeared. "What is it?"

Ace released a sigh. "Zoe and I are staying. We aren't going with you."

Savannah had never seen Trey at a loss for words before. He stared at Ace with wide eyes, his expression drained. He opened his mouth, closed it again. Ace stared back looking too remorseful to speak.

Savannah exchanged a look with Love, then Diamond, in case they were already aware of Ace's decision, but they seemed equally stunned.

Ace drew in a long breath that expanded his chest, then released it in a sigh.

"We're going to stay at Chance House. We think we can be useful there helping Auntie Bess and Uncle Gil."

Trey nodded once, then after a moment, a second time. "I see."

Savannah felt Trey's heartbreak wash over her, felt it seeping through to her chest and combining with her own anticipation of the heartbreak to come. If she stayed, she would be saying goodbye to Trey. If she went with Trey, she would be saying goodbye to Ace.

Trey looked away from Ace to stare a moment at the growing fire, then turned to exchange a look with each of his Chance House siblings.

"What about the rest of you?" His question started as a whisper but ended just shy of a shout. "Love? Diamond?"

"I'm going," Love said.

"Me too," Diamond said.

"And Savannah?"

Savannah wanted to look away from his sad, milk-chocolate eyes, but couldn't.

"I haven't decided for sure, Trey, but . . ." She paused, remembering Elise's comments. Even without making a conscious decision, she kept taking steps toward the real Palas with every virtual game she downloaded. She drew in a breath. "I just know I don't want to say goodbye to any of you."

She found Jack's gaze, and he looked back at her, surprised it seemed that she had sought him out.

Trey stood a moment, then ran a hand through his dark hair and nodded before he stepped away from Ace and slipped on his backpack. He picked up Ace's pack and held it out to him.

"If that's the case, then I guess we had better take advantage of some campfire talk." He gave Ace a small, fleeting smile. "Let's find our spot, Ace."

Ace rubbed his hands together to free them of dust, took his pack from Trey, then the two headed down a path between the trees to find a clearing nearby to set up their camp.

Love grabbed Savannah's arm. Her eyes were shining, a single tear poised to fall onto her cheek, her gaze following Ace's and Trey's retreating forms.

"I don't know if I'm about to cry for myself, or for Trey. All this time I felt confident about going because Ace would be there. He's the big brother. He's the handy one. No matter what were to happen, he would know what to do. I thought we'd just all be taken care of somehow. I never even once considered the possibility that he wouldn't go."

Savannah nodded. In lieu of real parents, in lieu of Bess and Gil, Ace had been their caretaker as long as she could remember. Even after Mom-Éclair and Rich Daddy had adopted her, Ace had been a constant in her heart. Without adoptive parents, Trey and Love and Diamond would feel Ace's absence even more acutely.

Savannah slipped her arm around Love's shoulders.

"Should we find our spot too?"

"Yes. Let's not go too far way, though," Love said.

"Oh, we won't. I want to be close to that breakfast Hadley promised."

"And Diamond?" Love reached out a hand to him and he turned to face her. "We can be somewhat close to your site, can't we, you know, just in case?"

"Sure, Love. You know how afraid I am of the dark." Diamond smiled, but the smile melted quickly. He too, was still processing Ace's confession. He slipped his pack on. "Jack, lead the way."

Savannah and Love found a clearing within view of Diamond's and Jack's site, and realized all too quickly that watching someone else do something was quite different from attempting it themselves. After much trial and error, and unexpected and uncontrolled giggling, they managed to join their shelter halves and erect their tent before gathering and carrying fallen branches for firewood and twigs for kindling and attempting to start a fire, too embarrassed to learn if Diamond and Jack had similar false starts before sparking and encouraging flames.

By the time their fire crackled and they had set their pot of water and dried soup over it to cook, another effort waylaid several times by inexperience, the afternoon had slipped away into evening. They would soon be losing light. The day had raced by, and Savannah felt proud that she hadn't thought of her handheld or wondered what the time might be even once. Too busy. Too tired.

Love spread a blanket on the ground next to the fire and offered Savannah a seat. Together, they sipped their soup and coffee from the tin cups Hadley had provided in their backpacks and watched the flames.

Diamond and Jack, Savannah noticed, had positioned their fire near a grouping of large rocks and were using those rocks for seating.

"Seven," Love said. She kept her voice low. "I want to tell you a secret."

Savannah lowered her cup. She had been close to taking a sip of coffee, but hesitated, waited.

"Okay."

Love drained her cup and set it on the blanket next to her.

"After I left Chance House, I tried my hand at acting. Small theater productions, a few ad auditions, that sort of thing. I had a lot of casual boyfriends. I moved from zone to zone, never staying in one place very long, abandoning those boyfriends every time if they didn't leave me first. I was a free spirit, I told myself. No one could tie me down. I told myself that my name was 'Love' and 'Love' loved everyone, so naturally I couldn't love just one person more than another." She glanced toward Diamond and Jack who were facing the other direction drinking from their own tin cups around their fire. "After Trey tracked me down, I moved to 504. Trey had brought Diamond in first, and when I walked into Warehouse 11 and saw Diamond, I realized that I had never, ever, been so happy to see someone."

Love refilled her cup from the pot, took a sip, then wrapped her hands around the cup to warm her fingers. The sun was fading, and the night was fast approaching, bringing with it a brisk breeze.

"Growing up in Chance House, I never thought of Diamond as a brother, not really, even though I thought of Ace and Trey as brothers. For some reason, I thought of him differently somehow. And when we found those user8 journal entries, I started to fantasize that Diamond had written them about me, even though I knew better, and, well, I had to admit to myself how I really felt."

Love paused again and sipped her coffee.

"By the way, I printed the rest of user8's journal entries for you. I brought them. I even slipped them in your bag. I think you should read them." Love cradled her mug in her hands. "Anyway, I guess now I'm admitting to you that I've fallen for Diamond. How unexpected, huh?"

Savannah glanced toward Jack and Diamond's camp. She couldn't make out any words, but she could hear Diamond's laughter. She looked back at Love who had followed her gaze toward the other camp. Her dark eyes were shining.

Savannah didn't think she had ever seen Love *in love* before, but the look on her face was unmistakable.

Savannah smiled. "I'm not surprised at all."

Love set her cup down and leaned her head against Savannah's shoulder.

"I knew you were the one to tell, Seven. And now, I have a favor to ask."

Savannah lifted her eyebrows. "Really? What kind of favor?"

"I'm going to tell Diamond my secret. After Ace confessed to all of us, I decided there was no better time and place. We're stuck out here together, so neither of us can run away from it. So, will you go ask Diamond to come over here to talk to me? And will you stay over there with Jack? I want to talk to Diamond alone."

Savannah nodded. "I can do that."

Love chuckled.

"I don't know why I was reluctant to ask. I know you want to go over there. You've been staring at Jack all day. Actually, you've been staring at him for a few days now."

Savannah swallowed. She couldn't deny it. Any time she had caught sight of him since Hadley's visit, even in her peripheral vision, she had stopped whatever she was doing, even in the middle of struggling with the shelter half, to look at him, hoping he'd look back.

"Please, Seven." Love straightened. "If you can do that for me now, I would appreciate it."

Savannah finished her coffee and set her cup down.

"All right. I'll do it now." She rose to her feet, wiping her hands on the legs of her jeans, having decided hours ago that trying to keep them clean was a lost cause. She took a few steps and turned. "Good luck, Love."

Love smiled. "You too," she said.

11 – Exception

Savannah stood at the edge of Diamond and Jack's camp and watched the two men for a moment, reluctant to disturb their conversation. She didn't remember if Diamond and Jack had spent much time together at Chance House, but Diamond had been working at Warehouse 11 with Jack for over a year since Trey recruited him, and the two seemed close now. While she stood listening, they had both expressed their concern for Trey, speculated about the chance of rain, for Jack said he could smell it in the air, then reminisced about a stalled delivery truck and hurrying to move pallets inside during a sudden downpour. Savannah smiled. She loved hearing the familiar sound of Diamond's laughter, the less familiar but thrilling sound of Jack's, for other than the occasional chuckle when Gwenny visited or a muffled laugh behind Wild's mask, she had had little occasion to hear it.

"Hey, Seven." Diamond spotted her and rose to his feet. "You and Love managing all right over there?"

Savannah stepped into the small clearing they had claimed as their campsite and approached their fire.

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, so far."

"Great." Diamond lifted his cup. "Coffee?"

"No, thank you. We made a pot." She drew in a quick breath. "Listen, Diamond. I've come to fetch you. Love wants to talk to you."

"Oh?" He set his cup on the ground. "More secrets?"

Savannah smiled.

"Of a sort."

Diamond lifted his dark eyebrows. "All right then. I'm on my way." He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze and gestured toward Jack as he passed her. "You can keep Jack company while I'm gone."

Savannah waited and watched until Diamond reached Love who stood by their campfire holding her hands in front of her chest. Savannah couldn't hear what Diamond said to her, but the tone of his voice sounded concerned. Even from a distance, Love appeared to be nervous.

"Care to join me?"

Savannah turned. Jack was gesturing to the large rock next to him.

She rubbed her hands together. She felt a slight chill in the air now that the sun had set, but she knew the act was more about nerves than temperature.

"Yes, thank you."

She sat on the large rock next to him, adjusted her position several times to find the least uncomfortable position for the rock was neither smooth nor flat.

She held her hands toward the fire, watched the flames flicker and dance around the ends of one of the larger branches used for firewood.

She straightened her shoulders, drew in a long breath then released it, trying to calm the fluttering feeling in her stomach and find her voice.

"How are you?" The words came out at last. She didn't turn toward him. She felt she could only keep speaking if she didn't. "I've been worried. You didn't respond on magnolia18. I haven't seen you for days. I began to think you were avoiding me."

As she spoke, her words came faster but grew quieter with each sentence. Voices carried for quite a distance out here in the forest without the constant din of the city, and she didn't want anyone but Jack to hear her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't intend for you to worry. I'm fine." He matched her low volume. "And yes, I think I've been avoiding you. I knew you were angry, and like I said, without the mask I'm pretty much a coward."

She nodded. Wild had told her that, on the rooftop, before he kissed her.

Wild. Jack. One in the same.

She leaned forward and grabbed a long stick from the ground and poked it into the fire, an act she had learned from the *Palas* make-a-fire tutorial.

Jack cleared his throat. "It's getting pretty dark. I found a meadow where I think we'll have a better view of the stars. Too many trees here. At the very least, the view should be better than the one from a city rooftop. Would you like to join me?"

She turned to look at him then. His face was closer than she had expected, as close as that first day in the warehouse when he had issued his warnings about the vault.

She dropped the stick. "Yes, I would."

Jack stood, pointed to a path between the trees. "We'll look at the stars for a bit, then come right back. I don't want to leave the fire unattended too long."

"Right. Do we have a lantern?"

Jack nodded and moved to his tent where two lanterns sat next to one another. He grabbed one and held it up for Savannah to see. "We can light it for the walk back."

Savannah followed him.

He led her through the trees, stepping over a small rivulet, and into a small meadow adorned with wildflowers. Jack pointed to them as he walked.

"The white ones are bloodroot flowers. These are yellow sundrops. They've closed their petals for the night, but we can come back in the morning to see them at their best."

He smiled at her, then stopped in the center of the meadow and lifted his gaze to the night sky. She looked up.

Stars. Even this soon after nightfall, a multitude of glittering stars winked back at her.

"As good as your virtual worlds?"

Savannah smiled. "Better. This is real." She craned her neck upward. Of course, this scene couldn't compare to the virtual world of *Palas* where the number of stars and the intensity of their light could be controlled, or the real world of *Palas* which was free of air and light pollution. Still, Jack was right. This view was indeed far superior to one from a city rooftop. "This is beautiful."

A chill breeze teased at her hair, and she brushed a few annoying stray strands off her forehead.

Jack released a contented sigh. "I studied the names of the constellations when I was a kid looking at the stars through my brother's telescope, but I've forgotten all of them. I liked to find and name my own constellations anyway, make up my own stories." He turned to look at her. "Oh, that's right. I'm repeating myself. I told you all that already."

Savannah dropped her head and looked back at him. Had he?

She swallowed. Yes. She remembered. When she had been exchanging messages with Wild via magnolia18 and she had imagined him lying on a rooftop somewhere staring up at the stars, he had told her about his own legendary characters and how they came to be eternalized among the stars.

Yes, Wild had told her this in their exchanges, and Jack was telling her this now.

The two were one in the same. For the first time, she believed it.

"Oh, right. I was still deceiving you then. And I promised you could slap me." He turned so his entire body faced hers, dropped his voice. "Maybe that's why I was avoiding you."

She looked up at him. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark and she could make out his features. His expression was affectionate, sweet, vulnerable.

She nodded.

"I do owe you," she said.

He nodded. "I deserve it." He closed his eyes. "Go ahead."

He was tall. She could reach his face, of course, but not effectively.

"Can you bend down a little?"

"Oh." Keeping his eyes closed, he took a wider stance and squatted until his face aligned with hers. "Better? Hopefully, you won't knock me over."

She placed one hand on his cheek. He winced, expecting her blow, then relaxed his face muscles before wincing again, perhaps assuming she was planning where her blow would land.

She reached around the back of his neck and pulled, guiding his face toward hers, then leaned forward and kissed him, her lips lingering on his longer than his kiss had lasted on the rooftop.

When she drew back, she looked into his wide, surprised eyes.

"Now we're even," she said.

Jack reached up and curled his fingers around her hand to hold it steady against his cheek, then slowly straightened.

He smiled a gentle, endearing smile, but at the same time his brow furrowed as if he were in pain.

"Now you've done it," he said.

"What have I – "

Savannah couldn't finish her question for he had pulled her against him and kissed her, a prolonged, purposeful, unapologetic kiss that evoked a sigh and a whimper before she could think to kiss him back.

Now, you've done it, he had said. She didn't know what he had meant, but her heart seemed to know, for it throbbed with an exquisite pain against her chest.

Whatever she had done, there was no taking it back.



As if the night was ending its performance, clouds rolled across the sky like a drawn curtain, obscuring the stars.

Jack took Savannah's hands in his and held them to his chest while he scanned upward.

"Looks like rain," he said. "We should get back to camp."

Savannah nodded. She didn't want their fleeting moment under the stars to end, but the chill in the air had grown colder, the breeze stronger, and if it did rain, she didn't want to be caught out in it. Even though her heart raced, and her face still felt flushed, she knew she would lose her body heat soon.

"We should light the lantern," she said.

She and Jack knelt together in a patch of bloodroot flowers next to the lantern they had placed on the ground and Jack lit a match. Savannah didn't remember voicing a light-a-lantern tutorial. She assumed the task had been too simple for a player to need detailed instructions. In-game, a player need only hold a match to a lantern to succeed in lighting it, and here, in real life, the task wasn't much more complicated, except when the wind repeatedly extinguished the match before it could reach the wick.

"Let's turn the lantern around and block the wind with our bodies," she said.

Jack nodded and they repositioned themselves, at last succeeding in protecting the flame long enough to light the wick and replace the chimney. The lantern's soft glow illuminated the closed petals of the flowers surrounding them.

Jack chuckled. "Well, this makes me appreciate a flashlight."

"Or a handheld," Savannah said.

They turned to face each other and smiled.

Taking the lantern's handle in one hand and Savannah's hand in the other, Jack stood. "Let's go."

They headed back to camp through the meadow and between the trees, both forgetting about the rivulet, water and mud splashing onto the toes of their boots as they stepped through it. Laughing, they reached Jack and Diamond's campsite where Savannah felt a large raindrop fall onto her cheek.

"Oh, the rain is starting."

"Let's hurry then. I'll walk you back to your – oh, maybe I won't." Jack moved up beside her and pointed toward the tent he and Diamond had constructed from their two shelter halves. Sitting on the ground in front of the flap that served as an entrance, next to the second lantern, was a backpack and an overnight bag. "Are those yours? Have you been evicted?"

Savannah moved to the tent and snatched up her bag, verified that it contained the clothes and toiletry items she had packed for the trip. The bag was indeed hers.

She looked up at Jack who had moved to stand next to her, his eyebrows lifted, and flashed him an embarrassed smile. "Well, I guess this means Love's confession to Diamond went well," she said.

"Confession?" Jack glanced toward what had been Love and Savannah's campsite, then smiled. "Oh, I see. Then this means you need a place to sleep."

Another large raindrop fell on Savannah's cheek, then another on the top of her head, then a third and fourth on her shoulder followed by so many more that Savannah stopped counting.

Jack pushed open the tent flap and gestured inside. "Go on in and change or do whatever you need to do. I'll take care of the fire and our gear."

Savannah hesitated, then shook herself into action. "Right."

He gave her a single nod and handed her the lantern before she fell onto hands and knees and crawled into the tent, pulling her bags inside behind her.

She and Love had brought blankets and small pillows from the warehouse bunks and had spent time with a spade removing rocks from the ground that would act as their tent's floor. Apparently, Jack and Diamond had been less concerned with comfort, for Savannah couldn't find a rock-free place to sit, and she didn't see pillows or blankets, just the sleeping bags Hadley had provided.

She pulled her jacket off and placed it at the head of one of the sleeping bags to act as a pillow in much the same way as the masked man had folded his jacket for Cynda that day in Trey's rooftop apartment.

The masked man. Wild. Jack. As much as she had accepted that they were one in the same, Jack's three identities remained separate in her mind, and she was fond of each in their own way. The mysterious masked man who had come to their rescue during the AFA march, Wild who had shared his love of stargazing on magnolia¹⁸ and kissed her on her building's rooftop, and Jack, whose sweet smile tugged at her heart.

The rain fell in earnest now, the drops sounding large and heavy. And as she changed into the sweatshirt and sweatpants she had brought to serve as her camping pajamas, she began to shiver. Without her jacket, and having removed her clothes for a moment, she had exposed herself to the dropping temperature.

She blew warm air into her hands, then folded her arms across her chest and waited for Jack, listening to the rain pelting the tent and the wind rushing through the trees.

The tent flap opened.

"Can I come in?"

"Yes. Get in here. It's pouring."

Jack set the second lantern, mugs, and two pots inside before he entered, cold air rushing into the tent before he closed the flap behind him.

"I brought some rocks that were near the fire," he said. He pointed to the contents of the largest pot. "The rocks will stay hot for a while, so if we can put these at the bottom of our sleeping bags, we can use them to warm our feet up. Just keep your socks on so you don't burn yourself."

"Did you just think of that, or have you been camping before?"

"I've camped a few times. With Tom. And Natalie. Gwenny's mom. Of course, that was way before Gwenny came along. Long before I ended up at Chance House even." A small smile danced around his mouth. "Natalie and Ma'am had a lot in common when it came to speaking their minds, and they clashed right from the start. Unlike Tom, I couldn't help but find their taunts and barbs toward each other kind of amusing."

Savannah straightened. Natalie. Gwenny's mother.

"Gwenny told me her Daddy's looking for her."

Jack nodded. "Yes, and you'd think someone from an Unlimited family could track her down, but we suspect Ma'am is interfering somehow." He took a seat across from her on the second sleeping bag. "Natalie was headstrong and involved in a lot of projects and causes, and frustrated when Tom wouldn't join her, but I don't think she would have left Gwenny behind. Not on purpose."

Jack lit the second lantern, looked across at Savannah and smiled when he succeeded lighting the wick on his first try. The additional light illuminated his face where raindrops dripped from his wet hair onto his forehead and clung to his eyelashes.

Savannah reached into her toiletries bag and retrieved a small washcloth. She held it out to him. "Here. Dry off. I'm surprised. Wild would never forget to put his hood up."

"I didn't forget. It slipped down and my hands were full. Like now." He picked up a handful of rocks from the pot with his bare hands and started to move them to the foot of her sleeping bag. He leaned toward her. "Help me out? Quick. My hands are burning."

She scowled at him. "You could just put them down."

He grinned. "Will you still help me out?"

She shook her head, chuckled. "Of course, silly."

He set the rocks back into the pot.

She dried his face and hair, pushing his bangs up off of his forehead while he fixed his gaze on her, his eyes shining. She was reminded of the many times Auntie Bess had taken a towel to each of their heads after getting caught in the rain or dousing each other with water balloons. Except for Jack, of course. He hadn't been at Chance House then.

"All better now," she said.

"Thank you."

Savannah watched while Jack finished piling and arranging the rocks inside the foot of each sleeping bag. "Do you visit Auntie Bess and Uncle Gil often?"

He shook his head. "I've never been back."

"Oh. I thought you might have since Ace still lives there. I know they'd love to see you. Like I said, you're no –"

"Don't say it," he said.

His smile faded.

He turned his body to face hers, placed a hand gently on her shoulder before drawing in a deep breath.

"You were going to say I'm no exception, weren't you?"

She nodded. She couldn't deny it. Those very words had been poised on her lips.

"I know you want me to feel included. That big heart of yours is one of the reasons I like you. But I wish you would quit saying it because I *am* an exception, Seven. I'm *very much* an exception."

Wild had made her heart race even when she couldn't see his face. It was no wonder she could hardly breathe when Jack stared at her with such intensity, the amber in his eyes resembling the color of the lantern light.

"I ran away from my family, Seven. I only came to be at Chance House because District Security caught me and couldn't determine who I was because I hadn't been reported missing. You and Trey and all the others are orphans, brought together by misfortune, and you created a family with Bess and Gil, but I don't deserve to be part of that family."

Savannah swallowed. Instinctively, she wanted to comfort him, even though she didn't know how, even though she knew he didn't want to be comforted. From his viewpoint, he was merely stating fact. But there had to have been a reason why he had run away, whether he had been abused or ignored, a reason that made Tom and Gwenny so important to him, a reason why he tolerated Ma'am at the warehouse.

She touched his cold, reddened cheek.

He grabbed her hand, his smile returning.

"But, more than anything, Seven, I want to be an exception *to you*." His voice was quiet. He moved closer to her, dropped his voice to a whisper. "I don't want you to think of me the same way you think of the others. I want to be as special to you as you are to me."

A persistent raindrop streamed down the bridge of his nose and onto his cheek. She wiped it away with her thumb.

"You *are* special to me, Jack," she said.

He leaned his face toward hers, paused as if giving her a chance to retreat, then closed the distance and kissed her, gently, before putting his arms around her and pulling her against him.

She gripped the front of his shirt with both hands and laid back on the sleeping bag, pulling him with her, ignoring the sharp rocks plunging into her shoulders. Jack moved his lips away from hers to place light kisses on her forehead and eyelids and cheeks, kissing a path to her earlobe and then her neck.

She shivered.

Jack propped himself up on his forearms and gazed down at her, and she reached up and touched his chest, felt it rising and falling with each quickened breath, felt his heart racing under her hand.

"You're freezing," he said.

"I'm not." She lied. Yes, her hands felt like ice, and despite the blood pumping through her veins and raising a flushed heat throbbing inside her, she couldn't ignore the cold.

He kissed her again, his lips lingering a tantalizing, torturous moment before pulling away.

"Not now. Not here," he said. A crack of lightning and a thunder roll stole his words from the air, shattering his brief silence. "When I dared picture this, I imagined it happening differently, someplace where you aren't shivering from the cold or lying on hard, rocky ground, someplace where you're with me because you want to be, not because you have nowhere else to sleep."

"But Jack –"

"I'm going to tuck you inside this sleeping bag now and cover you up with my jacket and tell you goodnight. But soon, and it has to be soon because we're running out of time, I'll invite you to be with me somewhere warm and comfortable." He ran his hand over her hair. "Because when I prove to you how special you are to me, I want it to be exceptional."

12 – Eight Makes Seven

The group's seating arrangements in the van heading back to 504 were similar to the ride to the camp, only this time Savannah sat next to Jack, hoping they could converse, but Love's chatter was unstoppable. Even after Ace switched on the music player he had rigged from a stolen handheld, Love just talked louder.

Savannah couldn't blame Love for being excited. She and Diamond planned to marry, enabling them to work and live at Fringe Point Mining Colony without a waiver, then build a new life together on Palas as a couple.

Ace's music stopped.

"Did you turn it off, Trey?" Ace glanced down at the repurposed handheld.

Trey shook his head. "I didn't touch it."

"Out of power, I guess." Ace sighed. "I should've charged it before we left."

Savannah dug her handheld out of her bag, leaned across Jack to look out the front windows to confirm their location. Yes. They had crossed into 503. She would have access.

"I can get music now, Ace," she said. She switched her handheld on. "Give me a minute."

The GenTech logo swirl and fanfare heralded the cacophony of notification alert chimes that followed.

"What's all that?" Love leaned toward her.

Message after message scrolled under Savannah's forefinger, all from Elise, annoyance and desperation about her whereabouts escalating with each subject heading. Had she been out of touch this long?

"It seems I've been missed." Savannah glanced up. She had an audience. Even Trey had turned to look back at her from the passenger seat, and Ace shot quick glances in his rearview mirror. "I think I should see if anything's urgent."

As expected, Elise was livid. Where had Savannah been? She had missed this month's family dinner without a word, and their parents were beside themselves with worry. Savannah was to respond without delay with a detailed, justifiable explanation and heartfelt apologies. Her final message ended with another scolding.

[You can't just go disappearing like that. I can't even imagine how you could, really, attached as you are to a handheld and your computer games. Remember you have certain obligations. We're family, Savannah.]

Family.

She stared at Elise's words, knew that they referred to their adoptive family, but she and Elise had spent an equal number of years with another family growing up, a bigger family, a family Elise hadn't seen in a decade, several members of which were going to disappear soon. Even if Elise rarely thought about them, how sad would it be for her to find out she could never see them again?

Savannah looked up at Love and Diamond and Jack and Trey, noted that Ace was leaning his head to one side in the driver's seat to hear better.

"Do you remember that first day when I came to the warehouse and Love was excited that all the full-timers were together again, except for Elise?" She waited for Love to nod, then the others.

"Would it be all right if I invited Elise to the warehouse? I don't intend to tell her anything. I just want us *all* to be together one last time, while we have the chance. The six of us plus Elise."

"You're talking about Eight." Love gripped Diamond's hand and they nodded at one another before Love turned to poll the others. "Ace? Trey? Jack? What do you think? One last get-together? Eight makes Seven?"



Elise had been appalled that Savannah would ask her to travel from GenTech City to Zone 504 on a Sunday night. She was busy. Grant was out of town meaning she had to do everything around their apartment that he usually did, plus she had an early meeting. There was no possibility that she would go to the trouble of hiring a car when it was Savannah's fault they hadn't seen each other or spoken in so long. No. Nothing could convince her.

Until Savannah said the magic words.

"I want you to meet someone."

Savannah couldn't see Elise's reactions using the warehouse's antiquated audio-only unit, but she could picture it in Elise's sudden silence.

Savannah felt a small pang of guilt, for she knew the statement was misleading. Elise already knew Jack, so "meeting" him was a mischaracterization. But she knew Elise would drop everything to meet Savannah's love interest, so she let Elise make the assumption that she would be meeting him for the first time.

Her love interest. Savannah felt a simultaneous flutter in her stomach and tug at her heart.

"Oh. Oh! Well, why didn't you say that in the first place? I'll need to change, though, and do my hair, and makeup. What have you told him about me? Should I worry about that? You haven't told me anything about him. Should I say that you have? I'm not good at lying. He'll see right through me."

"Don't worry about anything. Just come. We'll order some dinner."

Dana and her crew didn't work on Sundays so the Chance House siblings would have the place to themselves. Jack offered to fetch chicken from their favorite local restaurant. Love put a tablecloth on the table. Diamond and Trey set out plates and napkins. Jack returned with the chicken.

Then they waited, Savannah pacing as long as she could stand it before moving out front to wait on the sidewalk.

Elise had hired a car.

The driver opened the rear passenger door for her and she stepped out onto the sidewalk, flashing a smile when she recognized Savannah, then lifting her head to gaze at the massive rollup doors before spinning in a circle to take in her surroundings as the car pulled away.

"Elise. I'm so happy you came."

Savannah pulled her into a hug and Elise hugged her back, her attention still distracted by the row of warehouses stretching in both directions on both sides of Chester Street.

"What are you doing in Zone 504? In a warehouse, Savannah? Is it because this new man of yours *lives* here, or *works* here? Is this place even open now?"

Savannah chuckled and slipped her arm through Elise's.

"Just come on in. We have chicken."

"Chicken?"

"Tasty chicken. I promise."

Savannah pulled her through the front door and across the warehouse floor, Elise dragging behind, her eyes wide as she took in the large space, the aisles of stacked crates, the trucks, the vans, the metal stairway leading up to the offices.

At last, Savannah pulled her through the open double doors to the lounge, and five figures rose to their feet.

"Eight!"

Elise took a surprised step backward, her eyes wide as Love raced across the room and pulled her into her arms.

"L – Love?"

Ace and Trey and Diamond gathered around her, Jack moving to stand beside Savannah instead.

Savannah relinquished Elise's arm and let her be swallowed into the group hug as she muttered each sibling's name as they approached her.

Savannah folded her hands together and pressed them against her chest. They were all here, together, all the Chance House full-timers. Her heart swelled.

Elise's surprised expression still lingered, a small smile tugging at her cheeks, but she only responded to everyone's greetings with small nods.

"Nice to see you, Eight – I mean, Elise."

"You look great, little sister!"

"It's been a long time."

"Glad you could make it."

The siblings stepped back to give Elise some breathing room.

Elise turned to look at Savannah. "How long have you been meeting with them?"

"A couple of months. I thought you might want to see them."

Elise nodded to her, then to the group as a whole. "Yes, it's nice to see everyone." She turned back to Savannah, her eyes lifting past her to find Jack. "Who . . . is this . . . him?"

Savannah touched Jack's arm. "Yes. Except you already know him. You remember Jack, don't you?"

Elise smiled. "Yes, of course. Hello, Jack."

"Eight," he said.

"It's Elise now," she said.

"Yeah, Jack, it's Elise now." Trey gestured toward the table. "Are you hungry, Elise? We should eat while the chicken's hot."

Elise flashed Trey a smile. "Of course."

Savannah tried to deny it, to push away the awkward feeling in her chest, but she knew Elise. She recognized her social smiles that were simply polite, the talk patterns she fell into at gatherings with people she barely knew and didn't care to know. And except for Love and Trey, whose chatter was as enthusiastic as ever, Ace and Diamond and especially Jack had little to say to her. As she watched and listened, Savannah remembered their interactions growing up, how Eight kept herself apart from them. In her mind, no matter how many years she had been there, she was temporary. She had no intention of being considered a full-timer or considering them family.

Savannah ate in silence.

"Thank you for the chicken," Elise said. She dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin, and stood. "I have an early meeting, so I've called a car. I paid for one-day zone access already so the car should be here soon. It was nice seeing all of you. Savannah. Walk me out?"

"Bye, Elise."

"Take care."

Elise took Savannah's arm, and this time she was the one pulling Savannah across the empty warehouse floor to the front door.

When they exited out onto the sidewalk, Elise turned to Savannah and sighed, pursing her lips as if she were searching for words.

Savannah felt she might cry any moment. Whatever Elise had to say, she knew it wouldn't be to thank her for the happy reunion she had hoped to give her.

"Savannah." Elise swallowed. "Naturally, it's nice to see them, but you should know they're all hiding something. I specialize in social psychology remember. I could tell every sentence out of their

mouths omitted some truth. If they've shared those secrets with you, then fine. If they haven't, you should find out what they aren't telling you. Either way, don't be dragged backwards, Savannah. We both moved on from that place. We both moved forward. We need to *keep* moving forward. We're Limited on our way to Extended, while they're still stuck in place. They may not even be Registered."

Savannah couldn't speak. Her heart hammered insistently at her breastbone.

"But Jack, on the other hand. Trey said he's the boss of this warehouse? That's at least something. Plus . . ." Elise paused, again searching for words by the look on her face. Her expression softened. "Even though he isn't telling you everything either, there's something about him. I'm not just talking about his looks, for he is quite delicious. It's more than that. He's, well, I don't know how to describe it exactly, but I feel like he's . . . and this is going to sound strange . . . but he's simply beautiful."

A long black car turned the corner and drew up in front of them and stopped.

Elise stepped toward it, then turned to look back over her shoulder.

"Bring him to family dinner."

Elise opened the car door and entered and the car pulled away.

Savannah wiped at the tears that had suddenly manifested onto her cheeks.

The warehouse door opened behind her but she didn't turn to look. She stared after the car, instead, watched its taillights as it turned the corner to carry Elise back to 502 and the promise of an Extended status.

An arm snaked around Savannah's shoulders from behind and pulled her backwards against a warm, firm chest.

Jack.

She sniffled, felt embarrassed to have done so.

He kissed the top of her head, then leaned down to put his cheek against hers.

"Seven," he said. It was Jack's voice, but she could also hear the voice he had used as Wild.

"Tomorrow, let me take you somewhere."

She sniffled again, blinked. "Where?"

"On a date," he said.

13 – Firsts

Jack woke her at dawn. Placing a finger on his lips to motion quiet, he mouthed “Let’s go” and stepped out of the locker room to wait while she rose from her bunk, dressed, slipped into her warmest jacket, and added an extra set of clothes to her bag that she hadn’t unpacked from camping. When she emerged into the lounge, Jack took her hand and led her back through the locker room to a back door she had never noticed and out to a back alley where Tom’s motorcycle sat.

Savannah waited until the door closed behind them before she spoke, but even then she whispered.

“We’re taking Tom’s motorcycle?”

Jack took her bag from her, placed it in one of the rear saddlebags, cinched it closed, then retrieved one of two helmets hanging from their straps from the handlebars and held it out to her.

“That we are. Can’t take the warehouse van on a work day. Besides, this will be more fun.”

“Fun. Yes, except, I’ve never been on a motorcycle before.”

“Exactly. That’s what today is all about. Doing things you’ve never done before.”

She took the helmet and pulled it over her head and Jack adjusted the strap for her, then put on the second helmet. Her chest tightening, she waited for Jack to mount the motorcycle and start its engine, then straddled the machine behind him, wrapping her arms around his middle the way she had seen Gwenny wrap her arms around Tom.

Gwenny. She supposed if that little girl could ride this motorcycle . . . No, she took it back. She just had to admit that Gwenny was more adventurous than she was.

“Ready?”

She could hardly hear him over the engine and through the helmet.

She nodded, but only because she had no reason *not* to be ready.

She kept her eyes clamped shut at first, clutching Jack so tightly she thought she had lost the feeling in her arms, but when nothing frightening had happened after a few minutes, she finally allowed her eyes to open.

The traffic was relatively light.

They sped through the streets of 504, past warehouses and high-density housing, rare empty lots overgrown with weeds, eventually crossing a zone boundary into 505. This was Extended territory, the rough road they had traveled in 504 smoothing to a well-maintained surface. Building designs transformed from simple utility to aesthetic-conscious architectures. They drove past a long stretch of grass and trees. A golf course, Savannah assumed, for Extendeds. Were lower statuses even allowed here?

Jack turned onto a side road passing a sign displaying airplanes taking off and landing, and only when Jack drove into an open airplane hangar did Savannah believe he had taken her to an airport.

He turned off the engine and motioned for her to dismount and pull off her helmet. Her legs and arms shaking, she managed to comply.

As they both pulled their helmets off, a man wearing one-piece overalls approached.

Savannah blinked. They stood in an airplane hangar. She hadn’t been wrong about that, because looming high above them in the middle of the hangar was an airplane.

“Mr. Wild. Mr. Thompson told me you’d be coming. She’s all fueled up and ready to go.”

The man extended his hand and Jack shook it.

“Thanks, Ben.”

Mr. Wild?

Savannah almost repeated the man's greeting out loud, but the man was extending his hand to her so she shook it, hoping she didn't look as dumbfounded as she felt.

Jack retrieved their bags and handed them to the man named Ben and gestured toward the motorcycle. "Can I leave it here?"

"Sure. No problem."

Jack turned to Savannah then and held out his hand. "I assumed you hadn't been up in an airplane before."

She shook her head. "No."

"Then let's go see what this world looks like from the air."

Savannah took his hand and walked with him to the stairs and into the airplane where they took seats facing each other.

She swallowed as Ben entered after them, sealed the door, and entered the cockpit, then reached out and gripped Jack's sleeve.

"How are we doing this? Did you arrange all of this with Tom?"

He smiled. "Sometimes it's nice to have Unlimited friends."

"But the pilot, Ben. He called you Wild."

"You'd better strap in," he said.

She buckled her seatbelt and cinched it tight, noticing her hands felt dry.

When she looked up at Jack he was smiling at her.

"I told you a lot of people call me Wild." He took her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, then pointed toward the window. "As much as I like having you stare at me, you'll want to look out the window once we're airborne."

The plane moved slowly out of the hangar and taxied to the runway, and just as Savannah began to relax in her seat, the plane accelerated, lifting up into the air before Savannah could catch her breath.

She watched and gaped as buildings and roads and vehicles shrank in size below them until they were too small to be called toys. The sky was a brilliant blue, the clouds puffs of white cotton. The mountain range where Hadley had taken them camping stretched lush and green across the landscape to the north, and when they reached the coastline, the ocean shimmered on the horizon.

Savannah wanted to cry.

"Mom-Éclair and Rich Daddy should see this. They'd love to be soaring through the sky like this above the clouds on their way to see more of the world."

"It's possible they will someday," Jack said.

Savannah nodded. "I suppose if Elise keeps pushing her husband harder." She turned to Jack. Was she grumbling? This was no time to be grumbling. "I don't know how you arranged it, but thank you."

Jack smiled. "I thought you should see this world before you decided to leave it." He touched her cheek. "There's more. Ma'am has gone overseas for some kind of business negotiation, leaving her beach house unattended. We should check on it for her, don't you think?"

"Her beach house?"

"Gweny told me you'd never been to the beach, so that's where we're going."

As soon as the plane had landed along the coastline on a stretch of pavement acting as a landing strip and had taxied to a stop, Jack took Savannah's hand and led her off the plane.

A brisk gust of salty air stole Savannah's breath from her lungs.

"Come on. Ben will take our things up to the house."

Jack pulled her along off the cement runway and out onto the sand and toward the water, waves crashing and crawling up over the sand toward them.

Savannah pulled on Jack's hand to stop him, reached down and pulled off her shoes and socks by their heels and dug her toes into the sand. The sun reflected off the water and she squinted, then allowed Jack to pull her forward again until they reached the wet sand and finally the water.

The water felt ice cold. Savannah screamed with the shock of it. Jack laughed, took her by the shoulders and pulled her against him as one wave receded and the next one came to replace it. The sound of the water, the smell of salt, the cool air, the bright sun. Jack.

She loved it.

Before she knew it, every inch of her was wet. She had grown accustomed to the temperature, loved bobbing up and down in the swells as they moved farther away from shore. She hadn't dressed for swimming. Didn't care. Especially when Jack drew her toward him and kissed her with his salty lips and tongue and she plunged her fingers into his wet hair.

"Let's go inside," he said.

He had whispered it into her ear and she had trembled.

The sinking sand grasped at her feet making it hard to walk, but putting her shoes back on over sand-caked feet seemed a worse choice.

Jack led her to a set of stairs up a cliffside south of the landing strip that deposited them at the front entrance of Gwendolyn Thompson's beach house, a white, two-story manor surrounded by palm trees. Savannah realized she had hardly stopped moving her head from side-to-side since they crested the cliff, both in awe and in an attempt to take in the entire sight. So many windows, terraces, balconies. This was a single family's home? No, that wasn't right. This was a second home, a vacation home perhaps.

"This way," Jack said. "We're going to stay in the pool house."

"There's a pool? And a pool house?"

They followed a paved walkway around to the south side of the main house where a large oval pool and an attached spa sat surrounded by flowering hedges. Beyond the pool lay a relatively small structure compared to the manor, but it was larger than most houses by Savannah's measure.

"We can rinse off and get into the spa to warm up if you want," Jack said.

He produced a key to the pool house, and they entered. A fire crackled in the fireplace. A spread of bread and meat varieties, cheeses, and bottles of wine awaited them on the long table in the dining room along with a card.

Mr. Wild. We hope the preparations are satisfactory. Enjoy your stay.

"Jack. All of this. Is this Tom paying you back for taking care of Gwenny? You'd call in that favor for me?"

He grinned, took the card out of her hands and put it back on the table.

"I would," he said. "But now we're both dripping water all over the floor. Do we want to rinse off first, then warm up in the spa, then have some lunch, or . . ."

"Let's rinse off. I'm feeling sand everywhere. But you can go first." She pointed. "I see our bags over there by the fireplace. I'm going to grab some shampoo."

He laughed. "OK."

He pointed to show where he was headed, then left her and she crossed to the fireplace and opened her bag, retrieved extra clothes and her toiletries, then felt something crinkle between her fingers.

A folded paper. It had to be the user8 journal entries Love said she printed and slipped into her bag.

Savannah unfolded the paper just to verify her hunch was correct, then dropped onto the brick hearth reading them despite having no intention to do so.

There were only two of them.

Today was art therapy. Draw what makes you happy, something or someone you love, they said. I tried to tell them I can't draw people but they moved on to help the others, so I just drew what was in front of me. It's a nice enough place, this courtyard, but I'm only happy when she's here. If I could draw people, I would draw her as she looks right now working on her own drawing, her mouth twisted to one side in concentration and frustration, but still lovely all the same. I guess it's my secret that it isn't the courtyard I love but the person in it that I can't draw.

Savannah's heart pounded. A drawing of a courtyard. Gwenny had shown her Jack's drawing of the Chance House courtyard. He had told Gwenny he couldn't draw people.

Placing her hand against her chest to calm her heart, Savannah read the next one.

I'm going to tell her how I feel today. Trey is on his way to meet her at some café in 503 and invited me along. I told him no but I think I'm going to after all. I'll have to run to get there in time. I know it's pretty much a cowardly way to do it. She'll go back to 502. I'll come back here with Trey. I'll probably never see her again. I better hurry.



Savannah followed the sound of falling water and found the large, tiled shower room with doors conveniently leading to the outside pool and spa. There were two shower stalls, one whose curtain was drawn obscuring the silhouette of the man who stood behind it.

Savannah pulled off her wet shirt and pants, stood for a moment in her bra and panties, her heart and breathing and stomach fighting one another for nervous attention.

"Jack," she said.

"Yeah? What? Am I taking too long?"

"You're user8," she said.

"I'm what?"

He pulled the shower curtain aside just enough to poke his head out. "What did you . . . ? Oh."

She stepped forward and pushed the curtain aside, stepped into the stall with him.

He glanced down at his naked body self-consciously, then met her gaze, his eyes wide.

"You're user8," she said. It didn't matter how many times she said it, apparently, for he didn't know what she was talking about. No one remembered those generic, default account names. "At Chance House, you wrote journal entries. You wrote about me."

He remembered then. She saw the realization cross his face.

"Oh." He stared at her, the water falling on his back and shoulders and running down his chest. He nodded. "What did I write?"

"In the last entry, you wrote that you were planning to meet me at the café with Trey and tell me how you felt. How did you feel, Jack, back then?"

"What do you think?" He placed a wet hand on her cheek. "I've loved you for a long time, Seven. I thought that was obvious. I did try to join you at the café, but a hover spotted me. My parents had noticed I was missing finally and flagged me. They sent Security to pick me up in front of the café. If I hadn't been afraid to go inside, I might have escaped them."

Wild. Jack. User8.

She moved up against him and ran her hands over his wet chest and shoulders and lifted her head to meet his wet kiss as he pulled her closer, reaching around her back to release her bra that fell into the puddle of water that was forming beneath them. He drew his head back and looked at her a moment, then reached behind him to turn the water off.

He took her hand. "Come with me."

He pulled a large towel from a rack and wrapped it around both their shoulders, then led her to a bedroom with the largest bed Savannah had ever seen, but he didn't lead her toward it. Instead, he pulled a comforter from a quilt rack and led her back into the living room where he tossed the comforter on the floor in front of the fireplace.

He yanked the towel off their shoulders and tossed it to the floor, then sat on the comforter, and took her hand to pull her down beside him.

"This is the way I pictured it," he said, "on a soft comforter, in front of the fire."

Savannah stretched out beside him as he took her in his arms and sought out the hollow of her neck.

"Another first," she said.

She would have said more but her words dissolved when his mouth found hers again, when he ran his hands gently but firmly over her body leading the way for the kisses that followed, when she put her fingers into his hair and guided those kisses until his head was almost at arm's length and he was kissing the inside of her thighs encouraging whimpers instead of words from her lonely mouth.

When at last he freed her from her final remnant of clothing before she could rip them off herself and pressed his body into hers, she felt that the heat of the fire was too hot, that he was being too gentle, that she wanted something to grab onto to pull him even closer, even deeper.

And then he shuddered and dropped his head on her breasts and lay still and she pushed his wet strands of hair, either from the shower or sweat, off his forehead.

"I love you, Jack."

There they were. The words she wanted to say.

He drew in a halting breath. "You love Wild."

"I love him, too."

"You love that user8 guy."

"I love him, too."

He laughed.

She tugged on his earlobe.

"Are there any more of you to love?"

He turned his head and looked up at her, the reflected firelight igniting the amber in his eyes.

"I guess you'll just need to stick around to find out."



If given a choice, Savannah decided she would never leave the largest bed she had ever seen. She would stay naked under its covers, her body entangled with Jack's, her hair wet. She would need to eat, of

course, but Jack had taken care of that by bringing most of the food from the table into the bedroom and placing it within arm's reach on the nightstand.

"How long can we stay?"

It was a question she had avoided asking until now, but she wanted to know the level of bliss she could allow herself to slip into.

"As long as Ma'am's out of the country, I suppose."

"What about the warehouse?"

"I left Trey in charge. Do you think I should check on it?"

She shook her head, gripped him. "No."

His laugh rumbled in his chest. "Now that you mention it, I did promise to check in once a day."

"Me and my big mouth."

He lifted her chin and kissed her. "It's the perfect size, I'd say."

"You're silly."

"That was Wild. He's the silly one." He stretched his arm out over her and grabbed the handheld she had first seen Wild carrying, an old model with attachments. "Trey and I set up an account like you and I did with magnolia18. I doubt anything too urgent would get Trey to disturb me when I'm with you. Opening it now. Checking drafts . . . Oh."

Savannah propped herself up on one elbow. "What is it?"

She watched Jack's eyes scan the lines of the message, watched him create a reply and send it, then turn the handheld off. He pulled her back against him.

"Was it Trey? What did he say?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but I hoped maybe this day on the motorcycle and the plane and seeing how nice this world could be might sway your decision. Not only was it unfair, I also think it backfired on me. I just showed you the things you and your adoptive parents don't have access to. I probably made it worse."

"What did Trey say, Jack?"

"He said the timeline's moved up again. GenTech's off-world supply shipments are expected soon and the spaceport's on high alert expecting violent protests. He said OWMC is giving mining colony recruits one day to file their application and single waivers. He said you can't put off your decision any longer. He said his marriage offer still stands. He said he thinks I'm a fool."

Savannah's lungs felt heavy, as if they were filled with water and she couldn't pull in enough oxygen.

"I can take you to the recruiting station tomorrow," Jack said.

"But I . . ." She couldn't see. How could this be happening now? "But I haven't decided."

Jack sat up and pulled her up by the shoulders, wiped her wet hair out of her face.

"No? Then why are you crying?"

Part III

"You have chosen . . . Palas."

The Guide

14 – Preparation

His brother. Gwenny. Tom. Savannah knew that the people Jack felt obligated to protect constituted his reasons for staying, but she insisted he voice them aloud in case he had other reasons she could dispel. No, he assured her, he had no other reasons. No, he wasn't encouraging her to leave him. How could she accuse him of that? And no, she shouldn't stay for him. Hadn't she told him more than once in their magnolia¹⁸ exchanges how the virtual world of *Palas* called to her, how she had immersed herself in its wide-open spaces to escape the constant intrusion of this one? And now that she knew she could see and touch and *live* in that physical reality, she couldn't pass up the opportunity. If she stayed for him, how could he take on the burden of her regret?

The explanations and arguments between them repeated in circles, each time ending in tears kissed away by trembling, impassioned lips.

Savannah didn't want to sleep. She didn't want to lose any moments. She wanted to stay aware of how her body felt next to his, how his voice sounded when he whispered in her ear, how he looked when he closed his eyes and his lashes touched his cheeks.

She knew she had to let him sleep, but before she did, she had to ask one more question.

"Jack?"

He stretched his eyelids toward his forehead, eventually opening his eyes to focus on her.

"Hadley said the OWSF sends the *Nighthawk* to Palas every ten years. Gwenny will be almost grown by then. Could you come to Palas then? In ten years?"

He closed his eyes, and for an instant she thought he might not have awakened at all, or hadn't heard her and had fallen back to sleep. But then he smiled a very small smile.

"I could come, but you'll have found someone else to love by then."

"That's impossible. How could one person replace the three of you?"

His chuckle sounded closer to a cry than a laugh. "I've waited ten years to tell you how I feel. I can wait another ten to be with you," he said. "I'll find a way. I promise."

Then, clinging to the slenderest of consolations, she slept.

In the morning, her bag sitting on the landing strip waiting for the plane, Savannah stripped off her shoes and socks and walked across the sand into the surf up to her ankles, closed her eyes and let the sea air and the sounds of the waves and seagulls caress her senses. The water wasn't as clear or the sand as white as rendered in the *Palas* virtual world, but here she could feel the sand and touch and hear the water and smell the salt in the air, and now she would carry the memory to the real Palas for comparison. For once, she knew in her aching heart that it was something she had decided to do.

But when had she decided?

It hadn't been a conscious decision. It had been her subconscious sending the tears, forcing her conscious self to admit the decision that had already taken residence in her heart. And now that her mind had accepted it, she could pinpoint the moment. Her heart had known she would leave her home and Elise and Mom-Éclair and Rich Daddy the moment she learned that Palas was real. Her mind had resisted, but her heart knew, and it had been driving her toward it step by step ever since despite her mind's unwillingness to accept it.

The plane brought them back to the airport hangar where Savannah climbed onto Tom's motorcycle behind Jack, wishing she could remove her helmet and lay her bare face against his back, and all too soon Jack steered the bike into the alley behind the warehouse where they dismounted.

The warehouse was busy, not only in the front where forklifts hummed and beeped their warning signals as they moved boxes and crates between trucks and shelving, but also in the rear section as well. The couches in the lounge had been pushed aside and the long table from the vault sat in their

place. Black metal boxes covered the top of the table while crate-sized stainless steel boxes sat stacked at one end as Ace, Trey, Diamond, Love, as well as Dana, Frederic, and Liz from the warehouse's crew filled them with the smaller black boxes.

Jack dropped his bag and the helmet in the locker room doorway, startling the group who turned toward him.

"Jack." Trey set the box he held in his hands on the table and hurried over to him, motioning to the others to continue. Ace and Diamond exchanged lifted eyebrows, Love flashed them a smile, and then the three turned back to their task. "Jack. Savannah. Good, you're back."

"What's going on, Trey? Why is this happening out here?"

"We're short on time and we needed help loading these supplies for the OWSF."

Trey lifted his eyebrows.

"The OWSF." Jack returned Dana's smile when she glanced toward him, then nodded to Trey.

"Right."

Trey motioned Jack and Savannah into the locker room and closed the door.

"Don't worry, Jack. The readers are sealed inside the black boxes. And we *will* be delivering them to an OWSF facility for Hadley to get to the *Raven Wing*, so it's not really a lie."

"Good enough. I just don't want them knowing anything that will get them in trouble if something leads Security to the warehouse." Jack drew in a breath. "So, what's the timeframe?"

"Those off-world shipments GenTech is expecting? Turns out they're listed on that schedule Savannah printed for us. The first one's arriving the day after tomorrow. It all tracks because Hadley sent word that the *Raven Wing* is launching tomorrow at midnight. That means we need to get our OWMC applications and waivers in today and get ourselves onboard tomorrow." Trey switched his gaze from Jack to Savannah then back again. "So, what's happening with you two?"

"I'm staying. She's going," Jack said.

Savannah's chest hurt. Hearing Jack speak so matter-of-factly about separating felt like a knife to her heart. And only having one day left together when they had really only been together for a day was too unfair.

Trey drew in a long breath, expelled it in a single huff. "I see. I guess I should be grateful I won't be saying goodbye to both of you."

Jack gripped Trey's shoulder and shook it. "I never told you any different." He gestured with his head toward Savannah. "But I'll take Seven to the recruiting station."

Trey shook his head. "No need. We don't have time if we want to finish packing, so I asked Ace to ask Zoe to pick up the forms for us. We'll fill them out here, then she'll return them and get them scanned in."

"You're involving Zoe?"

Trey lifted his hands. "What do you want me to do? I couldn't ask you to do it. You weren't here. At least Zoe knows everything already, and the recruiting station is pretty much in-between Chance House and the warehouse."

Jack sighed, nodded. "All right. It makes sense."

Trey turned to Savannah and gestured toward the lounge. "If you have any more of those headgear units ready to go, you should pack them now," he said.

"All right."

"I have to make a call," Jack said. He took Savannah's bag from her. "I'll take this. I'll be in my office. Come up when you're finished."

Jack turned to leave and Savannah's arm flew out on its own accord to stop him, but she pulled it back. She would see him later. For now, she needed to help prepare.

Trey took a step closer and whispered. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, then shook her head. This was Trey. She could be honest with Trey.

"I'm kind of a mess, I think."

He touched her shoulder.

"There's coffee in the kitchen," he said. "No rush on the headgear. The day's early yet. I'm going to get back to work. When Zoe brings the forms, we can take turns taking a break to fill them out."

He gave her a smile – not his exuberant, joyous smile, but his concerned and reassuring smile – then left the locker room.

Savannah followed him into the lounge and walked past the busy group at the table, Love and Diamond turning to watch her as she passed by but thankfully staying silent.

She headed for the coffee pot.

She wasn't in the mood for Love and Diamond's excitement when they learned she would be joining them, and the last thing she wanted was to hear comforting words because Jack wasn't. For now, coffee and busy hands would have to suffice as her source of comfort, at least until Zoe arrived with the OWMC application forms and she had to come face-to-face with the black-and-white incarnation of her decision.



Savannah had come nowhere near completing DreamSight installations on all 500 headgear units but decided she should bring them all anyway. If she had access to equipment, she could finish the task during the three-month stay at Fringe Point or during the longer journey to Palas. She kept one completed unit out for her own use, then sealed the crates, affixing the shipping stickers Trey had given her to the tops and sides, marking each one to differentiate between the completed and empty units. Then she entered the work pod and closed the door, shutting out the sounds of preparation, connected the headgear unit to the network, and entered the virtual world of *Palas* to find and say goodbye to Yuta Tensai.

DreamSight's game designer answered her musical call from Yuta Island, but before she could speak spoke first.

"You've come to say goodbye," he said.

She was grateful he could only see her avatar's face.

"Yes," she said.

"I've been expecting your in-game summons, dreading it a bit I must confess, but while I waited I began to wonder if you might be interested in taking on a special project while at Fringe Point." He pointed to one of the monitors behind him as if she could read the display's tiny font, not only across the distance of his physical room, but also through the lens of his virtual feed. "I have an idea for a new DreamSight world where players will find themselves imprisoned on an off-world planet or asteroid and need to find a way to escape. I'm hoping you can send me images and your own descriptions of Fringe Point and its atmosphere from the perspective of a mining Consortium contract employee."

Savannah tilted her avatar's head. "Are you talking about a prison colony? Fringe Point's a mining colony."

Yuta took a long swig from a bottled beverage, started shaking his head before he finished swallowing.

"Oh, I suppose that's the common perception, but there's a prison there too. Prisoners make reliable miners." Savannah's shock must have translated to her avatar's face, for Yuta blinked. "Oh, but, I don't think you need to worry. At least, I don't think so. But, if you feel uncomfortable in any way, put

your safety first. I have quite the imagination, so I can always design my world without any real reference this time."

"I can't promise anything, but I'll do my best."

"I was thinking too that having a special assignment would make a good cover story to tell your family."

She gasped.

She hadn't even considered what she would tell Rich Daddy and Mom-Éclair, let alone Elise. But Yuta's assignment would sound plausible. It might even sound as if she were finally trying to rise up within the ranks at GenTech and elevate her access status which would make Elise happy.

"Yes, thank you." Savannah moved her avatar forward a few steps closer to Yuta's image. "And thank you for everything, Yuta."

Yuta smiled. "Yes, well, my guide is important to me. Plus, this goodbye is only temporary. In ten years, I'll be expecting detailed descriptions from you to add to DreamSight's *Palas*, so have some adventures." He winked. "You're young so you think ten years is a long time, but it will go by in a blink."

Savannah smiled, the corners of her eyes tingling. Jack had promised to join her in ten years. Could it really go by as quickly as Yuta said?

She swallowed.

"Then I won't say goodbye, but so long," she said.

His grinning image dissolved into a billowing mist, and she wished now that she had met Yuta in person.

Savannah took a lingering look at the scene around her. Once her headgear unit lost access to the network and Yuta became inaccessible through the game, she would have no reason to visit Yuta Island. She might never see this tiny virtual island again.

She closed her eyes to avoid watching the scene wink out of existence, then logged out.

A heavy knock sounded on her work pod door. "Savannah, Zoe's here."



Zoe stood in front of the closed double doors to the lounge clutching a file folder in her arms. Ace's wife was tall and fair, wore her fine copper hair in a long braid, and was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt under a long-sleeved, plaid button shirt with sleeves rolled half-way up her forearms. When Trey approached her, she handed him the file folder, then scanned the faces in the room until her gaze landed on Ace who wiped his hands with a handkerchief and left the packing table to greet her.

Ace had smiled when he saw her, but now that he stood beside her and their eyes met, his smile faded.

"Is something wrong?"

Zoe placed her hand on his chest. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Savannah thought Ace's face paled a bit.

"You can use my office," Trey said. "Dana, Frederic, Liz, why don't you three take a break?"

Dana stretched her neck to one side then the other. "Happy to," she said. "An hour? Two?"

"Make it two," Trey said.

Dana motioned to her crew members and the three hurried out of the lounge, seemingly unaware that everyone in the room waited for them to exit before speaking.

"Oh, Seven, this is my wife Zoe," Ace said. "Zoe, this is my other little sister, Seven."

Ace gestured between Zoe and Savannah during his introductions, Savannah and Zoe having just enough time to exchange a nod before Ace took Zoe's hand and led her out of the lounge, the double doors closing behind them.

Trey opened the file folder Zoe had handed to him and retrieved a pile of envelopes. He handed one to Love and Diamond and Savannah, keeping one for himself and returning an additional one to the file folder.

"Hmm. Zoe brought an extra one. Just in case, I guess. We can take turns filling these out. The vault is a mess right now, so Savannah, why don't you go first and use Dana's office? The other two are occupied."

Savannah stood immobile for an agonizing moment before she convinced herself to move toward the double doors.

Trey hurried after her, touched her arm. She turned toward him.

"Savannah, before you check that single box, remember my offer still stands. It would just be for your comfort. It's just paperwork that won't mean anything once we leave Fringe Point."

Savannah steadied her gaze on Trey's kind face.

Trey's as good as they come, Jack had said.

Maybe that was true. But Trey wasn't Jack. If her name were to be linked to anyone, even on paper or in some database that didn't matter, it couldn't be to anyone but Jack.

"I can't do that," she said.

"If this is about Jack, he isn't even – "

"I won't do it, Trey," she said.

She knew what he was about to say, that Jack wasn't even going, that a fake, temporary deClairement of marriage shouldn't hurt him, but she didn't want to hear his logic. This wasn't about logic.

Savannah turned away from him, gripping the envelope with both hands, and left the lounge through the double doors and climbed the metal stairs. There she paused at Jack's office door. Maybe she could talk to him before she checked the single box and signed her name. Maybe now when he saw the forms in her hands, he would change his mind. Then again, he might be thinking the same of her.

But Jack was still on the phone. From what she could hear in Jack's tone, for she couldn't make out any words, the conversation was heated; an angry outburst followed by a pause followed by a quieter pleading tone and then another angry outburst.

Savannah guessed that Jack's brother was on the other end of the line, that they were arguing about the AFA and the imminent violence GenTech and the OWMC predicted. Would Jack don his Wild persona and put himself in danger to watch over his brother, the brother she'd never met, whose name she still didn't know?

Savannah stepped away from the door. She wouldn't be able to change Jack's mind, not with his brother's life and freedom at stake.

She continued down the catwalk toward Dana's office, meant to enter, but heard voices coming from Trey's office. Another argument, this time between Ace and Zoe. Again, she couldn't make out the words.

Savannah continued into Dana's office and closed the door, then took a seat behind Dana's desk.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing to shut out the sounds around her, then pulled the forms from the envelope.

For a person with Limited status, the forms were simple. A registration identifier completed the personal data and work experience portion of the form since the information could be retrieved from the registration database.

A single checkbox indicated whether she would be applying as a single rather than a family member and a signature waived the Consortium's liability in case of mental stress or anxiety and also

indicated her understanding that she was also agreeing to high-density living accommodations, perhaps the kind of barracks Trey was attempting to save her from.

The final portion of the form was a lengthy block of text, riddled with legal terms, but the warning was clear. If the applicant changed their mind about entering a three-year OWMC contract and decided to return with the *Raven Wing* after arriving at Fringe Point, the applicant agreed to compensate the Consortium for the cost of the travel berth. The cost wasn't listed, but Savannah suspected the sum to be way beyond her means.

Nothing on the form was unexpected. Every warning had been stressed during the briefing at Quinn's Theater. Still, since she hadn't committed to a decision consciously at the time, she hadn't internalized any of it, so she took care to read, and reread, each clause.

Then, with her heart thumping hard in her chest, she entered her registration ID, checked the single box, signed the liability waiver, and returned the forms to the envelope.

"Seven."

She looked up.

Jack.

He stood in the doorway, his gaze flitting to the envelope before he swallowed and looked back at her.

"Eight – Elise – just called. We've been invited to your family's dinner. She said she couldn't reach your handheld so called the warehouse."

"Family dinner?" Savannah tried to calculate the weeks that had gone by since the last dinner she had attended, accounting for the one she had missed, but felt at a loss to determine when the next one would be. "When?"

"I told her it would have to be tonight if it happened. I didn't give her a reason."

Savannah pictured Elise and Grant and Rich Daddy and Mom-Éclair sitting around the dinner table, imagined the looks on their faces when she told them the news about her special assignment at Fringe Point.

She had let her gaze drift to the envelope she was now gripping tightly in her hands, but now she looked up at Jack's sweet face.

Elise had invited him. Jack, out of all the Chance House siblings, had Elise's approval.

"You'll go with me? To family dinner?"

"I'll go with you," he said.

15 - Goodbyes

Their first stop on their way to family dinner was Savannah's apartment. Savannah already had her most precious possession with her, the heart-shaped PIG, the device that would soon just be a necklace once she left the infrastructure it needed to function, so she wasn't sure what she needed or wanted to retrieve. After turning in circles and pulling open closet doors and bureau drawers, she at last decided to pack all pants, tops, undergarments, and outer wear that wasn't threadbare or torn or faded, since the clothes meeting those criteria fit into one vacuum-sealed bag, then gathered up her favorite and to-be-read books and family photographs that she removed from their frames and stuck inside the pages of the books for safekeeping. She patted the door of her work pod wondering how much time would pass before GenTech would come and haul it away, considered for the briefest of moments about contacting the four J's one more time before discounting the idea, then gave her apartment a final appraisal. What a small, austere, lonely living space, and yet it had been hers and it had served her well.

Patting the doorjamb, she left.

Jack helped her carry her bags down the hallway, and when she reached Rose's door, she put her hand on his arm.

"I want to tell my neighbor goodbye."

"Sure." He set her bags down to wait.

A man opened Rose's door and Savannah blinked at him a moment until she heard Rose speak up from the room behind him.

"Oh, it's Savannah! Savannah darling, you're just in time for tea."

"She doesn't look like she has time for tea, Lady Rose." The man winked at Savannah. "Do come in."

Savannah smiled. The man who had opened the door was obviously role-playing along with Rose.

Rose sat in her recliner, a bandaged foot propped up on a pillow.

"What happened?"

"It's quite the story," Rose said. "After visiting Lord Roland one fine, brisk morning at the newspaper stand – this is Lord Roland by the way – I became so overjoyed that I began to dance on my way home when I stepped off the curb into the street and twisted my ankle. Lord Roland has been ever so kind bringing me a newspaper and breakfast pastries every morning since, and, like today, occasionally dropping by for tea."

Lady Rose and Lord Roland, in whatever dramatic scene they were playing out, exchanged a grin.

Savannah smiled, and hoped the smile remained while she spoke.

"I've come to say goodbye, Rose. I'm moving."

Rose's eyes widened. "You are? Are you moving in with that sweet boy?"

Rose pointed toward her front door and Savannah turned to see that Jack stood in the open doorway.

Jack stepped forward and took Savannah's hand, then gave Rose a smile.

"Don't worry," he said. "She'll be well looked after."

Rose grinned. "Well, then, drop old Rose a note now and then if you would."

Savannah nodded and smiled, hoping that her nod would be interpreted as a promise even though it couldn't be.

"Goodbye, Lady Rose," she said. "Nice to meet you, Lord Roland."

Savannah let Jack lead her back into the hallway, nodding at Roland as he closed the door after her. They waited in silence until the elevator answered their summons, then stepped inside with her bags.

Savannah's eyes were wet.

"Will you miss your apartment?"

Savannah shook her head. "Just Rose," she said. "Thank you for letting her think I was moving in with you."

He didn't answer. Instead, he leaned against the wall of the elevator and put his arm around her when she moved up beside him.



"Savannah, at last!" Mom-Éclair wrapped her up in her arms when they arrived, then released her to pull Jack forward into a quick, but powerful hug. "Hello. You must be Jack. *Elise* told us about you, although I don't know why Savannah was keeping such a secret. I'm Claire Jones."

Jack replaced his surprised expression with a smile. "Hello. It's nice to meet you."

"Elise tells us you were at Chance House?"

"Yes, for a short time."

"Come in to the den. Everyone is waiting for you there. I thought we'd have drinks before dinner arrives. I had to order delivery with such short notice."

Savannah watched her adoptive mother's face as she spoke. Even without Elise's knowledge of social behaviors, Savannah recognized the slight quiver in Mom-Éclair's chin, the frequent blinking of her eyes, the slight crack in her voice. Elise must have warned her about Savannah's possible "job change" and its accompanying bad news.

And Rich Daddy suspected something as well based on the extended, bone-crushing embrace he pulled her into when they met in the den.

Elise and Grant had been sitting on the couch but now rose slowly to their feet, Elise gripping Grant's sleeve for support, her eyes wide.

"You might as well tell us now, Savannah," Elise said. "I don't think any of us can make it through dinner unless you do. Of course, we just might all lose our appetites."

"Yes, Savannah, please." Mom-Éclair lowered herself toward a settee then changed her mind and straightened again. "You missed family dinner. We couldn't reach you. Elise says you've been struggling with . . . some kind of decision."

Savannah exchanged a look with Elise, then looked at each of her family members in turn and smiled the same hopeful smile she had given Rose.

"All right." She drew in a long, deep breath. If mental telepathy existed, she would have sent a grateful thought to Yuta. Without the cover story he had provided, she had no idea what fabrication she would be telling them. "I'm going to Fringe Point Mining Colony on a special assignment for Yuta Tensai, the creator of the DreamSight games."

The looks she had imagined manifested in front of her. Wide eyes, confusion, heartbreak.

Silence.

Rich Daddy found his voice first, his confused expression transforming to a shake of his head.

"That's too dangerous, Savannah. You can't do that."

Savannah blinked. She should have expected an outright rejection of the idea, should have planned a response. Since she hadn't prepared, she chose honesty.

"I didn't make the decision lightly." Savannah took a step toward him but Rich Daddy backed away, afraid perhaps that he might waver if she touched him. "It's an opportunity I can't pass up."

Rich Daddy snapped his focus to Jack. "Is this your doing?"

"Jack doesn't work for GenTech," Savannah said.

"Mining colony contracts are just for three years, I've heard." Mom-Éclair glanced toward Grant and Grant nodded his head. "Just three years, Richard."

Savannah worried that everyone in the room could hear how loud her heart pounded. Could she really stand in front of all of them with a straight face and lie? Or could she rationalize her words with the facts that Yuta *had* given her a special assignment, and that she might, in fact, change her mind once she arrived at Fringe Point in which case it *would* be a mere three years? A possibility existed that she wasn't lying. Was that possibility making this feel better?

Rich Daddy didn't answer. He turned and pulled open the doors to the balcony and exited, drapes flying apart and then returning to their positions in a flutter.

"I'll go talk to him," Mom-Éclair said.

Jack stepped forward. "I'd like to speak to him, Claire, if I may."

She looked up at him, her gaze studying him a moment, perhaps really looking at him in earnest for the first time, then nodded.

Jack gave Savannah's arm a slight squeeze, then followed Rich Daddy out onto the balcony, closing the doors behind him.

Elise released Grant's sleeve to move next to Savannah and grab her sleeve instead.

"Is this really what you want, Savannah?"

Savannah quashed the urge to chuckle. Elise always saw straight through to Savannah's innermost conflicts.

Savannah's answer, as true as it was, couldn't have been more painful.

"Yes," she said.

Mom-Éclair gestured toward the dining room. "Let's take our seats until the food arrives. I'll prepare the drinks."

When Savannah took her seat at the table and Mom-Éclair set a large glass of wine in front of her, she had to fight the temptation to take a long swig of it. Although she had calmed after the initial announcement and reactions, she knew Jack and Rich Daddy were still on the balcony having a conversation she wasn't privy to, and she couldn't conceive what false assurances Jack was giving or how they were being received. She sipped her wine, then took a larger sip, and by the third sip that was more of a gulp than a sip, Jack and Rich Daddy came back inside and entered the dining room.

Jack moved up behind her and put both hands on her shoulders.

Rich Daddy took a seat at the head of the table and gestured toward Jack and Savannah as a single entity.

"I'll expect to hear from you as soon as you arrive at Fringe Point. Jack tells me the Consortium provides communication access to all its employees." He drew in a breath and released it, dropping his shoulders. "Claire, shouldn't that food be here by now?"

Savannah reached up with both hands and squeezed Jack's fingers. Whatever he had said, Rich Daddy had accepted it. Perhaps Jack had told him that he would be going with her, that he would protect her, that he planned to marry her and as a couple they would enjoy a more comfortable arrangement, and that no matter what occurred he would always be by her side. Those were the assurances that would have persuaded Rich Daddy to let her go without objection.

If only those assurances had been true.



“What did you say to Rich Daddy?”

Savannah shared a reclining patio chair with Jack, leaning back against him, her head feeling heavy from the wine, a blanket pulled up to her chin. They sat on the rooftop of the warehouse in the dark, or at least as dark as it could get in the middle of 504, which Savannah admitted was not as light polluted as 502.

When they had returned from family dinner, after the hugs and tears had almost been too much for her to bear, Jack had reminded her that they still hadn't really looked at the stars on a rooftop together, so had grabbed a blanket and led her to the spot where he told her he and Trey had enjoyed many beer-inspired conversations.

Jack hadn't answered her question, so she reached up behind her and tugged on his earlobe.

“What did you tell Rich Daddy?”

She felt his chest rise and fall as he drew in a deep breath.

“I told him that you had the favor of an Unlimited with wealth and influence enough to be an OWSF patron,” he said.

“Oh, Yuta. I suppose Rich Daddy wouldn't have known that.”

“And that you wouldn't be going alone, that you'd be surrounded by people who loved you like family.”

“Yes. Trey and Love and Diamond.”

“And even if all that wasn't the case, I reminded him that you are smart and clever, and even if he couldn't help worrying about you, that I knew he could trust you to be careful.”

Savannah had managed to keep tears from flowing all day, but this time she had no warning. They just slipped out of the corners of her eyes and raced down her cheeks. She pulled up on the blanket's edge to blot them away, but they refused to be intimidated. More came, unfazed by the loss of their brethren.

She sniffled. “You didn't lie to him then.”

“No.”

She sniffled again, worried that her nose would become involved and try to participate with her tears.

“Jack.” New tears swam in her eyes. “What does it say about us if you won't come with me and I won't stay with you?”

She had been holding onto that question since she had cried against his chest in the largest bed she had ever seen, afraid to answer it herself, afraid to hear how he might answer, but now it had finally succeeded in its fight to be spoken.

He took a long time to answer. When he did, he put his lips next to her ear and whispered it.

“It says we love each other enough to let the other be where they need to be.” He leaned his head back again. “Or, as Trey said, we're both idiots. Or did he say fools? Either works, I think.”

“Are you two talking about me?”

Trey was walking toward them carrying a cooler.

“I told Seven you called us fools,” Jack said.

Trey took a seat in the second chair and set the cooler down next to it, withdrew a can from it and handed it to Jack.

“You want one, Savannah?”

"No. I've had wine. That's enough for me."

Trey nodded, retrieved a can for himself, then leaned back in his chair.

"I know I'm interrupting, but I thought Jack and I should drink a toast before tomorrow. I failed to convince him to go, but I can't blame myself too much if you couldn't sway him either, Savannah. Also, I wanted to tell you the good news. Well, bad news for you I guess Jack."

"What news?" Savannah wiped at her eyes and cheeks and chin with the blanket again, in case Trey could see her tear-stained face in the dark.

"Zoe convinced Ace that they should go with us."

"Really?"

Savannah leaned forward, then leaned back again when she realized Jack's body heat had been keeping her back warm.

Trey nodded. "Turns out she thought she might be pregnant, which she isn't, but that made her start thinking about raising kids, and then on the way to get those forms, she said that the streets were packed with traffic and blaring horns and flashing lights and relentless ads, the usual stuff we've all been desensitized to, and she said the decision struck her like a lightning bolt. She and Ace couldn't miss the chance to leave it behind."

"I'm so glad," Savannah said.

"Well, I always thought Ace was going anyway since he seemed excited about the idea," Jack said. "Maybe he just thought it was too much to ask of Zoe."

"Yes, see?" Trey glanced over at them. "You're both fools. Of course, you're the bigger fool, Jack."

Savannah felt the rumble of Jack's laughter in his chest.

She pulled the blanket off of her and got to her feet, handed the blanket to Jack.

He blinked up at her. "Where are you going?"

"I'll let you two share your beer." *And say goodbye*, she thought, but couldn't voice it. The words sounded too sad and cruel to say aloud. "I'll turn in."

"Don't you dare sleep in the locker room," Jack said.

"The bed in your office isn't the largest bed I've ever seen but I think we'll both fit." She winked at Trey who winked back at her, then bent over and kissed the top of Jack's head. "I'll be waiting for you."

She headed toward the door to the stairs and just as it was closing behind her, she heard Trey's voice.

"I wonder whatever happened to the PIG-giver she was dating."

Savannah held the door long enough to hear Jack's reply.

"Oh, that guy? She's leaving him behind too," he said.

When Jack joined her, he undressed in the dark and crawled under the covers next to her without a word, slipped both hands up under her sweatshirt and around to the small of her back and pulled her up against him. Savannah reached down and pulled the sweatshirt up and over her head and Jack released her enough to allow her room to manage the feat. She moved back to the spot against him, the fine hairs on his chest tickling her bare breasts, and stretched her neck upward to receive his kiss. She had no more tears, it seemed, her eyes hot and stinging in their attempt to manifest them. She thought for an instant that she had been mistaken, that the tears had come after all for Jack's cheeks were wet, then realized they were Jack's tears instead of hers, and she released an audible cry.

No words had to be spoken. Each kiss and caress and moan and gasp communicated the exquisite agony of what would be their second and last night together. How could she ingrain these last moments in her memory clearly enough to endure the lonely nights to come? His scent, the feel of his skin, the weight of his body on hers, the way he felt inside her, the taste of his mouth, the light in his amber eyes when she caught him gazing down at her.

"Sev – "

He wanted to speak. She didn't let him. She silenced him with a long, deep kiss, then pulled him even tighter, wishing she could pull all of him inside her, and when he lay still and spent on top of her, she combed his hair with her fingers wondering how she could leave him.

Incredulously, with her body and mind's needs and desires at odds, wrapped in his arms, she fell asleep.

Rumbling, thrumming engine sounds invaded her dreams. Was the *Raven Wing* launching? Was she onboard? Was the panic searing pathways through her chest reacting to the fear of space travel or to what lay ahead or losing what she was leaving behind? Or –

A handheld was ringing, joining the din. Although ringing wasn't the right word, even though the persistent sound had to be one of the myriad of sounds a handheld could produce for an incoming call, or a reminder alarm, but the sound's meaning didn't quite seem to be either one.

She opened her eyes.

She was alone in bed. Jack was pulling his pants on, then his shirt, then withdrawing what looked like a small handheld with a flashing red light from one of the zippered pockets of his jacket – Wild's jacket.

Savannah sprang upright.

"Jack?" She pointed to the window even though the curtain was still drawn. "What am I hearing?"

"Drones," he said.

And then the drones came.

A lump formed in her throat.

Jack slipped the flashing handheld back into its pocket.

"Get up. Get dressed. Go wake the others." He pulled his jacket off the clothes hook on the wall and opened the door that led to the main area of his office. "Get all your things together."

"What's happening?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure yet . . . exactly." He stepped toward her and leaned one knee on the bed so he could reach her, cupped her face in his free hand and kissed her. "Just in case."

He left her. She heard him running down the catwalk and by the sound of his soft footfalls he was barefoot.

Just in case, he had said. Just in case that had been the last goodbye.

Savannah threw the covers back and got up, dressed in the jeans and t-shirt she pulled from the one bag she hadn't packed in the van the night before, shoving her sweatpants and sweatshirt she had worn to bed for a brief time into the bag to replace them.

The group had packed the night before, each keeping an overnight bag they planned to carry with them. Originally, Ace planned to drive them to the spaceport, but now that he and Zoe were joining them, Jack would need to drive instead. Or would that plan change again now that some kind of emergency had taken Jack from her in the middle of the night? Only, it wasn't the middle of the night. It just seemed that way. When curiosity compelled her to slide the curtain open, she could tell by the soft glow in the sky that the new day was dawning.

She didn't see any drones through the window, but she knew from her night with Wild on the rooftop when she had looked through his goggles not to be relieved even when the thrumming had faded.

She slipped her bag over her shoulder and ran downstairs, threw open the double doors, and burst into the locker room, flipping on the lights. She ignored the ensuing groans, waited long enough for at least one pair of sleepy eyes to focus on her.

"Jack says we need to get up and get our things together," she said.

More eyes opened to look at her in confusion.

She didn't wait for them to ask any questions. She turned and moved to the lounge, positioning herself in the jamb of the double doors so she could peer into the main warehouse, waiting to see movement.

The others joined her, huddling in a cluster behind her.

"What is it?" Trey moved to stand beside her and whispered.

Savannah turned to focus on him. His eyes were wide but his voice had been calm.

"Drones," she said.

Savannah heard a small squeak escape Love's throat.

Trey groaned. "Did I mention I hate drones?"

Savannah shook her head, felt the corner of her mouth turn up. "No, just hovers."

She heard movement on the stairs, saw a silhouette run upstairs to the catwalk, disappear for a moment then reappear coming toward them.

Savannah and the others stepped aside as Jack entered.

He looked disheveled, his hair pushed upward in several directions, the result of Savannah's playful fingers messing with it such a short time before, his eyes red and swollen.

"You all need to go now, to the spaceport. The leader of the AFA just appeared on our doorstep with drones on his tail, meaning that this warehouse, no matter how clean you left the vault, will no doubt be compromised."

When no one responded, he grunted in exasperation. "I'm telling you that you need to go."

He stepped forward and grabbed Savannah's hand and pulled her through the open doorway, his action shocking the others out of their momentary trance.

"Jack," Savannah said.

He responded by squeezing her hand a bit tighter as he pulled her through the main warehouse past the dock and toward the van. The rest of the group followed, Ace and Zoe leading the way followed closely by Trey with Love and Diamond trailing behind.

When Jack reached the van, he took Savannah by the shoulders and pulled her out of the way to let the others climb in and take their seats first.

"You have to go now," Jack said. He swallowed. "Everything's coming to a head. The AFA, BAR, GUN, and three other factions from other districts I don't know the names of are all here in the Fifth District. This is their main assault. And somehow Security got a mole inside the AFA and got a location lock on the leader and followed him into 504. Judging by the leader's description, the mole might even

be your white-haired friend. If she was flagged that night, they might have rounded her up and made her a *deal*."

"Cynda?"

He nodded. "Don't judge her. I'm sure she wasn't given much of a choice."

Ace fired up the van. The smaller of the two roller doors was ascending.

"Why would the AFA's leader come here? Will you be in danger? What will happen to you?" Her voice sounded as high-pitched as Gwenny's.

"Don't worry about me. Get yourself off this stupid planet." He flashed her a smile, one that reached his eyes but dissolved into a look of anguish, and then he kissed her, hard, quickly, then pushed her toward Love who stood behind her grabbing her arm. "I love you, Seven. Remember that. Always have. Always will. Now go."



Ace weaved the van through back alleys and shortcuts much like her driver had done the night he had driven her home through protest-filled streets, jostling Savannah from side to side, at times slamming her body into Love so hard that Love subsequently slammed into Diamond.

Why was there so much traffic at this hour? Or was it always this crowded at this time? Savannah wouldn't know. She never ventured far from her apartment, and certainly not this early.

But it was more than just crowded. It was chaotic, as if some kind of foreboding vibration or irritating static permeated the air.

When Ace swerved out of the way of an oncoming bus, Love gripped Diamond's sleeve with one hand and Savannah's hand with the other.

"I feel so stupid," Love said. "I thought I'd be excited to leave, to say goodbye to 504 and the warehouse, but when I saw Jack closing the roller door behind us, I think my heart broke."

Savannah turned her face away. If she blinked hard enough, she wondered if she could keep herself from breaking down.

"Oh. I'm sorry." Love gripped Savannah's hand with both of hers. "You must be . . . you must feel . . ."

Love didn't finish.

The sky was brightening. Dawn had yielded to morning.

Savannah had thought, or perhaps had simply hoped, that they would have more of the day to get to the *Raven Wing*. She had envisioned the group having a last breakfast and coffee together in the kitchen before Jack drove them to the spaceport where she would sit in the front passenger seat and hold his hand as he drove, and that they would have time to have one long, last, lingering, tear-stained kiss before one of them had the courage to pull away. It was the scenario that had stilled her mind enough to sleep.

But none of that happened.

Instead, the goodbye had happened too abruptly, the kiss too brief. She couldn't even feel it on her lips now.

Her eyes ached.

She should have told Jack she loved him one more time, after he said it, before Love and Diamond pulled her into the van and closed the door. He had to know it, for she had told him in front of the fire at the pool house, but he should have heard her say it one more time.

I love you, Jack.

With all the technology advancements in this world, why hadn't telepathy been achieved?

Handhelds existed, and they were the next best thing, she supposed. Optionally, she could use the PIG to leave her final draft message in the magnolia18 account for him to find if he ever logged in again once she was gone. But Jack should have heard her say it. He should have seen her face when she said it. Just reading the words wouldn't be the same. That was the reason, she supposed, why poets wrote sonnets and composers wrote love songs aspiring to be more than words, for words weren't enough.

A horn blast made Savannah jump. Ace was swearing. Zoe was telling him to be calm, to be careful, that they just had to hold on a little longer.

Love touched her arm. "Did you ever read the journal entries I printed for you?"

Savannah turned, refocused, nodded. She would never forget reading those entries in the pool house on the day of firsts.

"Yes. Thank you." She smiled, then tilted her head when Love gave a knowing nod. "Love. Did you *know* Jack was user8?"

Love shook her head, shrugged. "No, but I guessed. Diamond denied it. Ace thought of you as a little sister. Trey would have just admitted it. And those words sounded like something Jack would say – not about me – I'm too noisy – or Eight – she never looked very happy – so it had to be Jack yearning for you. Jack is . . . "

Love paused, struggling but not finding a descriptor.

Beautiful, Elise had said.

Savannah sighed. Jack *was* beautiful, and she was leaving him behind.

Savannah withdrew her hand from Love's grip and put an arm around her shoulders. When they reached Palas, she would invite Love to take a walk with her under the stars and tell her about Wild and magnolia8 and the date on the rooftop. She would tell her how she had learned that Jack and Wild were one in the same and about their date at the beach house. She would tell her a little bit at a time, as if she were reading her a bedtime story a chapter at a time, reminiscent of their time growing up together at Chance House. She knew Love would love that. And they were moments Savannah could look forward to.

Keep moving forward, Elise had said.

"Finally," Ace said.

Zoe turned around in the passenger seat. "We're here."

Their small group was only one of countless others who were arriving early. Ace followed a long line of vehicles entering the spaceport, inching the van forward until at last it was their turn to deposit their burgeoning bags at the cargo drop-off, Zoe producing the OWMC travel documents she had received from the recruiting station after submitting their applications.

After finding a parking space in a long-term lot where Jack could retrieve the van, they exited, hoisted the bags they carried over their shoulders, and boarded the third tram that passed them heading to the *Raven Wing's* terminal, the first two trams too packed to board.

Security officers lined the walkways, hovers patrolled the sky overhead, and protesters, content for now just to hold their signs and call out their catch phrases, stood in clumps filling open spaces on sidewalks.

An authoritative voice repeated the same warning over loud speakers positioned to reach every ear at the spaceport.

"TWI Spaceport conducts peaceful and lawful transportation for cargo and passengers. Any threat or act of violence will be regarded as terrorism against the spaceport, its shareholders, employees, and the Fifth District, and participants will be subject to District Security fines and imprisonment."

Protesters shouted their slogans even louder after each announcement.

Trey tapped Savannah's shoulder and pointed.

Towering over the expansive port were two spaceships, one a cargo-only transport comprised of ten separate but interlocking cylindrical modules, clouds of steam still venting from its engines after a recent landing, the other a passenger-cargo hybrid, black as a raven's wing, the letters OWMC emblazoned in gold along its side.

"Look, it's the *Raven Wing*," Trey was beaming.

In spite of everything, Savannah felt a flicker of excitement.

They stepped off the tram and were swept forward into a stream of passengers heading toward the terminal, Trey hurrying to walk alongside Savannah where they exchanged a smile.

This is it, his eyes seemed to say.

As she walked, her gaze was drawn upward toward the two ships. Every few steps she had to remind herself to watch her feet to avoid tripping on an occasional crack in the cement or running into the person walking in front of her.

Savannah had never seen spaceships before, at least not when they weren't just specks with flaming tails streaking through the sky overhead. The two massive structures stood like brilliant testaments to human ingenuity, to study and sacrifice, to long, hard hours of work. They screamed their technological prowess at the skies and stars above while saluting their creators below.

Savannah felt a conflicting sense of pride and guilt admiring them for she, among others, had chosen to abandon all they represented.

Crowd control ropes guided the stream of passengers into a long line that snaked its way toward and inside the terminal. Kiosks positioned along the route repeated a welcome message instructing passengers to have their travel documents and either temporary or registration IDs ready and to be prepared for fingerprinting and security scans. Solicitors walked along the line offering marriage certificates. Trey lifted an eyebrow toward Savannah questioningly, but she shook her head. But Love and Diamond, standing just behind them, paid the exorbitant fee, signed their names, exchanged a kiss, and pocketed the paperwork. They were a registered couple now.

Zoe handed each of them their travel documents and temporary IDs, handing Savannah only her travel documents since she was registered as a Limited and had a registration ID.

Then they waited.

Savannah shoved her cold hands into her jacket pockets. Even though the sky had brightened, the morning air was crisp and biting in the breeze, and the line wasn't moving. The *Raven Wing* wasn't boarding yet, at least for this line of passengers. According to the announcement runner at the bottom of the kiosk screens, only Unlimited boarding was open. That meant that Hadley and Quinn as members of the OWSF and their families were either already boarding or would have access to an express boarding method once they arrived.

The kiosk displays added a segment to their repeating content showing layouts of the *Raven Wing*'s berth decks and common areas, advising passengers that since common area space was limited, an induced, rotating sleep schedule would be in effect during cruise. Also, all passengers, regardless of access status, would be sedated during launch as a safety measure.

Trey groaned. "Well, that's disappointing. I wanted to watch us leave the atmosphere."

Ace laughed. "You say that, but I bet you won't miss feeling your teeth rattle."

"I bet they don't want anyone vomiting or panicking," Diamond said.

The kiosk displays changed again. Dramatic music and graphics resolved into a live feed of two reporters sitting side by side.

"Good morning and welcome to the Fifth District's morning news, brought to you by the good people at TW Industries." The reporter exchanged a broad smile with his co-host, then turned back to the camera and donned a more serious expression. "Our top story this morning is the apprehension of the leader of the AFA."

Savannah blinked. Had she heard the reporter right? She watched the updated announcement runner scroll by, blinked again. Was she reading it right?

"Protests and terrorist attacks by the Access for All protest group known as the AFA have been escalating over the past few months, and according to the Fifth District Security will be culminating today in what is being called the group's boldest move yet, an obstruction scheme against GenTech's supply delivery scheduled to arrive tomorrow. Protesters began assembling as early as last night at TWI Spaceport as well as along traffic routes. Since no violence has occurred as of yet, no arrests have been made, except for the AFA leader whose location was leaked to Security by an informant. As of this broadcast, the leader's identity is being withheld until admitting procedures at 504's Northwest Division are complete."

A chorus of shouts and screams erupted from the previously demure huddle of protesters.

Savannah stepped away from the kiosk. The AFA leader, arrested. He had been at the warehouse. He had been with Jack at the warehouse.

Trey pulled her into their group's circle and they exchanged worried looks, afraid to speak in case they were overheard, not only by other passengers but by Security who patrolled the line, their skeptical, surveying gazes on alert.

But the expressions on her siblings' faces weren't hard to read.

"I'm sure he's fine," Love said. But she was wringing her hands as if they ached.

"Maybe . . ." Savannah's words, barely audible, felt too large in her mouth. "Maybe I should go back."

Ace turned both palms up.

"And do what?" His voice had been too loud. People in the line ahead of them turned their heads. He lowered his voice. "He either made himself scarce, in which case he's fine, or he didn't, and he's being processed now right alongside that idiot, in which case there's nothing we can do about it. We're Unregistered remember, and I highly doubt that your Limited access gives you much more influence than we have."

Savannah had been leaning forward into the circle but now she pulled back. Ace rarely spoke with such an angry tone.

She swallowed.

"My brother-in-law. He's a lawyer." She shook her head to negate the words as soon as she spoke them. Grant was a *corporate* lawyer, useless in this instance. "Maybe Yuta."

"You mean Yuta Tensai, the game designer?" Diamond lifted an eyebrow. "Surely you don't think he has influence when it comes to Security."

Savannah sniffled. Her nose had started to run. Zoe handed her a tissue.

"Aren't you two being a bit harsh?" Zoe glared at Ace, then turned a similar glare toward Diamond.

"Seven's just worried about Jack," Love said.

Diamond sighed, nodded. "We're all worried about Jack, Love, love. We're just . . . frustrated."

Ace shook his head. "Speculation is pointless. And they said they only made one arrest."

"They don't always report everything," Savannah said. "They never mention wasp swarms. They didn't mention BAR or GUN, just the AFA."

Trey curled an arm around Savannah's shoulders. "Don't worry. I'm sure Jack's fine. And if he can find a way, I'm sure he'll get word to us, even at Fringe Point."

She nodded. Jack had told Rich Daddy that communication was accessible to everyone at Fringe Point.

Ace stepped forward and pulled Savannah into his arms, nearly squeezing the breath from her lungs. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Seven."

She nodded her head against his chest.

The line began to move. Ace released her and returned to Zoe's side and grasped her hand. She gave him an approving nod and smile.

Savannah gazed upward and squinted into the sun.

Was Jack really fine?

Did he run, or did he risk his own freedom to help the person who had brought Security to their literal doorstep? Did he even know them?

She shook her head. What was she thinking? Jack had to know the AFA leader. As Wild, he had been showing up at protests to protect his brother. He had to know the leader.

She bit her lip, angry with him suddenly.

Did he always have to take on the role of protector? For his brother, for Tom, for Gwenny? For her? For all of them? Somewhere in his caretaker brain, had he decided that he had to stay behind to ensure their successful departure?

Damn him.

A very large part of her wanted the line to move faster.

Savannah didn't understand how she could feel so tied up in knots and numb at the same time, or how her body could ignore the voice in her head telling her to run back to the warehouse to find Jack and just keep walking forward instead as if blindly following the crowd in front of her.

Trey still had his arm around her shoulders. She wanted to shrug him off at first, not wanting to be comforted, but he held her fast, and now that an hour or maybe more had passed and their section of the line grew ever closer to the terminal's entrance, she allowed her muscles to relax enough to let him steady her.

Gratefully, Trey stayed silent and the others spoke among themselves as they walked. Savannah distracted herself by scanning the individuals and family groups ahead and behind them, attempting to guess which ones were planning to board the *Nighthawk* in three months on its way to Palas versus those legitimately planning to live and work at Fringe Point for their three-year stint while they presumably squirreled away lucrative earnings to improve their situation upon their return. But guessing each group's final destination proved difficult, for even though everyone had been standing in line for hours, first in the chill morning breeze and now squinting into the bright, warm sun, most of them still wore hopeful expressions. Even those who had been keeping their children's curiosity and high-energy in check still exchanged smiles and excited banter.

One parent had arrived late, though, she noticed. Perhaps too late.

Savannah saw the dark-clad, hooded figure running along the length of the line, carrying a child dressed in similar dark clothing, also with a hood, the child's legs and arms wrapped tightly around the figure's waist and neck. The figure would pause to scan faces, run forward, then pause again, obviously searching for someone, perhaps the other parent.

The line moved forward through the terminal's entrance and turned a corner and Savannah lost sight of them, but she hoped the family would be reunited soon.

Trey released her and pointed. "Look. I can see the check-in booths. We're getting close."

She sighed. At last.

A hand fell on her shoulder from behind and she took a step back. Maybe she was blocking someone's view?

"I found you."

The clench in her stomach recognized the voice before her mind could register it.

Savannah spun around and stared.

The figure and child she had been watching stood directly in front of her on the other side of the control ropes, both staring back at her, a golden-haired child and the man with amber eyes who held her. Her quick intake of air hurt her lungs.

"Jack?"

Gweny leaned forward in Jack's arms and blinked tear-filled eyes at her.
"You were all going to leave without telling me goodbye."

17 – Eye and Wing

“Sir. Step away from the line.”

A Security officer approached them, his index finger extended as he gestured for Jack to follow his instruction.

Savannah reached over the ropes and grabbed Jack’s jacket at the shoulder with one hand and Gwenny’s hooded sweatshirt with the other to first confirm they were real and then to hold them in place.

“Sir. I said to step away. If you have documents, you can go to the back of the line.”

“But, he’s with us.” Trey gestured with his head to the rest of their group, but the officer’s eyes never left Jack.

“Sir.” He said it in a deeper voice this time, dropping his hand onto the weapon at his hip. Savannah didn’t know what Security officers carried and couldn’t tell while it was holstered, but it couldn’t be good.

“Listen.” Jack turned to face him. “Just call over a Consortium rep, will you?”

The line had stopped moving. All eyes within the terminal had focused on them. Whispers started in the line ahead of them, louder murmurs behind them, especially from those whose view was blocked.

“Gwenny,” Jack said. “Pull that card out of my top pocket, the one I showed you earlier, and show it to the officer.”

Gwenny did as he asked.

Savannah exchanged a wide-eyed look with Trey.

It was a registration card.

“When you call them,” Jack said, “give them the ID.”

Tom. Yes, somehow Tom had provided Jack with an ID. But why wasn’t Tom here? Why was Jack here with Gwenny? Had Jack brought Gwenny here so she could tell them goodbye?

The officer frowned, raised a finger to his ear and activated his comm.

“We have an issue out here. Send someone over.” He drew in a breath. “And check this ID. U2947P.”

Savannah couldn’t hear the response. As the officer ended the call, he gestured to the passengers directly behind their group.

“Step around them,” he said. “Keep the line moving.”

“Jack.” Savannah pulled on his jacket, waited until he turned toward her. “Why are you here? Are you coming with us? Why did you bring Gwenny?”

Gwenny turned her head and buried her face in the crook of Jack’s neck.

Jack patted the top of Gwenny’s head, then gave Savannah a sweet but exhausted smile.

“I’ll explain,” he said.

Trey and the others squeezed against Savannah’s back as the line of passengers surged around them like they were a boulder in a stream.

“But you don’t have documents, Jack,” Trey said. “You didn’t fill out any forms.”

“I could marry you.”

The words spilled out as if her subconscious had been holding on to them ever since he told her he wasn’t an option.

Savannah shot a glance down the line looking for the solicitors, thought she spotted them, pointed, then tugged on Jack's jacket. "Those people are here marrying couples. Love and Diamond did it. If we got married, they might let you and Gwenny on the *Raven Wing* with me as my family."

His tired eyes softened.

"It's all right, Seven. You don't need to marry me."

"What's going on, Jack?" Ace shoved his way to the front of their cluster. "We were worried about you."

A woman in a tan OWMC uniform rushed toward them, gripping a handheld, her finger tapping at the comm in her ear.

Breathless, she stopped in front of Jack and held her handheld out to him. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she said. "If you could just validate your ID?"

Jack nodded, placed his forefinger on the handheld, then entered a passcode.

The woman smiled, relieved, then lifted the handheld high enough for the Security officer to see its display. His face blanched slightly.

The officer turned toward Jack. "My apologies," he said.

The woman, whose name was Maven according to the badge dangling from a lanyard around her neck, brushed her hair out of her eyes, took a moment to catch her breath, then turned back to Jack.

"Again, our apologies. We weren't informed you were coming. I'll take your party's documents and check you all in and upgrade your berths. For now, follow me to the *Raven's Eye*."

Love pushed forward. "Did she just say the *Raven's Eye*? Isn't that the lounge for Unlimiteds?"

"Jack, I hope you're planning to explain *very* soon," Diamond said.

Maven held out her hand and Savannah relinquished her travel documents, the others following her lead with looks of confused acceptance.

"Thank you," Maven said.

Jack shifted Gwenny's weight to the opposite hip. "Is there anywhere we can wait that's more private than the lounge?"

"There are private rooms inside the lounge. Will that do?"

Jack nodded.

"Then if you'll all follow me?"

Maven gestured to the Security officer to unlock the section of control ropes, and as soon as Savannah exited the line, she gripped Jack's arm with both hands.

"I can't believe you're here," she said.

"That makes at least seven of us," Diamond said.

Maven let them through a locked door that circumvented the check-in booths and down a side corridor to a waiting elevator large enough to accommodate all of them with ease. With a wave of her badge, the elevator began to ascend.

Maven turned to face them.

"The *Raven's Eye* is located on the 11th floor which provides direct access via gangway to the *Raven Wing's* passenger boarding level. All lower levels of the ship are dedicated to cargo. Our other Unlimited guests aren't expected to arrive until dinner time which will be served in the lounge. Note that all food and drink aboard the *Raven Wing* will be provided in pre-prepared pouches, so enjoy the lounge's offerings while you can." She clutched her handheld to her chest. "Also, due to increasing unrest at the spaceport, we have been authorized to launch as soon as all cargo and passengers are onboard. I will let you know when you need to board and prepare for launch."

The elevator reached the 11th floor.

"Right this way," Maven said.

Maven led them through a tiled lobby past several OWMC employees at their desks behind a reception counter, then down a carpeted corridor to a set of large, double doors with ornate, metallic

inlays. She waved her badge in front of the access panel and the doors slid open to reveal the *Raven's Eye*.

The lounge occupied the entire south wing of the terminal, floor-to-ceiling windows providing a view of the *Raven Wing* towering over the terminal building in one direction and the spaceport and its growing number of encroaching protestors on the ground below them in the other. Framed photographs of the *Raven Wing* launching into space as well as star charts indicating the locations of the OWMC's five mining colonies hung above the bar. Small tables surrounded by overstuffed chairs, and larger tables surrounded by stools filled the room.

Maven gestured to a small corridor past the bar. "Mr. Wild, we have several private rooms through here."

"Thank you," Jack said.

Maven nodded. "Then I'll leave you here for now. Welcome to the *Raven Wing*."

Maven left them, closing the lounge doors behind her.

Jack peeled Gwenny's arms and legs from around his torso and placed her in the closest overstuffed chair. Frowning, Gwenny pulled the hood of her sweatshirt down over her face and dissolved into the chair.

Love knelt on the floor in front of her.

"Gwenny? Do you want to come sit with Auntie Love? I haven't seen you in a while."

Gwenny pursed her lips. She didn't answer but she lifted her arms and allowed Love to pick her up.

Jack turned to face the group.

"I know I owe all of you an explanation, but Seven deserves it first, so if you can wait just a bit and watch Gwenny for me, I'll be back to tell you everything."

Trey exchanged a quick look with Ace and Diamond, then nodded. "We can wait, Jack. We're just glad to see you're in one piece."

"And I've got Gwenny," Love said. "I think she's going to drop off to sleep in a minute."

Jack nodded. "She's had a rough morning. Thank you."

Jack took Savannah's hand and led her down the corridor past the bar and into the first private room.

As soon as the doors closed behind them, Savannah slid her arms around Jack's waist and let her head fall against his chest.

"Jack, before you say anything, before you tell me why you're here, and before you explain why I shouldn't be happy that you're here, let me have a moment."

He encircled her in his arms and lowered his head to place his cheek against her temple.

Savannah relaxed her body into him.

He was here. He was fine. He hadn't been arrested along with the AFA leader. But something had happened. She could see it in his pained expression and in Gwenny's frown.

Savannah drew in a series of deep breaths, willing the strength and warmth of Jack's embrace to steel her nerves. He waited, patiently, silently, until at last she pushed away from him and dropped into a chair, just then noticing that the small room only contained two chairs and a side table. The view of the black surface of the *Raven Wing* filled the room's narrow window.

Jack moved the other chair so it faced her and sat, then clasped his hands and stared down at them, letting silence continue to hang between them while he drew in a long breath, then looked up to meet her gaze. He smiled. Savannah assumed he intended the smile to be reassuring, but the pain she sensed from it was anything but.

"First," he said, "you should know that Tom's been arrested."

"Tom? But they said only the AFA leader . . ." She stopped mid-sentence, her mind catching up with the meaning of his words. She swallowed. "Oh. *Tom's* the leader."

He nodded. "Tom showed up at the warehouse this morning with drones on his tail. He knew someone had given him up, that he couldn't outrun the drones, that he'd be arrested, so he came to the warehouse to ask me to get Gwenny." He shook his head. "No, to *beg* me to take her where Ma'am couldn't get to her. He said once he was arrested, Security would put Gwenny in her grandmother's care, and he couldn't stand the thought of that. 'So, take her far away,' he said, 'even if I won't be able to her again . . . for a while.' So, here we are."

Savannah pictured Tom begging Jack for help, how desperate he must have looked. She imagined how torn Jack must have been and still was sitting here about to board a spaceship to leave his friend behind. She didn't have to imagine how Gwenny felt. She looked devastated.

Savannah swallowed, reached out and placed her hands over Jack's clasped ones. "What about your brother?" She whispered the question. "You haven't mentioned him. Can you leave *him* behind? Is he safe?"

Jack blinked and knit his brow, as if he didn't understand her question, then his eyes grew wide and he lifted his head, glanced up at the ceiling for an instant before dropping his head in a nod.

"Right. My brother." He took her hands in his, stroked her fingers. "At the pool house, you asked me if there were any more of me. Well, there *is* one more."

He drew in a long breath as his face and mouth grappled with which words he would say next.

"Seven, Tom *is* my brother."

If Savannah's hands had been free, she knew they would have flown to her mouth to stifle her gasp, but Jack held them in a firm grip.

"Tom is your brother," she said.

The moment reminded her when she learned that Jack's face was behind Wild's mask, when she had parroted his words back to him while her mind struggled to form its own sentences. She had asked Jack then if he had a brother, since Wild had told her he had a brother.

Jack's brother – Wild's brother – was Tom.

"My full name is Theo Jackson Wild. My father is Theodore 'Ted' Wild of TW Industries which is a major OWMC shareholder and owns the naming rights to this spaceport. My mother is Gwendolyn Thompson of Thompson Holdings. Tom took our mother's name. I took our father's."

Savannah stared into the amber eyes she thought she knew so well.

Theo Jackson Wild.

Then Wild really *was* his name. He really *had* been attending AFA protests to protect his brother who wasn't only a member of the AFA, but its leader. And if Tom was his brother, then Jack really *was* Gwenny's uncle, not just an honorary one.

Jack, and Jack as Wild, had always told the truth. Just not all of it.

"Thompson Holdings carries strong influence in a lot of different industries, except with the OWMC. The Consortium is my father's domain. So Gwenny should be beyond Ma'am's reach at Fringe Point."

Savannah nodded, continuing to nod as she vocalized what she was beginning to understand.

"You're taking Gwenny to Fringe Point to keep her away from her grandmother, *your* mother, *Ma'am*, because your brother Tom, the leader of the AFA, has been arrested."

"Yes."

"Then . . ." Savannah paused. She didn't want to ask the next, obvious question. Asking meant he might answer. Asking it was selfish, without regard to Tom or Gwenny or even Jack, yet she couldn't breathe if she didn't. "Then, after we get to Fringe Point, in three months, or however long it is now that the timeline moved up, when I leave on the *Nighthawk* with the others for Palas . . . "

The rest of her question, despite her need to ask it, died on her lips.

Jack stood and pulled her up against him, wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She put her ear against his chest where she could hear his heart pounding.

"I don't know what happens from here," he said. "I really, truly, honestly, don't know."



The sons of power couple Theodore Wild and Gwendolyn Thompson were doubly privileged gaining Unlimited access status by proxy from both parents. The oldest son Tom received the majority of his mother's attention and adoration, as well as her highest expectations, while the younger son Theo received a confusing mix of judgmental disapproval and overprotectiveness. Theodore treated both sons fairly and somewhat affectionately but was seldom home to do either. As soon as Tom entered the university and moved to an apartment nearby, Theo packed a bag and left home, Tom providing his cover story and mimicking his voice on the phone whenever their mother called.

Theo had no idea where he would go or what he would do once he left home. He had a chance to leave and he took it, but much to his embarrassment he was detained by Children's Services who found him sleeping in a park. Since he was unwilling to reveal his identity and his description didn't turn up in Security's database as missing, he was sent to Chance House in Zone 503 where Bess and Gil Chance had dubbed him number 11. When they asked him if they could call him Jack, he had smiled at how close they had come to his real name.

The fact that Gwendolyn Thompson could be fooled for over six months was surprising, but he shouldn't have been surprised when she used her influence to put Theo's image on a hover surveillance list.

When a hover spotted him on his way to *503's Best Café* and Security brought him home, his mother offered him a deal. If he stayed home until he graduated from school and took part ownership of one of her businesses and manage it, keeping him close, she would let him live his life as he saw fit. She also agreed to call him Jack. He had liked being Jack from Chance House. It was the reason he had chosen Warehouse 11 because he had been the 11th ward the Chances had taken in.

Tom hadn't always been the leader of the AFA. He hadn't even been interested when he first met Natalie Dunham. She had been the activist, scolding him often about his lack of social awareness and responsibility. It wasn't until she disappeared that Tom sought out the AFA to look for her, hoping that his involvement would lead him to her whereabouts, his participation increasing as he extended his contacts and search to BAR and GUN and other protest groups. Finding Natalie was his true priority. If the AFA did succeed in gaining access for all, it would be his gift to her.

After Tom convinced Jack to take Gwenny away that morning, he had smiled and told him that perhaps his arrest would prove to be a good thing, that it would put his face where Natalie might see it and she would come back to them. Then he sped away down Chester Street, only making it as far as Magnolia before the drones descended.

As Jack finished confessing to his Chance House siblings in the *Raven's Eye* lounge, he turned his gaze toward Gwenny, asleep at last on Love's lap, and released a long-held breath in a sigh.

Savannah squeezed Jack's hand and waited with him for the questions she suspected would be forthcoming, for Ace and Zoe, Trey, Love and Diamond stared at Jack with mouths slightly ajar, confusion, surprise, and sympathy in their eyes.

Trey rubbed the back of his neck.

"So, I guess that explains why you never talked about your family. But I don't understand. Why keep all this a secret?" He gestured around the lounge, to the privileges that Jack's status was currently affording. "Why didn't you ever tell us?"

Jack shrugged.

"I thought about it, almost every day in fact, but I could never think of a good time, or a good reason, to tell any of you that I had run away from privilege and masqueraded as part of your Chance House family, that I was still masquerading as an Unregistered warehouse manager when I'm actually an Unlimited co-owner trying to disavow privilege I didn't earn. And what was the point in telling you when you were leaving? Better to let you remember me as someone you trusted rather than someone who deceived you."

Ace leaned forward and placed his arms on the large table where he sat on a stool next to Zoe.

"You could have trusted us to accept you for you, Jack, just like we did at Chance House. I know you think you didn't deserve to be one of us, back then, but you were. You still are. You can't deny it."

Diamond shrugged his shoulders. "I don't care what your access status is, Jack." He spread his arms. "That's why we're all here, isn't it, because we're running away from all that?"

Jack's mouth twitched up into a smile. He nodded. "I guess you're right."

Trey lifted his arm and pointed. "I only have one more question."

Jack lifted his eyebrows. "Only one?"

Trey gave a single, quick nod. "The motorcycle. Yours or Tom's? Truthfully."

"Well, technically, mine, but – "

"I knew it! All this time I could have been borrowing it from you."



The remaining Unlimited guests included high-ranking OWMC executives, and two representatives from the OWSF and their families, namely, Hadley Stineby and his wife Bev, and Zachary Quinn, his wife Rosemary, and their teenage son Joseph. Although Hadley greeted Savannah with a warm handshake telling her how pleased he was that she had decided to join them, Jack was the center of attention in the lounge for a second time. Consortium executives surrounded him, unable to disguise concern behind their smiles that Jack had been tasked by his father the chairman to conduct a surprise inspection. Zachary and Hadley questioned what had convinced him to join them at last, both Rosemary and Bev giving Savannah what they thought was a knowing wink. She had responded with a smile leaving it to Jack to clarify if pressed, for it wasn't her place to explain the reason he was here. Savannah couldn't hear any of Jack's answers over the din, if in fact he gave anyone an answer, for dinner had been served, the bar was open, and all voices in the now crowded room grew louder with excitement each moment.

Gweny had awakened with an appetite, and Savannah helped her fill a dinner plate from the bar, her fingers and face soon stained with spaghetti sauce and grape juice.

When Maven entered and announced it was time to board, Savannah dunked a napkin in a glass of water and suggested Gweny wash up. Their adventure was about to begin, Savannah told her. She wanted to look her best, didn't she?

Gweny hesitated, searching Savannah's face for signs that the upbeat tone of her voice was genuine, then took the napkin and succeeded in cleaning up before Jack joined them.

"Ready?"

Trey clapped Jack on his shoulder. "I've been ready my whole life," he said.

Jack turned toward him and smirked. "I wasn't talking to you."

Trey laughed, then hurried to the lounge's double doors to ensure he was the first one to follow Maven out into the corridor and down the gangway to finally board the *Raven Wing*.

Savannah wished she hadn't taken Maven's advice to enjoy the *Raven's Eye* offerings so literally. As soon as she stepped onto the gangway, the fact that the narrow, suspended walkway hovered eleven floors above the spaceport's unyielding tarmac twisted her full stomach into a nauseating knot. She knew the corridor was enclosed. The cables that held the gangway in place until they retracted for launch appeared thick and strong. But these facts did little to assuage her trepidation. She stole a glance at Gwenny, worried that she too would find the gangway frightening, but the hardy girl looked unfazed. At least for now, she walked beside her Uncle Jack with a brave face.

Maven led the group of Unlimited passengers through the open hatchway of the *Raven Wing* and into its stark, metallic interior, Trey the first one to step through the scanners and don the proffered spacesuit, wincing slightly as an OWMC attendant tightened and secured its straps and gloves. He still grinned after he was cleared to continue, however, and held up a gloved hand in a wave as the attendant showed him to the elevator, handing him a badge and directions to his assigned berth.

"You and the young one here will share a berth, Mr. Wild," Maven said.

"I'll need one for three of us." Jack lifted the hand holding Savannah's to explain their connection.

Maven nodded. "Of course."

Savannah didn't know what to expect, yet somehow the interior of their small berth wasn't surprising. There were four beds, or sleep pods according to the jargon Maven had used, stacked like bunk beds, along with four locking cabinets to hold belongings. Here was where they would seal themselves inside the sleep pods while they slept through launch and assigned sleeping rotations during cruise, and little else. Maven had told them this was an upgraded berth. Savannah wondered what the berths were like for those without Jack's Unlimited patronage.

A small screen next to the doorway illuminated with instructions to prepare for launch.

Jack secured Gwenny while Savannah climbed into the second sleep pod's tight space, then offered his gloved hand for her to clasp before climbing into a third pod.

Despite Savannah's attempts to slow her breathing, a swell of panic refused to be ignored. What was she doing? Why had she agreed to lie restrained and confined atop a rocket that would hurl her into space? Her sleep pod's hatch closed and locked, oxygen flowed, and yet she felt as if she couldn't breathe.

A faint blue glow emanated around her, then she felt a pinprick on the inside of her wrist, a tiny needle from the feel of it, administering the sleep drug, but perhaps it was more than just a sleep drug for her panic instantly subsided.

"Sevenanna, wake up! Look, I'm floating!"

Savannah turned her head. Had she slept? Had she even closed her eyes? Had they launched?

Her sleep pod's hatch was open and Gwenny's face loomed next to her before retreating as she pushed her body into the air toward the berth's ceiling.

Savannah released the straps holding her down and her body instantly lifted above the bed's surface. She grabbed handholds and pulled herself free of the pod.

"Do you two want to see the stars from space?" Jack held a grip near the open doorway with one hand, held his other out toward Savannah. "The others are waiting for us in the COS."

The COS. Common Observation Space. Savannah had seen information about it flash by on the information kiosks when they stood in line.

Hand in hand, the three exited their berth, walking and gliding down the narrow corridor.

The COS was a long, curved space with floor to ceiling windows and a handrail along the interior wall. Ace and Zoe, Love, Diamond, and Trey stood together at one end of the space while Hadley and Zachary and the other Unlimited passengers stretched out along the remainder.

Trey and Love grabbed Jack and Savannah and Gwenny and pulled them forward, the others parting to let them approach the windows.

Savannah's mouth dropped open.

Space. A seemingly unending black void pinpricked with dots of light, in some areas so plentiful that they blended into a cloud-like mist. Among those dots was one they had called home, a planet that had until now seemed immense but was now only another point of light shrinking rapidly from view.

"I can't believe this is real." Trey spoke in a whisper, as if speaking louder would disturb the moment.

Savannah didn't think she could speak at all. She could hardly form coherent thoughts.

"Is that space, Uncle Jack?" Gwenny, held tightly in Jack's arms, turned to face him. "Are we in space?"

Jack nodded. "Yes, we're in space."

"Is that why we're floating?"

Jack nodded again.

Savannah drew in a deep breath and held it in her lungs, assuring herself she had oxygen to breathe, that she was alive and this wasn't just a dream.

She tore her focus away from the panorama in front of her and waited for Trey to do the same, her eyes stinging the instant they made eye contact. She couldn't characterize her exact feelings, let alone know how to express them. She only knew that she felt awash in them and that one person more than any other was responsible for her being able to experience them.

"Thank you, Trey."

18 – Fringe Point

No amount of time spent gazing at the limitless, star-studded blackness reduced the need to return to the COS to stare in amazement. The expanse was one that Savannah's brain refused to comprehend, the fact that she stood inside a speck of metal hurtling through its midst as an even smaller speck was one that only her intellect could hold on to. As the days and weeks passed, each time she returned to the COS, she wondered if Maven and the rest of the *Raven Wing* crew – as well as the crew of the *Nighthawk*, and countless others who crewed ships traveling to and from off-world colonies – had become desensitized to the view out these windows or if this much bigger picture of creation was the very enticement that lured them into spending their days in space.

Now, having lingered in the COS long after the others, she had missed her chance to eat with them in the cramped, minimalist, on-board version of the *Raven's Eye* lounge. Jack and the others had already eaten. Ace and Zoe had gone to the library to study Fringe Point and OWMC welcome materials. Love and Diamond had gone with Jack and Gwenny to the gym which contained a harnessed treadmill and resistance equipment, one of the many perks of the Unlimited level. The only other Unlimited passenger slow to finish their meal pouches was Hadley who strapped himself into a seat beside her.

"May I ask you a question?"

Savannah took a sip from her water pouch and nodded.

"Of course."

"May I ask about your plans? For Palas, I mean."

"My plans?"

"Yes." Hadley stroked the scant stubble of gray hairs on his chin. "My plan, of course, is to oversee the concealment of the boxes. I've selected a mountain containing an undiscovered silver deposit, the idea being that the boxes will be found eventually but not too soon. Then I thought I'd establish a residence nearby and stand guard, if you will. Plus, the area is unspoiled, wide-open country and that appeals to me."

"I hope you don't mind my curiosity. Trey told me he wants to see as much of Palas as he can, so plans to wander or find a traveling profession. The two couples sound excited to discover the possibilities. Jack, unsurprisingly, didn't answer me, so now I'm twice as curious about *your* plans."

Savannah took another sip of water and licked her lips: they felt dry after the time spent in an artificial atmosphere.

Did she have any plans? As Hadley said, she wasn't surprised Jack didn't answer, but she felt fairly certain, however, that they didn't include Palas.

She cleared her throat.

"Well, I don't know that I have any plans other than the favor Yuta Tensai asked of me once I get to Fringe Point, so I started journaling, writing about this journey, how it feels to be in space, about my excitement, and fears, and . . . not regret exactly but maybe guilt is a better word . . . about leaving my family behind. I doubt these ramblings will be anything Yuta can use in his next game world, but I've found the distraction useful."

Hadley smiled. "I would love to read what you've written, someday, if you'll let me."

Savannah chuckled. "Well, maybe."

Hadley's expression softened. "Do you write about Jack? I ask because I'm worried that you might resent him for his deception."

She almost laughed again, almost asked which deception in particular he referred to, his identity as the masked man or his identity as an heir to two Unlimited fortunes.

She shook her head. "I don't resent him. Not for that, at least." She straightened. "But no, I don't write about Jack."

She had started to, several times, but her fingers, poised above her laptop's keyboard, froze in place. To write about Jack meant writing about losing him. She had been given a reprieve when she had thought she was going to lose him before boarding the *Raven Wing*, but how long he would stay with her now was unknown. Anticipating a repeat of those feelings made her heart sick, so she couldn't write about it. Writing about it meant facing it. So, no, she didn't write about Jack.

Hadley nodded, smiled.

"I don't know what assignment you'll receive at Fringe Point, but I think you'd be a good teacher. Your primer idea was a good one, and, you did voice those *Palas* game tutorials. If you'd like, I could put in a word with Maven. Fringe Point families with children could use a good teacher." He lifted a bushy eyebrow. "What do you think?"

Savannah had prepared to discount the idea, feeling unworthy of the profession her adoptive parents excelled at, but as Hadley talked, she imagined being surrounded by children like Gwenny, their innocent, eager faces looking up at her in anticipation. It would be a welcome change from speaking into an inanimate recording device.

She tilted her head.

"Yes, I might like that."



Before their imminent arrival, Maven gathered the group together in the rec room in front of a map displaying the interconnected domed spaces of the colony positioned next to the exposed, descending spirals of the mine itself, where she pointed out the spaceport, residential and commercial areas, mining operations, and cluster of agricultural domes. She explained that enclosed trams provided ground transportation, that handhelds and other computing devices could connect to the local network for communication, and delayed news feeds were available. A messaging service was provided to each OWMC employee and contractor either through personal devices or kiosks in common areas.

Maven tapped her index finger on the dome surrounded by the mining operations, commercial, and common area domes.

"The residential dome contains all living quarters as well as primary and secondary schools, markets, and several dining options. This arrangement keeps the need for non-work transportation at a minimum.

"As for your party's accommodations, Mr. Wild, since we need to house so many OWSF members until the *Nighthawk* arrives, I'm afraid we only have one high-priority guest unit open for you, Miss Jones, and young Gwendolyn. I've arranged for three family housing units for the rest of you."

"Even me?" Trey raised his hand, then pointed toward his chest.

Maven smiled. "Yes, even though you're a single, Mr. Wild requested an upgrade for you."

Trey punched Jack's shoulder. "Thanks, Jack."

"As for work assignments, based on the experience you provided in your applications, and a special request from Mr. Stineby, I've arranged for a teaching assistant position for Miss Jones – and if Mr. Wild agrees, young Gwendolyn can attend the primary school in her classroom – contractor onboarding and offboarding for Love, and equipment maintenance and inventory for Ace, Diamond, Trey, and Zoe. Mr. Wild, you, of course, will have free access to all OWMC facilities to carry out whatever

instructions you've been given by the chairman. And also, as you requested, all staff members have been informed to keep your visit to the colony quiet."

"Thank you," Jack said.

Maven smiled. "Of course. Are there any questions?"

Trey shook his head. "Not from me. I appreciate the housing upgrade, and maintenance and inventory sound a lot better than actual mining."

Maven smiled. "Well, naturally, the Consortium needs mine workers, but for the most part that's accomplished through prisoner labor."

"Prisoner labor?" Jack leaned forward. "There's a prison?"

Maven nodded. "Oh, yes." She displayed the map again and tapped her finger on the dome she had pointed to earlier as mining operations. "I forgot to mention it because it isn't visible on the surface, and it isn't common knowledge, but yes, Fringe Point houses a low-security detention facility beneath the mining operations dome that has direct access to the mine. Most prisoners work in the mine, but a small percentage who exhibit consistent good behavior or are nearing the end of their sentences are allowed to work in various supervised commercial, farming, and common areas. But you needn't worry. Contact with detainees will be minimal."

Savannah had leaned forward at the mention of a prison, but now, like Trey had done, raised her hand. It seemed that some classroom, as well as Chance House habits, had been ingrained in both of them.

"Would it be possible to interview any of the prisoners?" When all eyes turned toward her, Savannah realized most of them didn't know about the favor she had promised Yuta. Perhaps it would be best not to reveal it in front of Maven. "I've started a journal and am thinking about writing some articles. I'd love to include some of their stories."

"I see. Well, visits can be requested, but you would need to have a specific person in mind. You might have better and more candid results anyway if you were to encounter them in a more organic way, say, at their jobs in the common areas. They'll be wary, of course, since they're monitored and controlled by SIPHs."

"SIPHs?" Trey drew in a breath. "Are they some kind of hovers?"

Maven nodded. "Small Insurgency Prevention Hovers. I would say they're closer to wasps." Maven smiled at each of them in turn. "That should be everything I can tell you at this point. We try to streamline our Unlimited guests' arrival by securing your accommodations and work assignments enroute to ensure that your arrival goes smoothly. Now I must brief the OWSF members and other Unlimited guests. I'll be escorting you to housing when we arrive, so I'll see all of you then."

With a final nod and smile, she left them.

Jack crossed his arms and released a long sigh. "I had no idea Fringe Point was also a prison colony,"

He glanced at Savannah, then turned his gaze toward Gwenny who sat with crayons and paper in the corner of the room.

Trey straightened. "Is there a problem, Jack?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I mentioned that my mother's influence put me on a hover list after I ran away. What I didn't explain is that she holds that influence because she owns hover part manufacturing businesses, and it isn't a stretch to think those businesses make parts for drones, wasps, and these SIPHs Maven mentioned as well. I could just be paranoid, but when it comes to Ma'am I don't think I can be paranoid enough. I guess I'm saying that it isn't *impossible* to think that Fringe Point isn't beyond her reach after all."



The Unlimited guests watched the *Raven Wing's* approach to Fringe Point from the COS windows before ship-wide announcements would send them to their berths a final time. Only a light sleep would be induced during final approach, descent, and landing, for as soon as the ship was secure in its dock and cargo had been unloaded, passenger disembarkation would commence.

Jack had been quiet after their meeting with Maven, and now he stared at the approaching space rock that Fringe Point clung to with one hand on his forehead.

Savannah tapped Trey's arm and gestured toward Jack, lifting her eyebrows. Trey nodded.

"Hey everyone, let's grab a snack and pack our things while we have a chance. Gwenny? Want to see if the lounge has an ice cream pouch left? Jack, Savannah, take your time."

"Ice cream!"

Gwenny grabbed Trey's outstretched hand and let him pull her toward him.

"We'll check in with you on the ground, Jack," Hadley said.

The COS emptied.

Savannah waited. She didn't know if Jack wanted to share any of his thoughts, or if she should even start a conversation, but she hated to see him so obviously preoccupied with worry.

She ran her tongue over her lips, wishing she had grabbed a water pouch.

She cleared her throat. "Are you actually planning to inspect the mining colony for your father?"

He released a chuckle in a puff of air. "As if I'd know what to inspect. I can report my ignorant observations though. I suppose it could be useful to him. Not anytime soon though. I don't want to risk any communication my mother might intercept."

She nodded.

"Are you worried about the SIPHs?"

He shrugged. "More cautious than worried I think."

"Then . . . are you . . ." She paused, started again. "Do you regret coming with us? You were so insistent that you wouldn't."

He dropped his hand from his forehead and turned toward her, lowered his head closer to hers and narrowed his eyes.

"I don't regret being here with you, if that's what you're asking. I could have hidden Gwenny away somewhere without leaving the planet, but my first thought, my very first selfish thought when Tom asked me to take her, was that I had been given permission to go with you. You had to have known that, right?" He waited, accepting her hesitant nod as affirmation that she had hoped that was the case. "But now that we're about to be free of this ship, I can't help but think that I should go back to help Tom out of trouble, even though there's nothing I can do that my powerful parents couldn't do better, that I shouldn't have taken Gwenny into space so far away from her father, even though he asked me to and I promised her it was temporary. I keep thinking – no, I *know* how unfair this is to you. We had said our goodbyes and you were able to look forward and now I'm here complicating your life again." He touched her cheek with his fingertips. "And in that churning stew of thoughts I'm also thinking how shallow I am because I can't wait for us to get off this ship and out of these spacesuits."

A smile flickered across his face.

Savannah grabbed both sleeves of his suit and gripped them, pulled herself closer to him.

She waited for her feelings to articulate themselves in her mind, fought the reluctance to speak the thoughts aloud for she had been struggling with them ever since Jack had confessed everything in the *Raven's Eye*.

"Jack."

He lowered his head even closer as if he wouldn't hear her if he didn't.

"I feel confident that *Mimi*," and she stressed the nickname, "is more concerned with her reputation and getting Tom out of trouble than hunting for you and Gwenny."

He nodded but didn't comment.

"We have at least three months before the *Nighthawk* arrives and the *Raven Wing* leaves. During that time, I'm hoping that you and Gwenny and I will be like a family, working, going to school, sharing time with our Chance House siblings."

She paused again. The next words shouldn't be difficult for her to say. She had thought about them so many times.

"I love you, Jack Wild user8." She had dropped her gaze unwittingly but now looked up again. "So, I'm deciding not to worry about what happens next. I want whatever time I can have with you."

Blue warning lights bathed Jack's smile and softened expression in its glow, return-to-berth announcement tones nearly but not completely overpowering his words.

"I love you and want that too, Sevenanna."



Without Jack's Unlimited status and Maven's preparations enroute, disembarking at Fringe Point spaceport would have meant hours waiting in long lines to be offboarded from the ship and onboarded into the colony. From their side of the tram transporting them from the ship's gangway toward the residential dome, Savannah and Trey and Love could look down at the winding walkways guiding the lower status passengers through the reception buildings – contract signing and job placement, housing assignments, uniform and materiel disbursement. Maven, who was escorting them to their accommodations, narrated the view, at last encouraging them to turn their focus forward as the tram took them through the commercial and common domes toward the residential dome.

Savannah felt as if her head was on a swivel, unsure of where to look next, for the sights in every direction made her wonder if she were truly, physically here or just immersed in one of *Dreamsight's* virtual worlds. The tram sped through opaque tunnels ringed with lights that illuminated as they neared them and faded as they passed by, slowed but didn't stop at stations where people dressed in uniforms waited for the next non-express tram to arrive, glancing up at the virtual sky projected within the dome as if they were expecting a change in the weather. The tram passed what looked like a park in the common area dome, and Savannah wondered if the grass and plants dividing walkways were real, spotted several workers in tan jumpsuits raking and sweeping and wondered if they were prisoners, tried to look for any sign of SIPHs but the tram exited the dome through the next tunnel before she could spot any.

Gwenny, sitting beside Jack on the other side of the tram so she could see out, had plastered her face against the window, both hands flattened on either side of her head, evidently too enamored to speak.

The tram entered the residential dome, slowed to a crawl, then stopped, chimes preceding the voice announcing their arrival.

Maven stood and moved to the opening doors. She smiled. "Here's your stop everyone. Meet me outside on the platform."

Savannah lined up behind Jack and Trey to exit, and the group of Unlimited passengers they had come to know during their journey gathered around Maven for the last time.

"The keys I handed out earlier show your unit block and number – just follow the signs – and will also give you access to all facilities and transportation so keep them with you. Your luggage will be delivered to you later today." She straightened. "And here we part ways, although, the *Raven Wing* will be docked here until the next launch window to put us back on schedule, so I'll be around at the spaceport until then if you need me."

"Thank you, Maven," Jack said. "I'll be sure to let my father know of your help and hospitality."

Savannah thought she might have seen a slight blush on Maven's cheeks. "That's very kind of you, Mr. Wild." She lifted her hand in a wave. "Goodbye for now, everyone."

Promising to meet Hadley and Zachary's families for dinner once everyone acclimated, Trey led the way to the family housing units.

Four-story family unit buildings contained sixteen family units, four on each floor. Each unit contained a living room, bathroom, kitchen, and two bedrooms and could sleep up to six if bunk beds and transforming couch beds were used. Ace and Zoe's unit, Love and Diamond's unit, and Trey's unit were situated close to one another on the top floor and shared a common room.

Trey was beaming. "Better than my rooftop apartment. Much better than the warehouse locker room. And I have one all to myself? Thanks for your illustrious birth, Jack."

Jack laughed. "You're welcome?"

"Will you be all alone, Uncle Trey?" Gwenny tugged on Trey's pant leg.

He patted her head. "Don't worry. I'm sure Jack and Savannah will let you come visit me."

"Will you, Uncle Jack?"

"If Uncle Trey behaves himself."

Gwenny must have recognized the teasing smile Jack and Trey exchanged because she laughed.

Jack took Gwenny's hand. "Let's go see where we'll be staying," he said.

High-priority housing was a collection of stand-alone steel and glass units encircling an open, landscaped courtyard. Jack identified their assigned unit and opened the front gate with his playing card-sized key before walking through a small, enclosed veranda and unlocking the wide, front door.

The unit had a large, open floor plan with artist renderings of the colony decorating its cream-colored walls, each of its two bedrooms larger than Savannah's entire apartment. Compared to family housing, and what she imagined high-density single dormitories offered, the unit was large and lavish and extravagant just for the three of them, but Savannah thought it couldn't compare in size or amenities to Gwendolyn Thompson's pool house by her beach estate.

Gwendolyn Thompson. Jack's mother.

"Jack, the pool house."

Savannah tugged on Jack's sleeve, and he turned toward her.

"What?"

"I just realized. That was *your* family's pool house."

She felt stupid, saying it out loud, but she had just put all the pieces together.

Jack smiled. "Yes."

"The beach house belongs to Grandmother," Gwenny said. "But this is better than the beach house, isn't it Savannah? This is a *space* house."

Savannah chuckled. Yes, a space house. She would use that description in her report to Yuta.

Gwenny pulled on Jack's hand. "Where's my room?"

"Pick one," Jack said.

Gwenny peeked in the doorways of both bedrooms. Both had a skylight and a view of the courtyard, but one seemed to appeal to her more than the other and she dashed inside and stood with her head raised staring up through the skylight at the virtual sky.

"Will it look like space when it gets dark?"

"I don't know. I would think so," Jack said. "That's just a virtual sky so we won't miss home as much, but they probably turn it off at night."

Gweny's shoulders drooped but she kept her head lifted. Then she sniffled and lifted her hands to wipe her eyes.

"Daddy should be here," she said.

Motion caught Savannah's eye, and she turned to look at the display in the main room. Text was scrolling across a star-filled background.

Welcome to Fringe Point Mining Colony

19 – The Prisoner

Dear Mom-Éclair, Rich Daddy, Elise, and Grant,

Hello! I'm here at Fringe Point Mining Colony at last.

This is the first chance I've had to write to you since arriving. Believe it or not, I've been busy working as a teacher's assistant. Hard to believe, right? Me? I mostly just help out, but once a week I either read books to the children for story time or teach them a bit about computers. Their ages range from five to seven. I see now why you like teaching, Mom and Dad. I like seeing the look on their faces when they start to understand something I've taught them.

In the evenings, I've also been busy working on my special assignment for Yuta Tensai, even though I'm not progressing as quickly as I'd like. My attempts to engage in conversation with prisoners have failed so far. I was told they would be wary to talk to me, so I expected it. Still, it's been a little frustrating.

Well, a few weeks have gone by. I forgot to send this off thinking I was going to add more before I sent it, and now here we are. Good news, though. I finally made some progress today. I was in the park - yes, there's a park here with actual plants! - and I waited until one of the prisoners was emptying some raked leaves into a trash bin, then approached and asked if I could ask him a few questions. He was younger than I expected. He looked at me for a while before he asked me why. My explanation was always met before with a blank stare, but this time when I said I was doing research for a DreamSight virtual world, his eyes lit up. He said his work detail shift was ending but promised he'd answer my questions tomorrow. He also said that there would be others that might want to talk to me, too. So

Savannah's laptop slipped off her lap onto the bed.

Jack had just plopped himself face down beside her, groaning.

He turned his face toward her. "Sorry."

Gweny shouted from her bedroom. "Uncle Jack! Can you tell me a story?"

Jack sighed. "I've been trying to get her to go to sleep for an hour and a half. If she isn't thirsty, she wants the light on, or off, or she wants a snack. At this point I don't care if she sleeps. I just want to go to bed."

Savannah patted Jack's head. "I have an idea."

She moved her laptop aside and stood, opened the wardrobe door and pulled out one of the bags she hadn't unpacked and retrieved her headgear.

"DreamSight?" Jack pushed himself up on one elbow.

"You don't mind, do you?"

Jack shook his head. "I'm desperate."

"Uncle Jack!"

Jack gestured toward Gweny's room. "Please," he said.

Savannah found Gweny sitting up on her bed, wide awake, her eyes shining in the dark.

"Sevenanna," she said.

"Want to explore some virtual worlds before you go to sleep?" At Gweny's nod, Savannah positioned the headgear over her eyes and ears and adjusted it to fit, then powered it up. Battery life registered as nearly full since Savannah hadn't used it since . . . well . . . she could hardly remember when she'd used it last. "You'll hear my voice, then choose a world."

Savannah waited, smiled when Gweny gasped.

"That is you Sevenanna." Gweny giggled. "I choose *Vista Road*!"

Savannah blinked. She didn't know why she had expected Gwenny to choose *Palas*, but she supposed racing cars through the ever-changing scenery of *Vista Road* would be more exciting to one her age.

Savannah returned to bed and stretched out beside Jack.

"One of us should check on her after a while, but she's distracted for now."

Jack caressed her shoulder. "Thanks," he said. He pulled a pillow under his head. "Tomorrow, Gwenny and I will go to the park with you."

"What about the SIPHs?"

"Gwenny and I will hang back. I would just feel better about you talking to prisoners if I'm there. Plus, I think Gwenny is tired of tagging along while I tour mining facilities." He smiled. "Afterwards, we can go check out the science center. I hear they have telescopes."

He moved his eyebrows up and down.

She laughed. "That sounds good."

He rolled off the bed and closed the bedroom door, locked it, then returned and stretched out beside her, snaking an arm around her waist.

"So, how long do you think she'll stay entertained?"



Sitting on a rough-hewn stone bench in the common area's park, Savannah stared up at the cloud wisps drifting across the virtual sky, wondered briefly how the projection was accomplished, then allowed herself to be mesmerized by it instead. The effect was calming, tricking the mind into thinking that she sat 'outside' in an open atmosphere. Still, being 'outside' here under this dome felt more refreshing than walking the congested streets of GenTech City. Instead of being bombarded by ads and lights and noise, the residential and common areas of Fringe Point operated at a relaxed pace. News and information could be queried but didn't intrude. The virtual sky was always blue during the day and gave way to the star-studded canopy of stars at night.

Perhaps the Palas-bound group's extended layover here at Fringe Point had been a good turn of events after all, allowing them to ease into a less-frenetic lifestyle before encountering the culture shock that surely awaited them on Palas.

"Savannah Jones?"

She turned to find the voice, rose to her feet.

The young prisoner she had spoken to the day before greeted her with a small smile. Two more prisoners, a man and a woman who appeared to be close to Savannah's age, stood several yards behind him on a pathway near a small embankment covered with ivy, each holding a rake, the sleeves of their gray jumpsuits rolled up to their elbows.

Savannah turned her attention back to the young prisoner.

"Yes, hello. I appreciate you coming to talk to me."

He wiped his hands on the front of his jumpsuit, then ran his fingers through his dark brown hair. He lifted his eyebrows. "Do you really know the DreamSight designer?"

Savannah smiled. "I do."

He gripped the handle of his rake with both hands.

"What kind of new world is he planning? How soon will it come out? My time here will be up by the time the transport ship leaves, so I'll be going home soon. Do you think if I let you interview me that I

can get access to *DreamSight*, I mean, legitimately?" He blushed. "I'd rather not get sent here for access status fraud again."

Savannah stifled her gasp. Access status fraud? This young man was here because he had wanted to play a game?

Savannah nodded to him. "I can't guarantee it, but if anyone can give you access, Yuta can."

The young man's grin beamed. "That'd be great."

"I bet you're excited to go home," Savannah said.

He nodded, then gestured to the two standing behind him. "My friends over there, their time is up, too, except something – or someone – is holding up the final approvals."

"Sevenanna!"

Savannah turned.

Gwenny was racing towards her, waving what Savannah assumed to be her latest drawing above her head.

"Excuse me a moment." Savannah took a step forward and caught Gwenny by the shoulders.

"Whoa. Slow down. What do you have there? Show me quick."

Savannah heard a clatter, as if a rake had been dropped onto the paving stones, followed by a woman's scream, and just as she turned her head, hands were grabbing the front of her shirt.

"What are you doing with my baby?!"

A high-pitched buzz, like a swarm of bees disturbed from their hive, erupted from somewhere nearby, and was growing louder, and Savannah knew something was coming, but she couldn't look away from the angry, red-flushed face in front of her.

SIPhs. They had to be SIPhs. They were like wasps, Maven had said.

The tiny, black, fluttering swarm surrounded the woman, zapping her between her shoulder blades with sparks of electricity, her hands falling away and releasing Savannah's shirt front as she dropped to the ground.

Savannah swallowed and stepped back, her heart racing, her breath catching in her lungs. Gwenny. Where was Gwenny?

She reached out for her, but Gwenny pulled away from her, letting her artwork fall, and knelt by the woman who now lay prone at Savannah's feet, her shoulders twitching.

"Mommy?"

Savannah could hardly hear Gwenny's whisper.

The woman blinked, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Gwenny, baby."

"Seven! Gwenny! Are you alright? I stepped away, just for a second."

Jack rushed up to them, panting, his eyes wide. He reached out toward Savannah and touched her arm. When she had given him a reassuring nod, he turned to Gwenny.

And dropped to his knees beside her.

"Nat?" Jack's voice cracked.

The woman shifted her gaze, her breathing quieting, and closed her eyes with a relieved smile.

"Jack," she said.



"We're here to see Natalie Dunham."

Jack tapped his key on the sensor at the visitor reception window.

The man standing behind the thick, transparent window panel turned his tired gaze to a display only he could see and lifted an eyebrow.

"Consortium royalty." He muttered the words, but he hadn't attempted to keep them from being heard. "The rest of you will need to tap your keys, even the young one, then take a seat."

Jack tapped Gwenny's key, for he carried it with his own for safekeeping, then stepped aside. Savannah stepped forward and tapped hers, then took Gwenny's hand and led her to a metal bench situated along the wall to sit and wait. Jack followed them but remained standing.

Gwenny pulled on Jack's sleeve. "Why is everyone so mean to Mommy? Why can't she come with us? We have to tell Daddy we found her, don't we, Uncle Jack?"

Gwenny had been asking the same questions since two prison guards had entered the park in a service cart, instructed the two male prisoners to finish their shift, then loaded Natalie into the back of the cart and took her away. But Savannah didn't have answers for her. And Jack hadn't answered either. As soon as the cart had disappeared, he had pulled out his handheld and contacted Maven, requesting immediate visitation before Natalie suffered any ramifications for assaulting a Consortium employee.

Jack rested his hand on the top of Gwenny's head. "We'll get it all straightened out," he said. "First, we need to talk to your mommy."

Savannah leaned back against the cold wall. The temperature in the park had been pleasant, like a day in early spring, but the mining operations dome had felt considerably cooler, and as the elevator had descended to the prison level, the temperature continued to drop. She crossed her arms across her chest. She hadn't thought of wearing a jacket since there was no reason to take weather into consideration here on the colony.

Savannah surveyed the small waiting room, selecting adjectives she would use to describe the scene to Yuta. Cold, not only the temperature but also the mood it evoked with its cement floor and gray walls. Austere. Function-forward. Not surprising for a prison, she supposed. But this visiting area was only an outsider's view. If Savannah ever had a chance to talk to the young prisoner again, she would ask him to describe the living conditions from a prisoner's perspective.

Gwenny leaned against her, warming her a bit, and she put her arm around the girl's shoulders to return the favor.

They waited. Jack, impatient, alternated between sitting and pacing. Savannah gave Gwenny her handheld to keep her occupied with puzzle games.

"Visitors for Dunham?"

Savannah jumped.

The man who had been at the window burst through a door into the waiting room and called out to them, which Savannah felt was unnecessary since they were the only ones there.

Jack stepped forward. "Yes?"

"Your prisoner will meet you in room one. Remember that by requesting an unsupervised visit, the Fringe Point Detention Facility holds no responsibility for any harm you may incur. If you agree, you can go ahead."

He held the door open for them and pointed down a narrow, unadorned hallway where Jack led them to the first of two visiting rooms and opened the door.

The woman who had assaulted Savannah rose from her metal, straight-backed chair.

Natalie Dunham was tall. And thin judging by her loose-fitting jumpsuit. Her blonde hair had been cropped close to her head. Her wide, bright blue eyes were shining under the ceiling lights and were brimming with tears.

"Baby." She dropped to her knees and opened her arms and Gwenny ran into them. "Gwenny. Baby."

"Mommy. We found you."

Natalie stroked Gwenny's head, then cradled her face in her hands. "Look at you. You aren't a baby anymore, are you? I hardly recognized you out in the park, but when I saw your smile I knew it was you." She looked up, focused her gaze past Jack to meet Savannah's. "Please forgive me. I saw you grab her. "

"I understand," Savannah said.

Gwenny pulled her arm from her mother's embrace enough to point at Jack. "Look, Mommy. Uncle Jack's with me. And that's Sevenanna, Uncle Jack's girlfriend."

Natalie blinked at Savannah and then at Jack. "Girlfriend?"

Savannah exchanged a glance with Jack who nodded. They had never discussed putting a name to their relationship before, but Gwenny had always seemed to know.

"It's good to see you, Nat," Jack said. He flashed a teasing smile. "What's with the hair?"

Natalie ran a hand over the top of her head.

"You know how women fight. A preventive measure they told me." She tilted her head. "What? You don't like it?"

Another small smile danced around his mouth, and then he drew in a breath. "Tom's been looking for you, Nat."

"Tom?" Natalie got to her feet and picked Gwenny up in her arms, retook her seat on the metal chair, positioning Gwenny in her lap. Savannah noticed then that Natalie's ankles were tethered to the legs of the chair which were bolted to the floor. "Did Tom send you?"

"No. He doesn't know where you are, or what happened to you. He joined the AFA trying to find you, ended up as its leader."

"Tom did? Its leader? But, we heard rumors here that they arrested . . . the leader. . . "

Jack nodded. "I've been watching the news feeds. It seems Ma'am, or maybe even my father, has been successful keeping Tom's identity hidden, but I don't know what that means exactly or what else they can do even with their combined influence." He gestured toward Gwenny. "We're here because Tom asked me to take Gwenny somewhere out of Ma'am's reach. But we had no idea you were here. That was a stroke of luck. But *why are* you here Nat? What happened to you?"

Natalie turned up one corner of her mouth, her eyes narrowing. "*Ma'am* happened. No proof, mind you, but she warned me more than once to get out of Tom's life, that I'd ruin him, and I'm sure she had me followed, either by someone she hired or by putting me on a hover list. But when my friend Griffith and I broke into a GenTech warehouse, not to steal but just to take pictures of the medical equipment they were hoarding yet claiming was 'out of stock', GenTech City Security was right there waiting for us. This was only a few days after Ma'am threatened me to my face." She moved Gwenny off her lap. "I tried to contact Tom, but Ma'am must have intercepted all my attempts to reach him. All I could do was hope that he knew I would never just walk out on him, that I wouldn't abandon my baby. He had to know that."

"He knew," Jack said. "He knows."

She nodded, wiped at her eyes and cheeks before regaining her composure.

"I just wish I could go to him. I've been picturing his sweet face all this time, hoping he was safe and happy, but now I have to picture him in a cell somewhere."

"Maybe you can go to him soon," Savannah said. "The other prisoner I was talking to told me that your sentence is up."

Natalie smiled. "Eric's a sweet boy." She shrugged. "Yes, well, I suspect I have Ma'am to thank as well for stalling our release. I don't know when Griffith and I will get out of here."

"Ma'am? Are you talking about Grandmother?" Gwenny turned in Natalie's lap to look up at her.

Natalie stroked the length of Gwenny's hair. "Don't listen to us, baby. We're just talking." She turned back to Jack, released a small chuckle. "You know, if Ma'am was smart, she would get me out of

here. She may have influence in high places, but I have friends in low places. *Very* low. And they'd be more than happy to do *whatever* it takes to set Tom free."

Jack tilted his head, his eyebrows raised, then nodded.

"Well, then. The *Raven Wing* is scheduled to leave in two weeks. We'll just have to make sure those approvals come through in time so you can be on it."

"Make sure? By that, do you mean . . ."

"Yes." Jack released a long sigh. "That means making another deal with my mother."

20 – The Caretaker

Savannah had given Jack his privacy to record his video message to Ma'am. At least, she told herself that was her reason for taking her laptop out to the veranda. In truth, she didn't want to hear what kind of "deal" he would be suggesting to Ma'am. He could be offering up whatever clandestine methods Natalie had in mind but based on the previous agreement Jack made with his mother where she had given him co-ownership of the warehouse to keep him close, he might also be offering himself as part of the bargain.

Now, with only two days remaining before the *Raven Wing's* departure, Jack still hadn't received a response. Tracking verified that the message had been delivered and had been viewed. But Natalie's release remained on hold.

Today was also the last time the Chance House siblings would gather to share a meal on Fringe Point.

Love had dubbed the common room on the fourth floor of their family housing building "New New-Chance House" since the fourth unit on the floor was unoccupied and they had the entire floor to themselves. Another benefit of their top floor accommodation was the skylight above the common room that provided an unobstructed nighttime view of space, reminding them how far they had traveled from the lives they left behind and how far they still had to go. Every week, Jack and Savannah and Gwenny joined the group for dinner. Cooking duties always fell to Ace and Zoe. The others funded the meal's ingredients and took care of cleanup.

When Jack and Savannah and Gwenny arrived at the newly dubbed common room, Love bounded toward them, accepted Gwenny's hug with an equally tight squeeze, then straightened to point at the display screen on the far wall.

"Did you see Hadley's message? It just came in."

Ace and Zoe, Diamond, and Trey rose from their seats that surrounded the large table in the center of the room.

"We were starting dinner when we heard the announcement tone," Ace said. "Hadley sent it to everyone who's heading to Palas."

"We haven't seen it," Jack said. "We were on our way here."

"We saw it was from Hadley so thought we'd wait for you," Diamond said. "Have a seat."

Diamond pressed a button on the remote he held in his hand and dropped back down onto the couch, the others retaking their seats beside him. Jack sat on the arm of the couch and Savannah claimed an overstuffed chair. Gwenny crawled into Love's lap.

Hadley's face appeared on the screen.

"Greetings everyone. I have great news. The *Nighthawk* is approaching. Only days away now, it will arrive here at Fringe Point to refuel and resupply, accept our cargo, and exchange its crew. As we discussed at the theater, the OWMC will consider your departure a breach of contract, so we'll be conducting a bit of subterfuge. In three days, drop your luggage at OWSF headquarters at the spaceport, then meet in front of *Nighthawk's* cargo hatch just before dark. We've arranged with the Consortium to *borrow* your labor for resupplying the ship, just in case you're spotted, but you'll actually be boarding the ship *along with* the cargo.

"That's all for now. Delete this message and pack your things. The final leg of our journey is upon us at last!"

The video froze on Hadley's grin.

Ace pushed a button on the remote, confirmed the delete prompt, and the display went black.

Smiling faces exchanged glances, then, as if a realization dawned on them simultaneously, all turned to look at Jack, their smiles fading, the same unvoiced question manifesting on each of their expressions.

Jack met their gazes with a lifted eyebrow. "What's with the long faces? It's cause for celebration, isn't it?" He slapped his hands on his thighs and stood. "I'm hungry. Let's eat."



The walk home was a silent one. Gwenny slept in Jack's arms. Savannah trailed a few steps behind, rousing herself from her thoughts when she no longer heard Jack's footsteps in front of her to race to catch up to him. She shivered, even though it wasn't cold. Nighttime was the same temperature as the daytime under the climate-controlled dome.

The tram hummed close by. Lights from the housing buildings flickered through the windows as they passed. Someone laughed. A toddler cried. Somewhere, mere days away, a giant black ship, as Hadley had described it, raced toward its rendezvous with this piece of rock after ten long years.

Trey and Savannah, Ace and Zoe, Love and Diamond, Hadley, Quinn, and the hundreds of others that had joined them seeking a new life had all come here to meet it.

When she pictured Palas, at least as rendered in the DreamSight virtual world, and the *Nighthawk*, as Hadley had described it in proud detail, the part of her that had decided to begin this adventure stirred with excitement then succumbed to the death grip of her heartache.

Perhaps Jack was right. Perhaps it would have been better if he hadn't joined her on the *Raven Wing*. When she had said goodbye to him in the warehouse, she hadn't known how it felt to spend every day with the one she loved, living and working together as a family. As hard as that parting had been, this one would be exponentially harder.

Jack opened the door of their housing unit.

"I'll put Gwenny to bed," he said.

The notification tone was chiming, its accompanying light blinking on the display in the living room.

"I'll delete Hadley's message," she said.

Jack nodded and carried Gwenny into her room.

Savannah grabbed the remote and selected to view messages, saw from the description that the message was indeed from Hadley, then deleted it. She meant to return the remote to the table when she noticed that the tone still sounded, the light still blinked, and a second message description was scrolling into view.

"Jack?"

She swallowed.

"What is it?" He poked his head out from the bedroom door.

She held the remote out to him. "There's another message. It's for you."

He closed Gwenny's bedroom door and joined her, took the remote, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Good timing, I guess," he said. He gestured toward the couch. "Watch with me?"

Savannah sat, folded her hands in her lap. Jack sat beside her and pressed the play button.

A man blinked at them, squinted, then reached out of view for a moment before slipping on a pair of glasses.

The man reminded Savannah of Hadley. He looked to be similar in age, his eyes and features projecting the same degree of intelligence and kindness. His dark brown, gray-tinged hair seemed slightly disheveled, unsurprisingly, for he was wearing a robe, and Savannah could make out bedroom furnishings behind him.

He smiled.

"Jack," he said. "I was happy to hear that you're safe, that little Gwendolyn is safe. Your mother and I were worried when we couldn't find you, especially with all this business going on with Thomas."

Savannah glanced toward Jack. This was a message from his father, Theodore Wild, the OWMC chairman. Judging by Jack's wide eyes, he was as surprised as she was.

"I looked through the report you sent me. Very impressive. Naturally, you can't give me any feedback on mining itself, but you have a good eye for organization and procedures and leadership. I know you've never expressed an interest, but when you return, I'd like to talk to you about giving up the warehouse business and joining me instead. Evidently, my staff at Fringe Point accepted you as my representative, so I can envision great things if we make good on that perception.

"Well, that sums up my part. I look forward to seeing you soon." He swiveled his chair to one side and stood. "Gwendolyn, it's your turn."

Savannah swallowed. Gwendolyn. Ma'am. Jack's mother.

Slowly, Ma'am lowered herself into the vacated seat.

Like her husband, she too wore a robe. Her hair was even more disheveled. Her eyes looked tired, her coloring a bit pale, her cheeks a bit gaunt.

She reached up and ran her fingers through her hair. And then she leaned back and stared, not at the camera, but at something beyond it, or perhaps nothing at all.

"Gwendolyn." It was Theodore's voice. "Get on with it. Charges for sending a video message are based on time. You're wasting time."

She drew in a breath and sighed. "You can just trim it before you send it."

"I don't know how to do that. Do you?"

"No." She turned away from the camera to face him, wherever he stood out of view of the camera. "You insisted I do this. I'm here, doing it. Let me be."

She turned away from him and faced the camera, narrowed her eyes.

"*Theo*. And yes, I'm using your true name. You broke our agreement by leaving, so I'm under no obligation to keep my side of it. I don't know why your father calls you by that nickname you've adopted – you were named after him after all – other than trying to get in your good graces. Ah yes, that must be it. He wants to steal you away from me."

"Gwendolyn. Get to the point . . . if you would."

She straightened and lifted her chin. "Very well. Let's start with a recap. You took my granddaughter to the edge of space claiming Thomas begged you to do so. There you discovered that woman in the prison colony and now you're blaming me for delaying her release, threatening me that Thomas will never forgive me, at the very least, and that you will keep the child away from me forever at the worst." She smiled. "You have a lot to learn about negotiation, *Jack*. When we made our agreement, we both had something to gain for our concessions. Our discourse didn't include threats. You should have considered that I could, if I so desired, return your volley with threats of my own."

Another, much deeper sigh. Savannah thought she heard Theodore mumbling some kind of warning in the background that Ma'am addressed with a slight wave of her hand.

"What you must think of me to take this tack when I am your mother and have only ever sought what was best for you, for you and for your brother. Of course, I concede that removing that woman from your brother's life backfired on me in an unexpected way." She drummed her fingers on the table in front of her, the proximity to the camera's microphone making each tap sound like a heavy thud. Then

she laced her fingers together. "So, I offer you a peace offering. Natalie Dunham and her associate will be released at the Fringe Point spaceport on the *Raven Wing's* day of departure."

She leaned closer to the camera.

"I expect you and the child to join her."

The video ended with the camera's final frame zoomed in on Gwendolyn Thompson's glare.

Jack stared back at his mother's face, his expression unreadable, then lifted the remote and deleted the message.

"Natalie can go to Tom now," Savannah said. She considered what other thoughts she might express aloud to break the silence, for she felt she needed to continue breaking the silence. "Your father seems nice."

Jack nodded, then snapped his head toward her. "What did Hadley say? What's the departure schedule again?"

"*Raven Wing* in two days. *Nighthawk* in three."

He nodded again. "Tomorrow then, we need to start packing."



Prisoners were released at the spaceport directly to the departing transport ship and not allowed to stay at Fringe Point in any capacity. Friends or family could join them or say their farewells in the departure area between the release point and the boarding gangway. Savannah and Jack sat on one of the padded benches near the release point and waited, Gwenny seated between them. Gwenny hadn't stopped talking and asking questions since they left their housing unit, Jack having to admonish her on the crowded tram to at least whisper.

Savannah felt hollow.

There had been so many things she had wanted to say over the past two days while she lay in Jack's arms, her face nestled in the warm space at the base of his neck, but the words carried tears with them that she hadn't wanted to shed. Crying exhausted her. And if, like before, her tears triggered Jack's tears, she didn't think she could bear it. The only communication they exchanged, other than mundane trivialities, were the unspoken feelings behind each kiss and caress, like before, except so much more than before.

"Savannah Jones!"

She looked up, for she had been staring at the tiled floor of the departure area without seeing it.

"Eric. It's Eric, right?"

The young man raced up to her and stopped and she rose to her feet to greet him.

"Yes. Did Nat tell you my name? I'm so happy she and Griff are being released and that we're all going home together." He smiled. "But I'm sorry you didn't get your interview."

Savannah smiled. "Well, now you can do that directly. Rent some headgear time. Choose *Palas* and go to Yuta Island. Play an instrument. Doesn't matter which one. When Yuta appears, tell him the guide to *Palas* sent you, that you met me at Fringe Point. Can you remember that?"

"You're the guide? Oh, wow. Yes. I'll remember. Thank you!"

He held out his hand as if to shake hers then changed his mind and waved instead, then hurried to the boarding gangway.

"The guide to *Palas*," Jack said. He rose to stand beside her. "You're famous."

"In a very small circle," she said.

"Jack! Gwenny!"

Natalie came through the release point door, the man Savannah had seen with her in the park following behind her.

"Mommy!"

Gwenny ran to her and Natalie picked her up and hugged her, Gwenny encircling her neck with her arms.

Natalie and Griffith came toward them, and Natalie reached out with her free arm to hug Jack.

"You did it. Somehow you did it. Thank you."

The hollow pit in Savannah's stomach collapsed in on itself and twisted into a painful knot.

This was it. This was where it all ended. Or began anew, if she were ever able to look back on it that way.

She strode forward and stroked Gwenny's head. She hadn't had any problem telling Gwenny her feelings over the past two days, how she would miss her, that she would think of her every day, how she hoped she and her parents would reunite soon. Those words had come easily. Now, all that was left to say was a final goodbye.

"Goodbye, Gwenny," she said.

"Bye, Auntie Sevenanna. I can call her auntie, can't I Uncle Jack?"

Jack nodded. "Yes."

Gwenny leaned forward and kissed Savannah's cheek, the act thrusting a painful jab through Savannah's chest.

"Don't cry, Auntie Sevenanna. I'm just going home," she said.

Savannah nodded and gave her a smile, then turned to Natalie. "Good luck, Natalie. Say hello to Tom for me."

"I will," she said.

Then Savannah made sure she knew which direction would take her to the exit and back to the tram before she turned to meet Jack's gaze.

She couldn't keep the words locked up any longer. The tears had already begun to flow so there was no reason to hold back. She would say the words through the blinding tears.

"I love you, Jack. I love everything about you, unfortunately." His eyes, his beautiful amber eyes, grew wide at the word "unfortunately." "I love that you care so much for your brother and Gwenny that you put their well-being before your own, that you braved hovers and wasps to protect Tom, that you made another deal with your mother to help Natalie. You're generous and selfless. I love that about you. And I wish I could say that I could be so selfless, too, that I could stand here and tell you that I understand, that I accept the way you are and how you need to be. But I can't."

"Seven –"

He reached for her, but she backed away from him, afraid his touch would silence her.

"I can't be liked you. I'm selfish. I want to be the one you care about so selflessly. I want you to come with me." She swallowed. There was more. She could feel the words rushing forth and fighting one another for precedence, knew that no one standing in front of her could stop them. "I can't go with you. I can't wait in my apartment or your office at the warehouse while you risk your life to save Tom."

She shook her head, almost laughed.

"After watching your mother's message, I finally realized that the day we took Gwenny to the fountain, she wasn't warning me about her son Tom, she was warning me that *you* were the one who was like his father and would always put your own passions first. But I don't want to believe that's true, Jack. I want you to believe that you can put *me* first. You said I was an exception. I want you to prove it."

She blinked the tears out of her eyes and took another step backward, and then another, and then a third.

"But if you can't, then – "

She had meant to say goodbye, to say she loved him one more time, but she could see by his expression that her only chance to run would be now.

She turned.

Goodbye, Natalie. Goodbye, Gwenny. Goodbye, Jack.

She ran.

"Seven!"

Did she hear footsteps behind her? Of course, she did. There were so many people here. But she didn't turn to look to see if Jack had followed her. Instead, she found the exit and burst through it, weaving around the faceless individuals in her way.

"Savannah!"

Jack had never called her Savannah before. At least, that's the name she thought he had called out above the din.

"All passengers. Please check in at the boarding gangway."

The express tram to the residential dome arrived, opened its doors, and Savannah slipped inside and found a seat on the far side and leaned her head against the window, her heart pounding.

Another announcement sounded before the doors closed.

"Attention all spaceport employees. Prepare and clear dock 2 for the arrival of the *Nighthawk*."



Savannah found Trey sitting in the New New-Chance House common room wearing a headgear unit, his head resting on the top of the couch. She hadn't consciously decided to come here. She had merely been walking, noticeably and extremely slowly, seemingly fascinated by her feet as she took each step forward until she looked up to find that some instinct had brought her here, to her siblings, either to seek comfort from one of them, or simply to avoid walking into the empty housing unit and face its silence.

A hand embraced the top of her head. She looked up. Ace stood beside her. Her big brother, for all intents and purposes, and she quite possibly had never been so glad to see him.

"Little sister," he said. He handed her a headgear unit. "I thought maybe you'd want a distraction."

A cable dangled from the unit, and she remembered that Ace had told her a few weeks before that he had found a way to connect two headgear units together to share the same DreamSight instance without a server.

Savannah swallowed.

"Yes. I'd like that."

She took the headgear from him, and he winked at her before returning to the quarters he shared with Zoe.

Yes. She had to move forward. She had to make plans. The *Nighthawk* had arrived, and tomorrow they would be boarding at last. Ahead lay the open landscapes and forests and beaches of the world she had been yearning for ever since she had joined GenTech.

She took a seat next to Trey and connected the cable to his headgear, slipped hers over her head, and powered it on.

"Choose your world," she heard her Guide-self say.

"Palas," she said.

As expected, her avatar materialized on the familiar arrival road. The sound and visual effects implied a stiff breeze was blowing dust devils across the plain. A prospector leading a mule with a shovel and shotgun strapped to its pack strode toward her, the name "Lucky Chance" dancing over his head.

"Hello, there. What brings you to these environs, little lady?"

Trey had chosen a prospector template for his avatar, including voice modulation.

Defying her heart's resistance, Savannah smiled. "Maybe I'm looking for gold, like you."

"Gold, hey? Well, I heard there's silver nearby. I don't suppose you can guide me to either one, could you? Heard tell you were a guide."

Oh, Trey. You really are the best.

She glanced up at DreamSight's version of a virtual sky, then let her focus drift to the hazy, purple outline of hills on the horizon. Any other time the scene would have relaxed her. She would have been able to push all other thoughts aside and immerse herself in the fake surroundings, but that was back then, before she knew a real Palas existed, before she had loved and lost Jack.

Prospector-Trey's avatar shimmered. Perhaps a power glitch. They would need to charge Trey's headgear unit before he packed it away.

"What are your plans?" Prospector-Trey had abandoned his speech affectations. "What will you do once you're standing on a real road like this, with a real, blue sky overhead?"

Savannah sighed.

"Well, I think I'm going to copy you, Trey, and travel. Maybe there's some kind of job like a reporter. Like you, I'm starting to think there's no point in going if I don't plan to see as much of it as I can."

"Can I join you? Do you think Trey will let us tag along?"

Savannah blinked.

The prospector's voice had changed. Voice modulation had been disabled. But this wasn't Trey's voice.

"What?"

"Do you know what Gwenny asked me?"

Jack. This was Jack's voice.

Savannah moved her hands, wanting to rip the headgear unit off her head to see who sat beside her, but fingers closed around hers and held them.

"Last night, when I put Gwenny to bed, she asked me if I loved you. I said yes. Then she asked me if I was going to marry you. I said that I'd like to, and then she said, 'you and Sevenanna should be a family, like me and Mommy and Daddy are a family. You should have your own family, Uncle Jack.'"

"Jack." She breathed his name, tried to pull her hands free.

The prospector mimicked his controller and pulled Savannah's Guide avatar closer.

"You said I'm generous and selfless, but I'm just a coward. I've mentioned that before I think. Before I hid behind the mask. Now I'm hiding behind this headgear. But my cowardice goes far beyond just hiding my face."

Savannah's chest ached, as if her lungs were struggling to breathe.

"Yes, I wanted to protect Tom and Gwenny, but I've realized I've also used them as an excuse. If I was protecting them, I didn't have to make decisions about my own life. But then, last night after my conversation with Gwenny, I couldn't sleep. I slipped on your headgear and I heard your voice, asking me to choose a world."

"Jack, please."

Savannah felt desperate to see his face, to assure herself that he was really sitting beside her, that he hadn't boarded the *Raven Wing* with Gwenny and Natalie. She wanted to see his face now more than she had wanted to unmask Wild.

But his grip on her hands only tightened.

"To answer that question, I choose *your* world. Wherever that is. I think I remember writing that I wanted to be a part of your world in that journal exercise back at Chance House" He kissed the knuckles of her fingers. "I choose *you*, Savannah Jones."

He released her hands.

She freed herself from the headgear, then with trembling hands pulled the headgear from Jack's head, able at last to see his face.

"You're here," she said.

He smiled. "If you'll have me, despite everything I've kept from you, I want to be with you," he said.

She swallowed.

He was here beside her, looking at her with those amber eyes that had always looked at her the way no others did.

Savannah's knotted stomach and tight chest and clogged throat fought for her attention. And her eyes, burning in anticipation of an onslaught of tears, fought the hardest of all.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

His eyes misted. He swallowed.

"I don't know. I think I was afraid I couldn't trust myself, that I might betray myself at the last instant. But when I heard my father's offer and Ma'am's demand, I knew I would regret it if I went back. Tom and Gwenny and Natalie have each other, as well as my parents as strange as that sounds. If I went back, I'd lose you, and I'm not willing to do that.

"You see, there's only ever been one choice, since the very beginning." He leaned his forehead against hers. "I choose *you*."

He pulled her into his arms. She dissolved against him, wrapping her arms around his torso and clutching the back of his shirt. Then she drew back and lifted her face to receive his kiss as if it were the first kiss, for these tears were tears of joy instead of heartache.

When their lips parted, she heard a thud and a cry, turned to see Trey rubbing his shin where he had bashed it against the table.

"So much for sneaking away," he said.

"Trey," Jack said. "Is there a way to get to the roof?"

Trey blinked. "The stars look the same through this skylight as they do up there, Jack."

"I know. Still."

"Sure. You can get up there."

"Then let's go. You, too."

Jack grabbed Savannah's hand and stood, gesturing for Trey to lead the way.

They exited the common room through a short hallway, then climbed a flight of stairs to the roof.

The air was still, the temperature as consistent under the dome as ever, but their view of the stars seemed limitless.

"Is that the *Nighthawk*?"

Trey pointed.

Hadley hadn't exaggerated. The *Nighthawk* was gigantic, its silhouette so black that from this distance it appeared as if a large portion of space had been torn asunder and voided of stars.

Savannah felt her excitement stir, at first cautious, then rise more confidently with each beat of her heart.

Savannah slipped her hand into Jack's and squeezed it, then pulled Trey closer with her free hand, slipping her arm through his. Then the three exchanged smiles and turned their attention back to the *Nighthawk* and the stars.

"Palas," Savannah said. "Here we come."

EPILOGUE

"Professor Jones!"

I rose from the bench where I had been waiting in front of the *Nighthawk Casino* and stepped forward out onto the boardwalk.

Benny Tatem was running down the street toward me, a hand on his head to keep his hat in place. When he reached me, he grinned and pointed.

"The coach is coming. And the Duster's coming, too. He's right behind it."

I clasped my hands together and pressed them against my chest. He was back. The coach was bringing me two more researchers from the university, so that was good news, too. But my Duster was back. After his assignment escorting prisoners to Central Lockup, and apparently an additional task to provide protection for the newly formed coach line from Baker Station to Hadley, he was back.

Dust and the thundering sound of horse's hooves announced the arrival of the coach.

"Thank you, Benny. I see them."

He nodded and smiled.

The coach driver drew the horses to a halt in front of the *Nighthawk*, and the rider that followed it dismounted and came toward me, pausing only long enough to toss his horse's reins loosely over the hitching rail. If I had wanted to focus on the passengers exiting the coach, I would have had to step around the tall, large, duster-clad frame of the man blocking my way to the street. But I wasn't about to do that.

I looked up into his strong face, his ice-blue eyes twinkling as he smiled down at me.

"Rock," I said. "You haven't shaved."

"Is that what you were waiting here to tell me, Pebble?"

"I was waiting here to greet my new researchers."

"Ah, well, I had the coach driver drop them off at Tatem's livery. They'll need horses for the ride to Quinn's camp."

"What?"

I grabbed his sleeve and peered around him. A single passenger had exited the coach, but the man lived in Hadley. I recognized him. He must have just returned from a trip to Grandview.

Rock took my hand in his, pulled on it until I looked up at him. "If I let those researchers near you, you won't give me the time of day. Boxes, boxes, boxes. That's all I'll hear from the lot of you. So, I'm taking this opportunity to have you all to myself." He leaned down and put his lips next to my ear. "It's been weeks, Pebble."

I know I blushed for I felt the heat rise up through my neck to my face.

I nodded. "It's been weeks." I touched his cheek, tugged on his scruff of a beard. "I missed you."

He turned me around by the shoulders then led me by the hand into the lodging entrance of the *Nighthawk*, throwing the door closed behind us.

"What do you have for us?"

The bartender-clerk held out a key. "Room 2."

Rock strode forward with me in tow and grabbed the key.

"And a letter here for you, Professor, from your aunt."

Aunt Hettie?

"Thank you, Clarence."

I managed to grab the letter from his outstretched hand and shove it in my skirt pocket before Rock pulled me up the stairs.

As Rock unlocked the door to room 2, I considered pulling the letter out of my pocket but changed my mind.

Rock was here. And I had missed him.

He didn't wait for the door to close completely behind me before he kissed me. My closed eyelids, my cheeks, my lips. Even though he hadn't shaved, he must have washed up that morning for I smelled soap. I reached up and pushed his hat off his head, stuck my fingers in his sandy brown hair.

He drew his head back and looked at me.

"You want to read the letter, don't you?"

"I can read it later," I said.

He drew in a breath and sighed. "If memory serves you've been waiting a while for her reply, and whether you'll be distracted or not, I'm going to think that you are, so you might as well read it now." He lifted an eyebrow. "I'll be taking my boots off. Then I'll be taking yours off, so you'd best get to it, Theodora Gwendolyn Jones."

I smiled. "You are a silly man, Garak Rawlins."

He kissed my forehead. "And wild. Don't forget wild."

A wild man from the Wildlands, my father had called him. My Duster. My love.

Rock turned and picked his hat up from the floor, removed his duster, then hung the two articles on the coat rack. I hurried and sat on the chair next to the sliver of a window and withdrew Aunt Hettie's letter. The envelope was thick, containing more folded pages than I would ever have expected from Aunt Hettie.

I positioned the pages to receive the most amount of sunlight streaming through the window.

Little T,

I apologize for taking so long to get back to you. But it isn't for lack of interest, because as soon as I read about those boxes you've been investigating and that one personal entry in particular that you translated signed by Savannah Jones, I've been in a frenzy searching through your grandfather's things.

Savannah was your great-grandmother's name. Everyone called her Anna, except for your great-grandfather, so that's probably the name you know if your father ever mentioned her. Of course, knowing him, he probably never taught you anything about your family. Anyway, after your grandfather passed away, I packed his things, including what had been passed down to him, and brought them home to the ranch, but I've never gone through them thoroughly. When I read your letter, I remembered seeing a black box like the ones you described so went searching. I found it, thank goodness. I'll keep it safe for you. But what I really wanted to find was Savannah's journal. I thought it best not to trust it to the mail, so I've copied a passage that I think you'll find interesting. I didn't need to translate it, so I'll leave the mystery of why you found a journal entry from your great-grandmother in a box buried near a silver mine that needed to be translated for you and your researchers to figure out. Of course, the name could just be a coincidence, but this passage makes me think they are one in the same.

Tell that wild man of yours hello for me and tell him he needs to come with you to the ranch to take a look at this box. And come soon. Old ladies like me don't get any younger, you know.

Much love, your Aunt Hettie

One of the testimonial entries my team and I had translated from the mysterious black boxes – the ones that display words of light after sitting in the sun – that had been signed by someone named

Savannah Jones. It had only been a whim that I sent a letter to Aunt Hettie asking if anyone in our family had that name since Jones was common enough.

But according to Aunt Hettie my great-grandmother's name *had been* Savannah Jones.

I flipped to the next page. It was still Aunt Hettie's handwriting since she had copied the original text, but the entry had been written by Savannah.

Yuta Tensai told me that ten years would go by in the blink of an eye. He also told me that I was too young to believe him. Back then, when I thought I would have to wait that long to see Jack again, I had hoped that time would go as fast as Yuta promised, but once Jack finally chose to come with me and we set foot on the rich soil of this planet, the real Palas, I wanted to savor every moment. I tried as hard as I could to stay present, to appreciate the days traveling with our friend Trey, writing my newspaper articles, wading in the ocean, camping in the forest, finally settling in our friend Hadley's town in the Wildlands for a time where Tommy was born before moving to Diamond Point.

So yes, just like that it seemed, ten years have raced past. And, last night, the *Nighthawk* returned at last.

Jack and Tommy and I waited at the rendezvous point to meet the space plane that would carry new immigrants and science foundation scouts and volunteers to the surface. Trey and his wife Cat - which is short for Catalina if I haven't mentioned that before - Ace and Zoe, Love and Diamond and all the kids met us there and I thought one of us might choke the other we hugged each other so hard.

And then out of the moonless night sky, the plane descended and landed. Figures exited and came running toward us, one I didn't recognize until she had rushed into Jack's arms. Gwenny. A teenager now. Then her parents Tom and Natalie followed, all surrounding Jack, and I knew, even though I couldn't see his face in the dark, that Jack was crying when he hugged his brother.

Tommy was confused and I tried to keep up with his questions and introductions.

We have so much to catch up on.

Then Tom handed me a letter from Yuta asking me to keep my promise and send back tales of my adventures on Palas. Just like when we first arrived, the *Nighthawk* will be in orbit for several months studying the planet and retrieving any scouts or volunteers who want to return - I'm not one of them. Of course, I miss the conveniences I once had, and no place is perfect, but I'll never go back - so I'll have plenty of time to gather everything I've written over the years for Yuta and keep my promise as the "guide." (I wonder if any of my descriptions will be incorporated into an update of the *Palas* virtual world. I do kind of miss *DreamSight* I must admit.)

Have to go now. Jack is nuzzling my neck.

Hey, journal, tell Seven to stop ignoring me.

Jack wrote the two previous sentences. Maybe I should erase them in case anybody reads this someday, but he's awfully cute when he gets jealous of inanimate objects.

I reread everything. Aunt Hettie's letter. Savannah's journal entry.

Tommy, or Thomas as I knew him, was my grandfather, and now I knew he was named after his uncle. I had also learned where my middle name came from, my grandfather's cousin Gwenny. As for the rest, I would need to read it a few or a dozen more times and consult with my research staff to parse its

references. Had she called this planet Palas? Was *Nighthawk* the name of a spaceship? Was Hadley the name of a person?

And how many re-readings would it take for me to put my thoughts around the implication that my great-grandparents came from another planet?

"Pebble."

Rock was kneeling on the floor at my feet about to reach for my bootlaces.

"Yes?"

"Is your aunt fine? Did she answer your questions?"

I nodded.

"Can we put the letter away for now?"

I nodded, smiled, folded the letter and slipped it – more carefully this time – into my skirt pocket.

"My great-grandfather's name was Jack," I said. "It sounds as if he was a lot like you."

"Really?" Rock unlaced the first boot and pulled it off my foot, taking my sock with it. "How so?"

"Apparently, my great-grandmother thought he was cute when he acted jealous of inanimate objects."

"Like boxes and letters, you mean?"

"Exactly."

Rock unlaced and removed my second boot, then rose up on his knees and kissed me.

"I wonder if he was wild then, too," he said.