

"Are you-" Sarah left the question hanging.

The old man smiled. "No, I am a construct of Abernathy, a vessel if you like. He's a very busy man-" his eyes unfocused for a moment- "On Terra at the moment, so there are quite a few of us around. You can call me Abe if it's easier."

"All right... Abe."

"Please, sit," the old man gestured to the bench. "I love this view," he leaned over and whispered. "Don't tell anyone, but it's actually one of his favorite places on the planet. He doesn't like to admit he has favorites."

"Your secret is safe with me," Sarah smiled.

"So, to business," Abe clapped his hands. "First, some insurance." He flipped open the book in between them on the bench and pulled out a small black pouch with a zip on it. "This is a nano-injection. Won't do anything to you physically, but it'll allow you to resist their neural controllers if you fall into their hands." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small silver disk and handed it to her. "Stick that somewhere on you. You might need it."

"For what?"

"It doesn't hurt to be prepared," Abe smiled. He handed her the small black pouch. "Keep that somewhere safe as well." Sarah put the silver disk on the center of her shirt and slipped the black pouch into pocket.

"So, I have to ask," Sarah began, unsure of how to phrase it.

"Why you?"

"Yes." Sarah sagged with relief. "The last few weeks have been ludicrous... I'm not anybody really all that important. My job was amazing, my life was incredible. I was comfortable! And now it's been, well, hell really. People are trying to kill me. Pirates are helping me. There's..." she waved a hand in the direction of Sister Adelaide. "Warrior nuns."

Abe chuckled. "It has been a lot, hasn't it? Well, you were promised answers. Are you ready for them?"

"I hope so."

Abe shook his head. "No hope, Ms. Hoavy. You have to be ready. Are you?"

His tone was grave and serious. Sarah hesitated. "Yes. I am."

"You know the outline of it already," Abe began. "BHP Tinto, a Terran mining conglomerate partnered with Armscor to launch a coup to overturn the established order on Venus. They're desperate. They're locked out of Mars and Luna, the asteroids weren't as lucrative as they thought. The outer planets are still so far away."

"Venus is an easy target," Sarah nodded. "But I still haven't figured out where I fit into all of this! I'm just an Assistant Director. I'm nobody important."

"On the contrary," Abe replied. "You are very important indeed. You got your job for a reason." Abe produced a small holo-projector from his pocket. "I believe you know this man." He pressed the button and an image projected above it.

Sarah gasped. "That's... not possible."

"I assure you, Ms. Hoavy, it very much is."

"*I don't believe you.*" Sarah hissed. She stood up, her fists clenched. "My father died fighting *them*. He hated *them*. He hated what they had done to so many countries, all over Africa. He would never-"

"It might not be your father," Abe interrupted. He raised an eyebrow at Sarah's look. "They have the technology to control your mind, you don't think they can change somebody's face?"

"What kind of a sick monster-"

Abe pressed another button and another image popped up. "This kind of a sick monster, Ms. Hoavy," he finished. "They call him Mr. Hastings and he appears to be their point person for this operation."

"And he is cloning or surgically altering someone to look like my dead father?"

"They've done worse. They'll do anything to achieve their aims."

"Profit?"

"Control." Abe turned the holoprojector off and held it out to her. "There's a data stick in the base with all the files on it."

The civil defense sirens began to wail. Sarah shot to her feet and turned at the noise, but the sirens were drowned out by a deafening roar. A black transport rose up over the dome of the Palace. It settled over the Gardens and its doors flew open. Black suited shock troopers, armored, visored, and armed with pulse rifles began dropping to the ground one by one.

Mendrika and Sister Adelaide greeted them with a hail of weapons fire.

Sarah ducked instinctively as an electrical charge from a pulse rifle buzzed by her head. Abe seemed unconcerned.

The transport turned and started to rise once more when they heard a sharp hissing noise. The force of the explosion was deafening and the transport lurched stricken, its engines groaning before it slammed into the gardens. The force of it flung Sarah backwards. She lay still for a moment, stunned by the force of it. Deafened by the cacophony of noise. Her head hurt. She felt something wet and warm running down her arm.

Abe appeared above her. He extended an arm and she grasped it. He pulled her to her feet. "It's begun." He pointed high above the gardens, to the top of the dome of the Jaipur Palace where a black flag was snapping in the artificial breeze of the city's atmosphere.

The shock troopers were getting closer.

Abe turned to Sarah.

"Do you trust me?"

They were at the edge now. The atmospheric filters were groaning, their bulkheads covered with black blisters of pulse rifle fire. Sirens were wailing across the city. The snap of pulse charges filled the air. Acrid smoke from the wrecked transport choking the air.

Mendrika took a direct hit. The silvery sheen of his protective shield vanished. The shock troopers began to move towards him, but Sister Adelaide was faster. In one swift motion, she tossed Mendrika her pulse rifle, ducked into her habit, pulled out some knives and closed the distance between them and the shock troopers with a loud war cry.

Sarah met Abe's steady gaze. "Do I have a choice?"

"Not really," he replied. Then he shoved her off the edge.

