

## CHAPTER 1

"These harnesses really dig into my shoulders," Allaria thought. She hated the way the safety harness always pressed against her envirosuit, making the already uncomfortable journey even worse. The envirosuit was her lifeline—a multipurpose environmental protection suit designed to keep her alive in the harshest conditions imaginable. It was bulkier than she would have liked, with layers of insulated material, radiation shielding, and an integrated life-support system. The suit was somewhat reminiscent of a traditional space suit, but with key upgrades for versatility. Its primary function was to provide protection in low-pressure environments, but it also had reinforced shielding against radiation and contaminants that could be encountered during space missions.

When closed, the suit's large, curved glass visor covered her entire face, offering a clear view of her surroundings. The inside of the visor housed a digital display, a transparent interface that overlaid vital information directly onto her field of vision—everything from oxygen levels to external radiation readings, communication signals, and mission-specific data. Right now, it showed basic stats: temperature holding steady, oxygen levels optimal, and a comms status bar indicating a strong link with the team. Despite the envirosuit's sophistication, it wasn't meant for comfort, especially when confined within the narrow harness of an EDF shuttle.

Allaria adjusted herself again, her right hand tugging on the harness as she tried to find a less agonizing position. She leaned back against the bulkhead, feeling the cold metal press through her suit. The helmet, though lightweight, made leaning back an awkward task, so she did her best to avoid hitting her head on the hard surface. There was no way to make herself comfortable in EDF vessels—something she was starting to accept as a fundamental truth of the job.

The air in the shuttle was stale, a mix of machine oil and metallic tang, undercut by the faint mustiness that came from aging filters and countless previous missions. Allaria sighed, the exhalation causing her visor to briefly fog before the suit's internal air circulators cleared it up. "*Probably just the filters again,*" she thought, with a hint of annoyance. The shuttle was certainly no luxury vessel. EDF shuttles were notorious for their maintenance issues—aging air filters that hadn't been replaced in years, ductwork filled with dust, and climate control systems that ran on

outdated software. She could almost taste the slightly metallic undertone of the recycled air, mingled with a whiff of mildew that made her crinkle her nose. It wasn't enough to be harmful—just enough to remind her that they were riding in one of the fleet's older vessels.

The shuttle itself was a rugged, utilitarian craft. Its interior was functional, with exposed wiring and riveted panels lining the narrow cabin. Every inch of the shuttle was built for utility rather than comfort—cramped seats, each with minimal padding, bolted to the floor along the sides, and a low ceiling that gave the impression of being inside a metal box. The floor vibrated constantly, a dull hum generated by the shuttle's aging propulsion system, and the vibration traveled through her boots and up her legs, a steady, numbing reminder of the shuttle's effort to keep them aloft. She could hear the low drone of the engines reverberating through the metal walls, a sound that was almost soothing if it weren't so persistent.

The seats were covered in a synthetic material that felt stiff and sticky, almost tacky to the touch, like it had absorbed the sweat and grime of every occupant who had ever sat there. The overhead lights flickered from time to time, casting long, shifting shadows across the cabin. Allaria found herself staring at the dark corners, watching as the shadows seemed to move, and tried to shake off the slight feeling of unease. The shuttle wasn't much to look at, but it had character—a testament to the countless missions it had carried out, the patches and scuffs on its surfaces telling stories of past journeys.

EDF shuttles were nothing if not reliable, even if they lacked sophistication. They were short-range vessels, designed to ferry small squads over distances of only a few thousand kilometers. This shuttle, in particular, had probably been in service for decades, judging by the wear on its bulkheads and the way the seats had long since lost any semblance of cushion. The cabin temperature fluctuated slightly, the recycled air feeling cool against her face one moment and almost too warm the next, a side effect of the overworked environmental control system.

Allaria shifted again, resigning herself to a few more hours of discomfort. She focused on the mission ahead, trying to ignore the stiff harness, the cold press of metal behind her, and the constant vibrations that ran through the old shuttle's worn frame.

The voice of the shuttle pilot interrupted Allaria's thoughts with the announcement of their arrival at the Ottmar. The Ottmar was a mid-sized, single-deck civilian mining vessel, measuring just under 50 meters in length. It wasn't an imposing ship by any means, more functional than

formidable. It had large, mechanical arms fixed to its sides—massive robotic appendages that looked like skeletal hands, used for grabbing onto chunks of rock and extracting valuable ore from asteroids. The ship's design was utilitarian, with most of its bulk dedicated to cargo holds that could store vast quantities of ore. It had a small crew quarters, enough to comfortably house a handful of personnel, but the real focus was on the large engines and storage capacity, built for efficiency in deep-space mining rather than luxury or speed.

Allaria's boarding squad had been traveling to the Ottmar for the past few hours, and she could feel the tension mounting with each passing minute. An officer back on the Atticus had deemed the mission simple enough for a new team—one he felt confident even a Private First Class could handle—and that responsibility had fallen squarely on Allaria's shoulders. It was her first mission, her first real test outside of the academy, and the reality of being in charge was starting to sink in. She thrived on structure and planning, but now she was in the thick of it, leading her team into the unknown.

Allaria felt a knot in her stomach that she tried to ignore. It was an uncomfortable mix of anxiety and excitement. She'd trained for this, visualized every scenario countless times in her head, and yet there was a part of her that wondered if she was truly ready. She had the plan memorized, the layouts studied, and the mission parameters locked down, but that didn't entirely silence the small voice of doubt whispering in her mind. She knew her ability to think logically, to focus on the big picture, was her strength, but it was different when lives—real people—were at stake. Despite the anxiety, there was also a spark of exhilaration deep within her, a sense of purpose. This was her opportunity to prove herself, to show that she was capable of leading, capable of making decisions when it mattered most. She wouldn't let herself, or her team, fail.

She had hand-picked her team members, all Privates, each with their own area of expertise. Utekli, Karega, and Arturo were all skilled in ways that complemented each other, and she hoped her choices would help them succeed today.

Utekli was the thinker of the group. He had a calm, methodical approach that Allaria appreciated. He had focused his final year of study on Xenobiology, and his knowledge of alien lifeforms, environments, and potential biological hazards made him invaluable on missions like this. He was the kind of person who rarely rushed, preferring to gather all the facts before

making a decision. His demeanor often brought a sense of stability to the group, and Allaria knew that if they encountered anything unexpected, Utekli's analytical skills would be crucial.

Karega was the tech expert, specializing in Xenotechnologies. He had spent his academy years studying fragments of Gao-de technology, dissecting the alien machines and electronics that had been left behind. He was passionate about understanding alien tech, often spending long hours tinkering and experimenting to understand how things worked. Karega had a sharp mind and an innate curiosity that drove him to push boundaries. He could be a bit sarcastic at times, using humor as a shield against uncertainty, but Allaria knew that if they came across anything technological—especially of alien origin—Karega was the one who could make sense of it.

Arturo was the muscle of the squad, focused on close-quarter combat and weapon systems. He was the kind of person who approached everything with confidence, sometimes bordering on recklessness. Arturo had a natural talent for combat, a physicality that made him both intimidating and reassuring to have on their side. His confidence sometimes clashed with Allaria's reserved nature, but she appreciated his unwavering loyalty to the team. He was ready to put himself on the line without hesitation, which gave Allaria some comfort, knowing that if things got physical, Arturo would be ready.

Their mission was straightforward on paper: investigate the currently adrift Ottmar, retrieve a red-and-white datalink at any cost, and report any strange activity onboard. If they found any of the crew deceased, they were to leave the bodies undisturbed for further investigation by more experienced personnel at a later date. The instructions were clear, but the potential for surprises was what kept Allaria on edge. The Ottmar had gone silent without explanation, and it was now up to her and her team to find out why.

Allaria stood up and put her visor down, securing it tightly. The dark gray metal was dull in appearance, but the glass visor was quite clear with no visible scratches at all. The glass was also hardened to take a few forceful hits before breaking, though it couldn't withstand a gunshot. The boarding team made their way to the aft of the shuttle and into the airlock. It was a tight fit for the four of them, but after a few moments of shuffling around they were ready. Allaria felt the shuttle settle into its docking position and waited for the green light to indicate a proper docking. The light flickered green for a moment, then turned off, then turned green again. Allaria felt

uneasy about it, but after a few moments of the indicator being green, she began to feel better. The shuttle wasn't exactly new, but she trusted in the maintenance teams to do their job.

The airlock door opened with a loud clunk, loud enough to be heard through the envirosuit she was wearing. Air rushed past her as it filled the space she was in, though she couldn't feel it. Her glass visor immediately fogged up, reducing her vision to just the virtual display built into the glass. Allaria heard a short hum followed immediately by a quick beep. The helmet display indicated breathable air but also had a "scanning" status and a warning light flashing. Her envirosuit quickly made adjustments for the fog and cleared it away.

As the fog lifted, Allaria got her first real look at the interior of the Ottmar. The mining vessel's utilitarian nature was evident from the start. The corridor that lay before her was narrow, barely wide enough for two people to walk side by side, and the walls were lined with exposed pipes, conduits, and rusted bolts. The once-gray metal bulkheads were discolored with streaks of oil and grime, giving the ship a look of prolonged neglect. Overhead, dim emergency lights bathed the space in an unsettling orange glow that flickered occasionally, casting moving shadows that gave the impression of something shifting just out of sight. The floor panels were scuffed and uneven, some creaking underfoot as if the ship itself was groaning at their intrusion.

To her left, she noticed a series of small storage compartments, each one marked with faded stencils that indicated their contents—"TOOLS," "FILTERS," "SPARE PARTS." One of the compartment doors hung slightly ajar, revealing an assortment of rusted tools loosely piled inside. Allaria could hear the distant hum of machinery, a low vibration that resonated through the deck plates, punctuated by occasional hissing from steam or coolant vents further down the corridor.

The sight of the interior sent a chill down her spine. It was one thing to read the mission briefing, to memorize the layout and see schematics, but it was something else entirely to stand there, seeing the grime and dirt from the industrial work the crew completes. And yet it felt as if it had been forgotten by time. The Ottmar was supposed to be a working vessel, yet it felt empty and dead. That thought alone was enough to make her grip her weapon just a bit tighter.

As the fog cleared completely, she saw three bodies lying on the deck, each wearing an envirosuit of their own. The bodies were lying in such a way that each of them had their heads on another person's stomach, forming a triangle of sorts. For a moment, her heart skipped a

beat, a sudden burst of fear washing over her. She took in a sharp breath, feeling her chest tighten. The scene was surreal, almost ritualistic, and entirely unexpected. She had prepared herself for the possibility of finding the crew deceased, but seeing them like this—in an almost deliberate arrangement—made her stomach churn.

Allaria swallowed, trying to steady herself. She could feel her pulse pounding in her ears, her fingers trembling slightly around the grip of her weapon. Her training kicked in, the logical part of her mind urging her to stay focused, to assess the situation. She was a leader now; her team was depending on her. She forced herself to take a deep breath, letting her heart rate slow as she concentrated on the information projected on her visor. The helmet's internal diagnostics were still processing if the air was still safe, but the flashing warning indicator kept her on edge.

The gray metallic floors beneath the bodies were worn, as expected on a mining vessel. As her eyes adjusted to the new environment, Allaria noticed what appeared to be large dust particles dancing around in the air, as if they were weightless. They seemed to have no desire to fall to the ground at all. She reached out to touch one, but as her hand was about to grasp the object, it drifted away from her as her fingers created the slightest current of air.

The eerie silence of the Ottmar enveloped her, broken only by the occasional creak of metal expanding or contracting. Her breath, now even but deliberate, echoed softly within her helmet, a reminder to herself that she was still here, still in control. The moment of fear had passed, but the unease remained, lurking in the back of her mind as she stepped further into the vessel, signaling her team to follow.

With a light slap to the back of her head and a tap on her shoulder from Karega, Allaria snapped back to the present. She knelt down next to one of the bodies, forcing herself to project an outward appearance of steadfastness for the sake of her team. Her heart pounded, but she maintained a focused expression, not allowing her fear to surface. As she pressed a hand onto the body's shoulder, the feeling of rotted flesh giving way beneath the fabric of the envirosuit sent a shiver down her spine. It was an unnatural sensation—soft, almost yielding, and far too fragile. Inwardly, a chill ran through her. This was the first time she had been in such close contact with death in a mission context. She couldn't let the others see her hesitate.

*"It's a good thing these bodies are inside envirosuits. It really keeps the smell and mess contained,"* she thought to herself, desperately clinging to pragmatism to push away the unease

growing within her. The figures looked almost peaceful in their odd formation, heads resting against each other in a macabre triangle. But there was nothing peaceful about death in space. She scanned the bodies for any immediate signs of their demise—any punctures in the suit, burns, or indicators of struggle. But there was nothing that stood out. The suits were intact, and their postures were almost too deliberate, which only deepened her unease.

*"If I had known there would be bodies here, I would have asked for someone with a forensics background,"* she thought, berating herself for the oversight. But this wasn't supposed to be a complex mission. It was supposed to be simple—a datalink retrieval, maybe some investigation, and a report back. She stepped over the bodies, her movements measured, trying not to let her hesitation show. Her team was watching, and she had to exude confidence, even if her stomach twisted with anxiety.

She turned to the others, who were still standing near the shuttle's airlock. *"What do you think happened here?"* she asked, her voice sharp through the helmet speakers. Silence.

She frowned. *"Hey!"* she said more firmly, but still, no response. The silence felt too heavy, pressing in from all sides. She glanced back and saw them tapping their helmets, frustration clear on their faces. Karega was making hand gestures, pointing to his ear, then at her, indicating that their comms were down. Allaria tapped her own helmet, the sound of her gloved fingers muted by the material. Only static filled her ears. She could see Utekli shrugging, as if to say, *"It's not just you."*

The realization that they were cut off from each other hit her like a weight in her chest. The comms were supposed to be their one constant, their link to one another in the darkness of this derelict vessel. Now, they were isolated, their voices taken away. She took a moment to regain control, feeling her fingers tense around her weapon again. Her visor showed only the faint buzzing of static on the communication indicator. No chatter, no comforting hum of her teammates' voices—just silence.

Allaria knelt down again, examining the bodies more thoroughly. Her fingers moved carefully across the surface of their suits, checking for anything—a datalink, a clue, something that might explain what had happened. Her breathing slowed as she focused, trying to keep her mind from wandering to dark places. She needed to stay present, to think clearly. There was no datalink.

"Damn," she muttered to herself, though she doubted anyone could hear. Standing again, she made a note in her datalink: no visible injuries, no immediate cause of death observed. She took a few pictures for the report, each click of her helmet camera echoing in her ears, then moved on.

The corridor was dimly lit, the emergency lighting casting long shadows against the walls. Not the usual red lights that indicated danger, but blue—a steady, unsettling blue. Allaria paused for a moment, staring at the lights. *"Curious that the blue lights are enabled. I've never seen that before,"* she thought, feeling the unease deepen. She turned to the team, intending to ask if they knew what it meant, but then remembered—no comms. The silence felt like a wall between them, separating each of them from the other despite being only a few meters apart.

She took a step forward, barely managing to turn her head back around before a warning light flashed in her visor:

**ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN COMPLETE - WARNING: HIGH RADIATION LEVELS DETECTED**

The words seemed to burn into her vision, demanding her immediate attention. *"That must be why the comms aren't working,"* she realized, her mind racing. Then another alert flashed:

**RADIATION LEVELS AT 12% - CRITICAL LEVELS DETECTED - 4 MINUTES and 17 SECONDS UNTIL DANGEROUS CONTAMINATION. EXTREME DANGER.**

Her eyes widened, and she quickly looked at the others. Their faces were visible through their visors, a mix of fear and determination that mirrored her own. They must have received the same message, their helmets flashing with the urgent warnings. She felt her breath catch in her throat for a moment, her hands instinctively gripping her weapon tighter.

She thought back to her orders—*"Obtain the datalink at all costs."* The words echoed in her mind, grounding her. *"We're on the clock now,"* she thought, forcing her fear down into the pit of her stomach. She had to keep moving. She gestured for the others to follow, her hand steady even though she could feel her pulse in her fingertips.

Quietly, they moved forward, each step deliberate. The corridor seemed to stretch endlessly before her, each meter feeling heavier than the last. Allaria reached the turn ahead, motioning for the others to stop. Her heart pounded, the countdown timer flashing in her peripheral vision. This was it. This was what she had trained for. She had always wanted to lead, to prove herself,



and now, in this narrow, dim corridor on an abandoned vessel, she had her chance. She took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and with every ounce of determination she could muster, she stepped around the corner, her weapon raised, ready for whatever came next.

The envirosuit blinked with an updated time: 3 MINUTES and 52 SECONDS. She gave a quick look around the corner. It was clear, and she could see the envirohatch she needed to enter as she remembered the ship layout detailed in the mission outline. She could bring it up in her visor, but it wasn't necessary. Over the last three days, she had spent every moment of her free time studying for this mission.

Allaria was hoping this was the work of pirates or a rogue crew member. She was itching for a fight on the other side of the hatch. She could feel the adrenaline coursing through her veins, her heart pounding with anticipation. She told herself it was what she had trained for during her five years in the Academy. She had always been driven to excel in combat training, pushing herself to be the best. Now, she had the chance to prove it. She wanted to face an enemy, to show that she was capable of handling the worst scenarios. The prospect of a fight was both thrilling and terrifying, but mostly thrilling—an opportunity to truly put her skills to the test. She drew her pistol from its holster, situated tightly on her thigh, and disengaged the safety.

She motioned for Arturo to quickly move towards the hatch at the end of the corridor, another ten meters away, then motioned for the other two in her squad to follow. Arturo nodded, a grin forming beneath his visor that Allaria could almost sense rather than see. He moved with purpose, his weapon at the ready, and his body language exuded confidence. Arturo approached the envirohatch in a low, controlled stance, his eyes locked on the target. He signaled back to the team with one hand, indicating he was ready to breach. He placed his other hand on the handle, his muscles tense as he prepared to throw the door open. His lack of hesitation spoke volumes—this was what he was made for. Arturo lived for these moments, the charged anticipation before breaching, the split second when anything could happen. He moved like a soldier who had practiced this maneuver a hundred times, his focus absolute.

Allaria watched Arturo's movements, her own excitement bubbling beneath her composed exterior. She was ready. The thought of a hostile on the other side didn't scare her; it exhilarated her. She wanted a target, something to face and conquer. Her grip on her pistol tightened, her fingers itching to pull the trigger if necessary.

The envirosuit's internal timer continued its countdown, flashing in her peripheral vision: **3 MINUTES and 45 SECONDS**. Her visor displayed the warning about radiation levels, and she could feel a pit of anxiety forming in her stomach. She knew the envirosuit was designed to handle a wide range of environmental hazards, but radiation was something that always carried an extra layer of risk. The suit's protection was robust, reinforced against radiation, but just how much radiation could it truly withstand? She didn't have the answer, and the uncertainty gnawed at her.

She had only received limited training in radiation survival. Most of it was theoretical, focused on finding shelter or avoiding exposure, not navigating through it. The helmet's alerts flashed warnings, and she couldn't help but feel a creeping doubt. How much time did they really have before their envirosuits were overwhelmed? The mission was critical, but so was the safety of her team. She clenched her jaw, trying to push those thoughts aside. She needed to believe in the suit, to trust that it would protect her and the others. But the flickering warning on her display was a constant reminder that time was slipping away, that they were walking a razor's edge.

Her instincts screamed at her to turn back, to retreat to the shuttle and reassess. The logical part of her mind knew that they were venturing into unknown territory, that the risks were increasing with every passing second. It would be the cautious, sensible choice to return to the shuttle, to reevaluate and come up with a new plan. She hesitated for just a moment, her eyes flicking back towards the shuttle in the distance. The thought of safety, of pulling back to regroup, was tempting. But she quickly pushed it away. They couldn't afford to lose time. The datalink was somewhere beyond that hatch, and they had orders to retrieve it at all costs.

Allaria forced herself to move forward, pushing against the instinct to flee. She tightened her grip on her pistol, steeling herself. There was no room for hesitation—not now. They had come this far, and she wasn't about to let fear dictate her actions. She gestured to Utekli and Karega to move in closer, her body language calm and deliberate. She had to set the example. She was their leader, and she had to act like it. The mission came first, and as much as the urge to return to the shuttle pulled at her, she fought it down, choosing instead to trust in her training, in her team, and in herself.

Another quick hand signal told her squad to prepare for entry, then with a quick pull and a twist of the handle, the heavy hatch opened smoothly without making a sound, or at least not one Allaria could hear. She was surprised by how easily it moved, expecting more resistance from

something so massive. The hatch seemed almost weightless as it swung open, the mechanism well-oiled and precise, a contrast to the worn, rust-streaked exterior of the Ottmar. Allaria kept her pistol ready, her eyes narrowing as she scanned the room for any threats, her muscles tensed for a response.

She entered quickly, sweeping left and then right. The room was clear. She sighed with relief, lowering her weapon just slightly. It was a small space, about four by six meters, with walls covered in metal paneling. The lighting was dim, and the room was bathed in the same unsettling blue emergency glow that had been present in the corridor. The floor beneath her boots was metallic, scuffed from years of use.

A small control panel sat in the center of the room, surrounded by a cluster of worn chairs bolted to the floor. The chairs looked as though they hadn't been used in a while—their fabric faded, with patches where the material had worn away completely, exposing the foam beneath. The walls were lined with monitors, most of them dark, but a few still flickered with life, displaying static or error messages. There was a large glass window directly opposite the hatch they had entered through, and it took up almost the entire wall.

Allaria approached the window, her eyes widening at the view beyond. Through the thick glass, she could see the mining bay—a vast expanse filled with equipment, ore storage containers, and the skeletal forms of mining drones. One of the drones was just outside the window, its limbs hanging lifelessly as it drifted aimlessly in the zero-gravity environment. The bay itself was dimly lit, the emergency lighting casting long shadows that made the space seem even larger and emptier than it was. It was eerie, seeing the equipment just floating there, as if time had stopped abruptly. It felt as though whatever had happened here had occurred without any warning. There was no sign of panic, no overturned crates or hurried attempts to flee—everything was in its place, as if the crew had simply vanished in the middle of their work.

The silence added to the eeriness. The mining equipment, the storage containers, the drones—it was all there, frozen in time. It was as if the entire crew had just stepped away for a moment, intending to return, but never did. Allaria's gaze drifted to the control panel beneath the window. The console's screens displayed data logs and asteroid tracking information, as if someone had been actively monitoring them just moments before. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were intruding on something they weren't supposed to see—like stepping into a

room where someone had been interrupted mid-sentence and everything had been left unfinished.

Karega moved towards the control panel, his fingers tapping on the keys as he tried various codes. Allaria watched as he worked, the blue emergency lights still flashing rhythmically, creating an uneasy atmosphere. After a few moments, there was a soft click, and the standard lighting flickered to life. The room seemed to change with the light—less ominous, but no less unsettling. The blue flashing lights ceased, leaving only the hum of the equipment and the glow of the now-activated overhead lights. The sudden brightness made the room feel smaller, more confined.

Karega, having spotted what they were looking for, waved for Allaria to come over to him. He pointed at a datalink sitting on the communications panel, a small red-and-white device. Allaria stepped closer, picking it up carefully. The datalink was slightly warm to the touch, the indicator light blinking steadily. She gave it a quick look over, noting the intact casing, and handed it to Karega, who slipped it into a metal carrying case.

Just as she turned back towards the hatch, she heard a mechanical groan. The heavy hatch they had come through began to close, the movement, initially slow, quickened. Allaria's eyes widened, and she lunged towards it, her gloved hand outstretched, but it was too late. The door shut with a loud, echoing clang, the sound reverberating through the room and making her wince. She pressed her hand against the metal, trying to find a latch or handle, but there was nothing. The hatch had sealed automatically, locking them inside.

Panic bubbled up in her chest for a brief moment, her breaths coming faster. She glanced at her visor display, hoping for some sort of override or manual release command, but there was nothing—just the silent, blinking warnings. The room felt even smaller now, the walls closer. She looked back at the others, seeing the tension on their faces as they realized the same thing. They were trapped. The weight of the situation pressed down on her, but she fought to keep her expression calm, her mind racing to find a way out. She reminded herself that the mission wasn't over, and they still had a job to do.

RADIATION LEVELS AT 42% - CRITICAL LEVELS DETECTED - 2 MINUTES and 45 SECONDS UNTIL FULL CONTAMINATION. EXTREME DANGER.

The AI voice seemed eerie when it sent the message. It barely had any emotion in it, a flat monotone that made it even more unsettling. The words hung in the air, a chilling reminder of the reality they were facing. It was hard to gauge the urgency from the AI's voice alone, but the closing statement—"EXTREME DANGER"—was enough to send a shiver down Allaria's spine. She figured that the programmers must have put that bit in to drive home the seriousness of the situation, as if the flashing warnings weren't enough.

She quickly glanced around and saw everyone frantically looking at each other, their expressions a mix of fear and desperation. The unspoken question in their eyes was clear: what now? They were all hoping someone had an answer, a plan—something to cling to in this spiraling nightmare. *"Right, that's what I'm here for"*, Allaria reminded herself. She knew it was her job to come up with a working solution. Her heart pounded in her chest as she looked around the room. She could see it in their faces—Utekli's eyes were wide, darting between the consoles and the sealed hatch, while Karega's jaw was clenched tightly, his body tense. Even Arturo, who was usually so composed, looked on edge, his breathing rapid, his gloved hands fidgeting with his weapon. They were relying on her, and it was her job to make a decision.

Karega went back to the control panel, his hands moving over the keys, trying code after code in a frantic attempt to override the hatch. His movements were quick, almost panicked, and with every error beep from the console, his frustration grew. Arturo, meanwhile, was scouring the room, searching for anything they could use to force the hatch open. He was pulling at panels, checking under the console, his eyes scanning every corner of the room, but there was nothing—no tools, no loose equipment, nothing they could use to pry their way out. The room was well kept, almost too tidy, with nothing left behind that could be of use to them.

Allaria felt the pressure building. She had to act—every second that ticked by brought them closer to critical radiation levels. Her eyes darted to the large window, the only other way out. She knew what she had to do. Without hesitation, she aimed her pistol at the glass, her breath steadying as she focused. She pulled the trigger.

THUNK.

The shot hit the window dead center, creating a spiderweb of cracks that spread across the surface. The others spun around at the sound, their eyes wide beneath their visors. Even through the envirosuits, the muffled sound of the gunshot was unmistakable, reverberating through the confined space. Allaria didn't hesitate—she grabbed the handle of the now-closed

hatch with her free hand, using it to brace herself. She gestured for the others to do the same, her movements sharp and commanding. They scrambled to grab hold of anything sturdy, their eyes locked on her, a mix of fear and hope in their expressions.

A moment later, once everyone was situated, she fired a second shot.

THUNK.

The bullet struck the weakened glass, and this time, it shattered. A large chunk blew out, the force of the decompression sending it hurtling into the void, colliding with the lifeless mining drone outside. The sudden loss of pressure was immediate—the air rushed out, creating a powerful force that ripped more of the glass away, pulling loose items from around the room and sending them spiraling into the darkness. Allaria felt the tug of the vacuum, her body straining against the hatch handle she held onto with all her strength. The sound disappeared entirely, replaced by the eerie silence of open space.

She used her pistol to clear out the remaining shards of glass, making a hole big enough for them to escape. With a deep breath, she stepped out of the window, her body weightless as she moved into open space. The suit's warnings blared in her helmet:

**NO PRESSURE. NO ATMOSPHERE.**

But then, another alert flashed across her visor:

**RADIATION LEVELS DECREASING.**

Finally, some good news, she thought, her heart still pounding. She turned her head to see the others following her lead, one by one slipping out of the window and into the emptiness of space.

The first thing she heard were the cursing words of Utekli in her comms, his voice crackling to life. *"What the HELL, Laskari? You're gonna kill us all!"*

His tone was a mix of fear and disbelief, the kind of raw emotion that only came when someone had just stared death in the face. Allaria couldn't help but let out a small, relieved breath—if Utekli was yelling, that meant they had their comms back.

Even though she was used to it, she always hated being called by her last name, Laskari. She always thought of it as her father's name - Every time she heard her own name, she always thought about her father, Dr. Laskari.

Karega's voice came through next, dripping with sarcasm. "I guess the comms are working again," he drawled, his exasperation evident even through the distorted audio. He gave a dramatic wave, as if to say, "Oh, great, now we can all yell at each other again." Despite the tension, Allaria felt a flicker of amusement. Trust Karega to find the humor in a life-or-death situation.

Arturo, who had been silent until now, let out a low whistle. "You sure know how to make an exit, Laskari," he said, his voice carrying a hint of admiration despite the chaos they had just endured.

Allaria glanced back at them, her expression hidden behind her visor, but her voice steady as she replied, "Just doing what needed to be done." She kept her tone even, trying to project the confidence they needed to hear. They were still in danger, but for the moment, they were alive—and they had a way out.

She gestured for them to keep moving, her eyes scanning the dark expanse around them. The mission wasn't over yet, and they still had to make it back to the shuttle. The fear was still there, lurking in the corners of her mind, but she pushed it down, focusing on the task ahead. They had survived this far, and she wasn't about to let them fail now.

Allaria holstered her pistol and motioned for the rest of the team to follow her.

*"Come on, this way,"* Allaria said while motioning with her hand in the direction of the shuttle.

Her suit wasn't designed for being outside of a pressurized space, at least not for long durations, but she remembered her training in which she was taught that in an emergency, her suit could provide atmospheric life support for up to five minutes in the void of space. The countdown timer flashing on her visor was a constant reminder of how precious every second was.

*"Better to last four more minutes out here than only two in there!"* she said with a smirk, trying to inject some levity into the dire situation, though she wasn't sure if anyone appreciated it.

She knew there was no other way out. What she didn't understand was how the team hadn't figured it out on their own, and that frustrated her. Still, she kept those thoughts to herself—this was not the time to criticize her team.

The suits didn't have propulsion tech integration, so Allaria unclipped a nylon rope from her belt and tied herself to a sensor protruding from the hull to avoid drifting away. She looked over to where the team entered the derelict ship. The group was only twenty meters from the shuttle. *"That's not too far away"*, she thought to herself. She pushed herself off of some armor plating towards the shuttle, the loose end of the rope held securely in her grasp. The darkness of space enveloped her, the distant stars shining coldly as she moved, her visor displaying the slowly diminishing distance to the shuttle.

She landed against the shuttle's exterior, her boots making contact with a dull thud. Allaria quickly tied off the rope to a cargo ring on the shuttle, anchoring it tightly. She gestured to the others to begin their transit, her voice cracking through the comms.

*"Use the rope and get over here, one at a time!"* she commanded. The team hesitated for a moment, exchanging uncertain glances before they began to move.

Arturo was the first to grab the rope, pulling himself hand over hand towards the shuttle. His movements were swift and deliberate, but there was a visible tension in his posture. His eyes stayed locked on Allaria, and she could tell he was not pleased. One by one, the others followed—Utekli moved cautiously, his eyes darting between the vast void around them and the shuttle. Karega was last, his grip steady but his expression hidden behind the visor.

*"Ardakani, do you still have your pressure suit on?"* Allaria asked the pilot still in the shuttle.

*"You know I always have it on. Never know what could happen out here,"* came the reply, Ardakani's voice filled with cautious humor.

*"Perfect, also—go ahead and close the airlock hatch,"* Allaria requested as she waved through the cockpit window at the pilot.

Ardakani's face shifted in surprise, then quickly to confusion.

Leaving the rope tied to the cargo ring, Allaria opened the shuttle's emergency hatch, stepping inside and feeling the artificial gravity pull her back down. The interior of the shuttle felt cramped



after the expanse of space—its dim lighting, the metal surfaces, and the hum of machinery all felt strangely comforting compared to the exposed emptiness they had just traversed.

Once the rest of the team entered the shuttle, she quickly cut the rope and sealed the hatch behind them. The moment the airlock pressurized, she could feel the change. The pressure shifted, her ears popping slightly, and then there was the sound of recycled air rushing in, filling her suit.

*“See, not so bad. We were in and out in under five minutes. That’s gotta be some kind of mission record!”* she said, trying to lighten the mood as she removed her helmet.

Her comment was met with a mix of silence and heavy sighs. Karega just looked at her, his expression unreadable behind his visor, while Arturo’s glare was enough to make it clear he wasn’t impressed. Even Utekli shook his head slightly, his body language conveying frustration. They were glad to be alive, but it was clear they weren’t thrilled with how Allaria had handled the situation.

Allaria shrugged and sat down on the passenger seat towards the back of the craft. The metal was cold against her, but she welcomed the chance to sit and let the adrenaline drain from her system. She could feel the exhaustion creeping in now that the immediate danger had passed.

*“We got what we came for,”* said Karega sternly, his voice carrying a tone of finality, which he followed with a heavy sigh directed at Allaria. He was still holding the metal box containing the datalink in his lap, his grip tight, as if to remind himself of their objective.

Allaria lifted her helmet up over her head and placed it on the empty seat next to her. She took a deep breath of the recycled shuttle air, which wasn’t great—it was tinged with a stale, metallic scent—but was surprisingly better than the sterile, filtered air inside her envirosuit. The familiar smell of the shuttle’s interior, the hum of the engines, and the sight of the worn metal panels all made her feel a little more grounded.

*“Karega?”* Allaria asked, her voice sounding a bit more subdued now.

*“Yes?”* Karega responded, though his tone was curt, still holding onto the tension from earlier.

*“What does the datalink say?”* Allaria asked, her curiosity bubbling to the surface.

*“Not sure. Haven’t had time yet to take a look.”* Karega opened the case and carefully examined the datalink. The small red-and-white device looked intact, but he frowned. *“Looks like the battery is dead—or the screen is broken,”* he said, turning it over in his hands. *“Whatever’s wrong with it, there isn’t anything I can do here to fix it.”*

He placed the datalink back into the metal case with a frustrated sigh. The tension in the shuttle was palpable—an unspoken mix of relief and lingering fear. They had made it out, but it hadn’t been easy, and the reality of how close they had come to disaster still hung in the air.

Arturo finally spoke up, his voice edged with annoyance. *“You know, Laskari, shooting out a window isn’t exactly what we were taught as protocol.”* He leaned back in his seat, his eyes not meeting hers.

Allaria gave a small, weary smile. *“Desperate times call for desperate measures, Arturo. We’re here, aren’t we?”*

Utekli let out a dry chuckle. *“Barely,”* he muttered, shaking his head. Despite the tension, there was an undeniable sense of relief that they were all still in one piece, back inside the shuttle, and away from the dangers of the derelict ship.

The shuttle vibrated slightly as Ardakani began preparing for the return trip. Allaria closed her eyes for a moment, letting herself relax, if only for a second. The mission wasn’t officially over yet, but they were alive, and they had the datalink. That was enough for now.

The class A-6 EDF shuttle wasn’t very large on the inside, as roughly half of its volume was consumed by engines, fuel, and electronics. The walls were lined with exposed conduits, pipes, and support struts, all visible beneath the stark metal panels. It had a rugged, industrial feel to it—everything built for functionality rather than comfort. It had a pilot seat, co-pilot seat, and enough passenger seating for eight people plus their gear, as well as some storage space towards the back and under the seats. The seats themselves were little more than padded metal frames with restraining harnesses that dug into the shoulders, a constant reminder that the shuttle wasn’t designed for long-term comfort.

There was also a gun rack along the bulkheads, holding several pistols and a few rifles securely in place. The cold metal gleamed under the dim cabin lights, a stark reminder of the risks inherent in their line of work. At the very back of the shuttle, nestled between the engines, a small room functioned as an airlock. It was big enough to hold four people—five if they

squeezed and left the gear behind. From here, one could exit via a docking hatch. In the floor and roof of the shuttle, smaller emergency hatches were available, intended for use only when the main exit was inaccessible.

Ardakani sat in the pilot's seat, still wearing her pressurized flight suit, her hands steady on the controls as she glanced back over her shoulder. She rhetorically and loudly asked, "Everyone ready to go?" Without waiting for an answer, she pulled the shuttle away from the ship's docking port and turned it around on a course back to the Atticus. The sudden movement of the shuttle caused the passengers to lurch slightly, the restraints digging into their shoulders again.

"So, *how did your first mission go, Laskari?*" Ardakani asked, her voice holding a hint of amusement. She knew the answer already—it was written all over their faces, but she couldn't resist asking.

"*She almost got us killed!*" exclaimed Karega angrily, still wearing his envirosuit and helmet. He hadn't even bothered to take it off yet, the adrenaline still coursing through him. His voice was sharp, each word carrying the weight of his frustration. He added, "*You know I'll be including your actions in my report, and the sergeant won't like this much.*" His glare was obvious, even behind the helmet's visor.

Allaria slumped down into her seat, her gaze shifting to her helmet, which she picked up and placed in her lap. She stared at her reflection in the visor, her own eyes looking back at her, weary and uncertain. She didn't know what the sergeant would say when they got back, but it probably wouldn't be good. This had been her first mission, and she thought she had made the right call under the circumstances. After all, how much trouble could she actually be in? They had completed the mission and made it back alive—that had to count for something.

"*She shot out a window and nearly blew us all out into the fucking void of space!*" Karega repeated, his voice tinged with disbelief and a hint of residual fear. He turned towards the others, as if seeking validation for his frustration.

Allaria finally looked up, her face calm but her voice edged with defensiveness. "*I told you to hold on to something, and you did. We're all fine. Plus, we couldn't go back the way we came. There's no sense in wasting our time trying to get a stuck door unstuck,*" she said, her eyes locking onto Karega's, daring him to argue.

The tension in the cabin was palpable, but the others knew she was right. Arturo shifted in his seat, his gaze drifting to the small window beside him, watching the distant stars slip past as the shuttle moved away from the derelict ship. He let out a long, resigned sigh, the tension easing from his shoulders slightly. He knew the risks they had faced, and as much as he hated to admit it, Allaria's decision had saved them. They all knew it.

Utekli, finally removing his helmet, let out a dry chuckle. "*She's got a point,*" he muttered, his tone lacking the bite of earlier. He looked at Karega and shrugged, his expression a mix of exhaustion and reluctant acceptance. "*Better blown out of a window with a plan than cooked alive in radiation without one.*"

Karega leaned back in his seat, shaking his head but unable to fully deny it. The initial fear and frustration were still there, but they were beginning to fade, replaced by the understanding that Allaria's quick thinking had been the difference between survival and death. They hadn't wanted to be put in that position, but when it had come down to it, she had made the call they needed.

Ardakani, listening from the pilot's seat, couldn't help but smile slightly at the exchange. "*Looks like you're earning your stripes the hard way, Laskari,*" she said over her shoulder, her tone half-teasing but with a hint of respect. "Next time, maybe try not to give everyone a heart attack."

Allaria let out a small, tired laugh. "*No promises,*" she replied, her voice softer now, the weight of the mission settling in. Despite everything, they had done it. They had faced the unknown, made it back in one piece, and had the datalink to show for it. The tension in the shuttle gradually gave way to a shared sense of relief. The mission was over, and they were heading home.

It was a four-hour trip by shuttle back to the Atticus, the ship that Allaria and the rest of the team called home, and unfortunately for the team, their shuttle didn't have the power for hyperflight. The slow, steady hum of the engines reverberated through the cramped cabin, a deep, monotonous vibration that never seemed to end. The air inside the shuttle had grown increasingly stale over the hours, the recycled scent carrying a faint metallic tang and an undertone of sweat and old machinery. The vents above them did their best to keep the air flowing, but it was hard to ignore the faint, musty smell that lingered—a mixture of rubber, metal, and the ever-present hint of oil that clung to everything.

Allaria had spent the last two months on the Atticus after being assigned to it as her duty station fresh out of the Academy. It wasn't the ship she had dreamed of—no graceful lines, no sleek fighter squads—but it was better than being assigned to a desk. The Atticus was a drone-based battlecruiser, all sharp lines and intimidating angles. Its exterior was marked by an unforgiving geometry, a design language meant to convey power and efficiency. There were no curves, no softness to its silhouette—just straight, cutting edges that seemed to slice through the dark of space, a fitting symbol of its purpose. The ship's dark gray hull was peppered with clusters of sensor arrays, gun turrets, and launch bays for the numerous drones it carried, each piece serving a clear, tactical purpose.

The Atticus was where she and her squad called home for now, but she knew it was always possible to be assigned elsewhere whenever needed. Allaria had mixed feelings about the ship. On one hand, she respected its functionality, its brutal efficiency. On the other, it lacked the romance she had always associated with spacefaring vessels—the kind of grandeur she had dreamed about during her academy days. Still, it was hers for the moment, and she intended to make the best of it.

Allaria was tired, not so much from the action of the mission, but rather from putting up with everyone ON the mission for the last few hours. The thought of the hours-long trip back didn't help. She had been away from the Atticus for over four hours already, and before the mission began, she had spent a few hours training. She preferred to work alone when she could, and while at the Academy, she only teamed up with people when necessary. Still, she knew that being a part of the fleet meant being part of a team, whether she liked it or not.

She reached into a small pouch in her bag at her feet and pulled out a bit of dried food, unwrapping it and taking a small bite. The taste was bland, the texture dry, but it gave her something to focus on. Once finished, she put her head down until her forehead touched her helmet while still in the shuttle's uncomfortable safety harness. The deep hum of the engine acted as a lullaby of sorts, and before she knew it, she had dozed off.

Allaria woke to the sound of radio chatter as the pilot arranged for their docking with the Atticus. She looked down at her datalink, which had automatically synced up with the Atticus upon arrival. 0450 hours. She had been on the mission for a little over eight hours and hadn't slept in her bunk for almost sixteen. She stood up, grabbed her pack and helmet, and made her way

into the small room with the airlock exit, waiting for the go-ahead to leave the craft. The others quickly lined up behind her, equally eager to disembark.

*“I have a few things on my checklist before I can leave the shuttle,” said Ardakani. “Don’t wait for me.”*

The light over the airlock hatch turned green, indicating that the shuttle had come to a stop and a proper atmosphere had been detected outside the airlock. This was expected, given they were in the shuttle bay, but protocols were there for a reason.

The heavy hatch clanked open, and with a tired sigh, Allaria stepped down onto the ramp leading into the shuttle bay. The air inside the bay was much fresher, cooler, and it carried the mixed scents of machinery and fuel, but with a sharper edge that spoke of maintenance and cleanliness. One other shuttle occupied the bay alongside theirs—both docked, both scuffed and worn from use. Allaria always found herself curious about the other missions, wondering where the other teams were headed and what they were tasked with.

Walking through the shuttle bay, Allaria kept her head up, her eyes scanning the space with an inquisitive curiosity. Twelve or so engineers and mechanics worked throughout the bay, focused on various tasks—some running diagnostics on a shuttle, others inspecting tools or performing routine checks on equipment. The bay was large enough to hold the two shuttles, with additional room for visiting craft, though every inch of it seemed occupied by tools, crates, or personnel. The Atticus wasn’t a large ship compared to some of the carriers she’d seen, so two shuttles were all it had for personnel and cargo transport. However, the ship had two drone bays as well, each one much larger and always bustling with activity to ensure all twenty of the combat drones were functioning and ready for action. The drone bays were the true heart of the ship’s power.

On one end of the shuttle bay, a large energy wall kept the atmosphere in while allowing the shuttles to pass through effortlessly. She had no idea how it worked—something reverse-engineered from Gao-de tech, no doubt—but she loved the way the shimmering green and blue colors played across the barrier, almost mesmerizing in their dance. It was the one aesthetically pleasing aspect of the shuttle bay, in her opinion.

On the opposite end was an airlock that led to the weapons lockers, envirosuit racks, other storage rooms, and eventually into the main hallway that ran deeper into the Atticus. The

airlock's utilitarian nature, like everything else on the ship, spoke of function above all else. The Atticus had no frills—it was a ship built to fight, built to win.

Allaria had hoped for a different duty station, something with a bit more excitement, a bit more adventure. But the Atticus wasn't the worst ship to be stationed on. The Commander of the Atticus ran combat drills at least twice a week, and he did a good job keeping morale up. Everyone had a role, from the cook to the commander, and everyone had a place in combat situations. During drills, even the janitors had roles—clearing obstructions, cleaning residue from internal weapon ports, ensuring the corridors were clear for movement. When the drills happened, Allaria's role was to guard the shuttle bay as part of a squad of seven soldiers. It wasn't glamorous, but it was important. She knew she was just another name on a list, assigned to where she was needed, when she was needed there, but it was still a job she took seriously.

As Allaria moved through the ship, she caught sight of other crew members scurrying about—engineers in their grease-stained uniforms, tech specialists hunched over consoles, logistics officers barking orders as they coordinated resupplies. Every person had their job, and there was a sense of order amidst the chaos, each individual contributing to the functioning of the Atticus. She respected their dedication, even if it wasn't the kind of work she wanted to do. Everyone had their part to play in keeping the Atticus battle-ready.

One of her favorite moments on the ship was when the Atticus test-fired its weapons. The railguns mounted along the hull were monstrous, capable of hurling projectiles at incredible speeds. When they fired, the whole ship seemed to shudder, a deep, resonant thud that she could feel in her bones. The recoil vibrated through the walls, and it never failed to send a shiver of adrenaline running up her spine. She loved that feeling—that sudden jolt of power that made her feel like they were part of something larger, something unstoppable. It was exhilarating, a reminder of why she had joined the fleet in the first place.

The Atticus wasn't the ship she had dreamed of, but it was growing on her. It was a vessel with purpose, and for now, it was her home.

## CHAPTER 2 - 5 YEARS AGO

*“Get up you sorry pieces of shit!”* yelled the instructor in a hoarse voice, *“Get dressed and get in line for inspection! I’m told you’re going to be soldiers!”* He announced in an extremely sarcastic tone.

Waking up to a yelling instructor wasn’t something Allaria was used to, but this was her first day in the Academy, so she expected it based on what she had read prior to coming. The blaring noise of the alarm, mixed with the instructor’s booming voice, dragged her abruptly from the relative comfort of sleep. She blinked her eyes open, the harsh fluorescent lights of the barracks making her squint as she swung her legs over the edge of the bunk.

The barracks were cold, and the thin mattress beneath her had done nothing to keep her warm through the night. She could hear the sounds of the other recruits fumbling with their gear, the clattering of metal footlockers being opened, the hurried rustle of clothing as they all scrambled to comply with the instructor’s orders.

*“Stand up straight and be ready for counting! From now on, you’ll use only your last names!”* the instructor yelled, his voice echoing off the metal walls.

Allaria pulled on her uniform as quickly as she could, her hands shaking slightly from the adrenaline and the chill. She lined up with the others, her heart pounding in her ears. Everyone stood as tall and as straight as they could, but they each looked out of place, their uniforms slightly too large or too small, their faces still marked by exhaustion and confusion. With blurry eyes, Allaria did the same, hoping to avoid being called out. She kept her eyes focused directly ahead, staring at a small spot she saw on the bulkhead, using it as an anchor to keep herself steady.

The instructor, Staff Sergeant Kaylor, paced up and down the line, his eyes sharp and unforgiving. He wore a dark green uniform that seemed perfectly tailored, each crease pressed with precision. He was tall, lean, and moved with a coiled energy that suggested he could strike at any moment. His voice, though hoarse, carried a tone that demanded respect—a tone that suggested he had seen more than his share of battlefields.

*“Some of you have no idea what danger is. Some of you have no idea what safety is. All of you come from different backgrounds. That will be your strength and your weakness. You are all*



*here to become something new, to become the person the Academy decides you will be. Do you understand?"* the instructor yelled monotonously. Something in his voice gave off a sense of seriousness without the need to change his tone.

"*AYE SIR!*" the new recruits yelled back, their voices a mix of fear and determination, though not entirely synchronized.

Allaria felt her throat tighten as she yelled, the unfamiliarity of her own voice mingling with those around her. She tried to push away the gnawing uncertainty that seemed to linger at the edge of her mind—the doubt about whether she could really do this, whether she could belong here.

Suddenly, a commanding officer entered the barracks, and the atmosphere shifted instantly. Sergeant Kaylor immediately stood at attention, his posture rigid, and the recruits followed suit, their movements hurried and awkward.

"*Officer on Deck!*" Sergeant Kaylor yelled, his voice cutting through the stillness.

"*At ease, Staff Sergeant Kaylor,*" the officer responded, his voice calm but authoritative. The recruits relaxed slightly, though Allaria could still feel the tension in the air.

The officer, a man with sharp features and a stern expression, introduced himself as Captain Acerra. He wore a dark uniform adorned with insignia that marked his rank and accomplishments. He glanced at the line of recruits, his gaze passing over each of them in turn, and Allaria felt a chill run down her spine when his eyes met hers—a fleeting moment that seemed to stretch on far longer than it should have.

"*Welcome to the Academy,*" Captain Acerra said, his tone measured. "*You are here because you've been selected—because someone saw something in each of you that suggested you could be more. Over the next several weeks, Staff Sergeant Kaylor here will be your guide, your mentor, and, if necessary, your worst nightmare. You will learn discipline, you will learn loyalty, and above all, you will learn to function as a unit.*"

He turned slightly, gesturing to Staff Sergeant Kaylor, who was standing stiffly beside him. "*This is Staff Sergeant Kaylor. He will be responsible for your training. You will follow his orders without question. You will respect his authority as you would respect mine. Understood?*"

“*AYE SIR!*” the recruits yelled again, this time with more cohesion, their voices blending into one.

Captain Acerra nodded, seemingly satisfied. He turned and left the barracks without another word, his footsteps echoing down the hallway as he disappeared from view. Sergeant Kaylor, however, remained where he was, his eyes still scanning the line of recruits.

*“I don’t care where you came from,” he began, his voice low but carrying across the room, “I don’t care what you think you know. From this moment on, I am your reality. You will follow my commands, and you will do exactly as I say. I will break you down and build you back up into something worthy of wearing that uniform.”*

He paused, his eyes locking onto Allaria for a moment, and she could feel the weight of his scrutiny, the unspoken challenge there. She held her gaze forward, refusing to show any sign of weakness.

*“Now, let’s see if you’re as ready as you think you are,”* Sergeant Kaylor said, a faint, almost sinister smile tugging at the corner of his lips. *“Main corridor. Formation. You have thirty seconds.”*

The recruits scrambled, rushing for the door, their footsteps a chaotic mess of clattering boots and hurried shouts. Allaria moved with them, her heart pounding, her hands trembling slightly as she clenched her jaw and pushed forward. She wouldn’t be the one to fall behind—not today, not ever. This was her chance to prove herself, and she wasn’t about to let fear or uncertainty get in the way.

Standing in the corridor was Acerra once again. Captain Acerra spoke up, his voice cutting through the tense silence that had settled over the recruits. “Today, you will understand what it means to belong to the Academy,” he began, walking slowly in front of the recruits, his sharp eyes inspecting each of them, one by one.

Allaria's heart pounded as he approached. She could feel her palms grow clammy inside her gloves, the pressure building as she stood as straight as possible. She focused her gaze ahead, refusing to let herself falter. Just stand still, she thought. Keep staring at the wall. Keep staring at the wall.

Captain Acerra stopped in front of her, his eyes narrowing slightly as he inspected her. The tension in the air seemed to thicken, and Allaria felt her pulse quicken in her ears. The Captain looked at the name tag which was attached haphazardly to her training clothing. He let out a dismissive chuff, his lips curling into a slight smirk.

*“I’ve never seen a Laskari in this academy before,”* he said, his tone laced with a mix of curiosity and disdain. *“I always thought they believed they were too good to be soldiers. How the hell did you find yourself here?”*

Allaria felt the words sting, a deep prickle under her skin. She knew her family name carried weight, knew what people assumed about her upbringing. The privilege, the expectations. But she kept her face impassive, her eyes locked on that spot on the wall, her mouth firmly shut. She wasn’t sure if she was supposed to respond, and even if she did, she wasn’t sure what she would say. It seemed more like a statement than a question anyway—a way to get under her skin.

After a moment that felt like an eternity, Acerra seemed to lose interest. He turned sharply, his boots clicking against the hard floor, and walked toward the exit hatch without another word, leaving Allaria standing there, her face hot and her heart racing.

She tried to refocus on that same spot on the wall, but she lost its place for a moment, her vision blurring slightly. She blinked, swallowing hard, and forced herself to concentrate until she found it again. The comment stung, she couldn’t deny that—a pointed reminder of her background, of the expectations that she had never quite felt comfortable with. She knew he was right in a way. She was the first person in her family to join the military, as far as she was aware. She did technically come from high society, even if she didn’t feel like it. Her father was a doctor turned politician, her mother a respected neurosurgeon in one of Earth’s best medical facilities. She didn’t come from a family of soldiers, and she knew that the others could see that.

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and ignored the knot of frustration that twisted in her chest. He only said it to rile her up, she thought, and she wouldn’t let him win. She was here for her own reasons, reasons that no one else needed to understand. She was determined to prove herself, to earn her place here—not because of her name, but because of what she could do.

After the inspection, the recruits were lined up into four rows of ten and marched down a long, echoing hallway. The rhythmic clatter of boots on the metal floor reverberated off the walls, a steady beat that only seemed to heighten the tension amongst the recruits. No one spoke; there was only the sound of marching, the occasional cough, or the nervous clearing of a throat. Allaria's muscles were tight, her eyes focused straight ahead, trying to keep in step with everyone else.

The hallway seemed to stretch on endlessly, the overhead lights harsh and cold, casting elongated shadows that made the space feel even more sterile. Finally, they reached the end, and the group was ushered into a brightly lit room that seemed like the complete opposite of the dim corridor they had just left. The room was sterile, clinical, with white walls and polished floors that reflected the bright lights overhead. Rows of medical equipment lined the far wall, and there were several nurses stationed around the perimeter, each one standing behind a small table. The recruits were ordered to form a single file line that would snake around the room, stopping at each station.

Allaria swallowed hard, her eyes scanning the room as she followed the line of recruits in front of her. She wasn't sure what was about to happen, but she knew better than to ask. She approached the first station where a nurse stood, holding a chrome-colored, gun-like device. The nurse barely looked at her before grabbing her arm and pressing the cold barrel of the device against her ribs. Allaria flinched slightly at the sudden contact, but she held her ground, her jaw tightening as she felt a sharp pressure that quickly faded. The nurse gave her an unimpressed look.

*"What is this?"* Allaria asked, her voice betraying just a hint of curiosity.

*"Vaccines,"* the nurse replied curtly, already moving on to the next recruit. *"Next!"* she barked.

Allaria stepped away, her ribs aching slightly from the injection, and moved on to the next station. This nurse gestured for her to remove her shoes, which she did, placing them neatly beside her. She stood on a small platform while the nurse examined her feet, prodding and poking with a clinical detachment. The nurse scribbled something onto a datalink and handed Allaria a slip of paper with some numbers scrawled on it.

*"Take this to the next station,"* the nurse said, her tone rushed, already moving on to the next recruit.

Allaria took the slip of paper and moved down the line, handing it to the next nurse. This one didn't even look at her as she reviewed the numbers, rummaging through a bin until she pulled out a pair of training shoes, a pair of combat boots, and some insoles. She thrust them into Allaria's arms with a curt, "*Next!*"

The next station involved more measurements—height, weight, arm span. Allaria stood still as the nurse called out her measurements: "*One hundred sixty centimeters tall. Fifty-seven point six kilograms.*" The assistant standing nearby jotted down each number with brisk efficiency, barely glancing up from the datapad.

"*Please wait over here,*" the nurse said, pointing towards a small waiting area off to the side. Allaria moved to the designated spot, where a few other recruits were already waiting, shifting nervously from foot to foot. After what felt like an eternity, the assistant returned, his arms piled high with neatly folded uniforms. He handed a set to each recruit, including Allaria, and gave a sharp nod towards an empty section of the room.

"*All of you, put the gray uniform on,*" he commanded, his voice cold and indifferent.

The recruits hesitated, glancing at one another, unsure who should make the first move. The assistant's eyes narrowed. "*Now!*" he barked, his voice echoing through the room, startling them into action.

Allaria immediately began to strip off her outer clothes, her fingers fumbling slightly as she pulled on the gray uniform. The material was thick, heavier than she expected, but surprisingly comfortable. She looked around, noticing that everyone else seemed to be struggling with their uniforms as well. The assistant's voice cut through the room again, his tone dripping with a sarcastic edge. "*Hurry up! We don't have all day, and this isn't a fashion show!*"

Allaria rolled her eyes slightly at the remark, deciding that he probably used the same line on every group of recruits that passed through. She straightened the collar of her uniform and smoothed the fabric over her arms, glancing around at the others. Despite the hurried nature of the change, the gray uniform fit well, and she could see that it wasn't entirely unattractive once on. The fabric was blotchy, an odd mix of grays that reminded her of old camouflage patterns she had seen in history books about the war with the Gao-de.

She visited a few more stations, each one more invasive than the last. More shots, dental exams, eye exams. Everything was recorded, cataloged, and stored in the Academy's files. The

dental check was quick, the nurse barely acknowledging her beyond a nod when she saw there were no issues. The eye exam was just as straightforward. Perfect vision. Of course, it had to be perfect—her parents wouldn't have accepted anything less and made medical corrections for if she they were needed. She clenched her jaw at the thought, ignoring the familiar twinge of resentment.

By the time she finished at the last station, her arms ached from the vaccines, her feet were sore from the examination, and her head felt like it was spinning from the constant barking of orders. She stood in line with the rest of the recruits, dressed in their new uniforms, each of them looking just as worn out and bewildered as she felt. This was only the beginning, she reminded herself. She had chosen to be here. She was going to see it through, no matter what.

Once she was done with the medical exam, Allaria and a group of other recruits were moved to another room. It was much larger, with floors and walls lightly padded in a dull, synthetic material that absorbed impacts. The recruits were ushered in and lined up once more, shoulder to shoulder. The sterile smell of the room, combined with the nervous anticipation from everyone, created an odd tension that hung in the air. The instructors were already walking the lines, calling out names and pairing recruits up to spar.

Allaria glanced around, her eyes scanning the room. She had never been in a fight before. Her nervousness showed in the slight way her hands fidgeted, her fingers brushing against the seams of her gray uniform pants. Physical strength was not her forte; she had always been the type to spend her time studying. In fact, if asked, she could list all of the elected officials in the government, their dates of election, everyone in her chain of command, and even the names of all her platoon mates, despite only having met them the day before. Her memory had always been her strong suit, but physical combat? That was an area she had never trained in.

She berated herself quietly for not attempting to learn any self-defense techniques before joining. She didn't even know how she would have practiced—who would she have asked to teach her? There was a gnawing feeling in her stomach, a mixture of frustration and worry as she glanced around at the other recruits. Some looked just as lost as she felt, while others appeared almost eager, as if they had been waiting for this moment.

*“Laskari!”* an instructor barked, causing her to snap to attention. *“You’re with D’Arco.”*

Allaria quickly moved to the designated spot, facing her sparring partner. D'Arco was around her height, maybe just a little broader at the shoulders, and didn't seem to share her trepidation. His expression was impassive, focused, and his stance already seemed to indicate that he was comfortable in situations like this. Allaria tried not to let her nervousness show as the instructor moved to the front of the room, demonstrating basic stances.

The recruits mimicked the instructor's movements, shifting their weight into a defensive position. Allaria found herself watching D'Arco out of the corner of her eye, trying to emulate his confidence. As they were guided through a series of punches and grapples, she realized that her body was far less cooperative than her mind. Her punches lacked power, her balance felt awkward, and her coordination was off. D'Arco, meanwhile, seemed to catch on quickly, his movements fluid and precise. Allaria found herself grimacing in frustration, trying her best to keep up.

They moved on to tumbling and evading techniques, and here Allaria found herself more comfortable. She was quick on her feet, and her size made it easier for her to maneuver away when D'Arco advanced on her. She still wasn't strong, but at least she wasn't completely hopeless. The instructor circled the recruits, barking orders, correcting their stances, occasionally grabbing a recruit by the shoulders to reposition them.

"Laskari!" the instructor shouted, and Allaria felt a hand roughly pull her shoulder back. *"Your center of gravity is all wrong! Bend your knees more, stay grounded!"*

"Aye, Sir," she muttered, trying to correct herself while also trying to answer correctly. She stole a glance at D'Arco, who gave her a tight-lipped nod, as if to say, *"You'll get it."* She nodded back, grateful for the silent support.

By the end of the session, her muscles were aching, her arms felt heavy, and she was covered in sweat. She'd lost count of how many times she had been thrown to the ground during the practice grapples. She was exhausted, but the relief of having made it through without completely embarrassing herself was palpable. The recruits were finally ordered to line back up, and she found herself grateful that the physical part of the day was over.

Her spirits lifted considerably as they were marched to the next destination—the knowledge center. This was where she knew she could shine. Her eyes lit up as they entered the classroom, a wide space filled with rows of desks, each equipped with a small terminal. The

walls were lined with displays and diagrams depicting various historical events and famous figures from the Academy's history. At the front, a large screen displayed the Academy's insignia, flanked by flags representing the different branches of the military.

Allaria took her seat, her mind buzzing with anticipation. The first lesson was focused on the history of the Academy—its founding, its purpose, the values it was meant to instill in recruits. She soaked it all in, her attention never wavering. She found the information fascinating; the names, the dates, the ideals of discipline and unity. This was her element, and she found herself furiously taking notes, wanting to remember every detail.

The best part of the knowledge center, however, were the windows. They lined one wall, and beyond them was a view of Earth, a vast curve of blue and white against the darkness of space. Allaria couldn't help but steal glances out of the window, her eyes tracing the distant clouds and oceans. It made her feel small, but in a way that was almost comforting. She shared her barracks with thirty-nine other recruits, and their sleeping quarters had no view—just metal walls and bunks stacked side by side. But here, she could see everything. She'd heard a rumor that the third-year recruits were given barracks with windows. She couldn't imagine how nice that would be.

The day had been exhausting, both physically and mentally. She had never felt so out of her element as she had during the hand-to-hand combat training, and she'd never felt more at home than she did now, sitting in the classroom with a terminal in front of her and a view of Earth outside. She was a recruit now—inferior, untested, at the bottom of the Academy's hierarchy. But she was here, and she was going to make it through. She had something to prove—to her family, to her instructors, and most of all, to herself.

The knowledge instructor spoke with a dry, monotonous tone, but Allaria didn't mind. It was a nice change from being yelled at earlier in the day, and there was something comforting about the calm delivery of information. It gave her space to think, to absorb what was being said without the immediate pressure of performance.

He spoke about the Academy, his voice echoing slightly in the cold, sterile classroom. *"We here at the Academy exist for a single purpose: To prepare recruits for the return of the Gao-de and to protect Earth and its star system, and the other nearby star systems from the Gao-de by force when necessary."*



Allaria listened intently, her eyes fixed on the instructor, but her mind drifted for a moment. She thought about the Gao-de—the faceless enemy that had loomed in humanity's history like a dark shadow. She had heard stories in school, about the invasion over a hundred years ago. Tales of towering figures, relentless in their pursuit, leaving cities in ruins and humanity scrambling for survival. Growing up, those stories had felt distant, like myths meant to keep children obedient. But here, in this classroom, the threat seemed real. The Academy existed because of that threat, and everyone here had a role to play in facing it.

The instructor continued, his voice never wavering. *“The Gao-de will return. While they haven’t returned since their first attack, we believe they will try again, and we will be prepared, just as we have been for the last one-hundred and fifty years. Strength and Knowledge combined is power—if you have one without the other, you are weak. With both, you can defeat any enemy.”*

His words cut through Allaria like a knife, catching her off guard. She had always prided herself on her intelligence. Growing up, she was always the smartest person in the room—whether it was at school, at social gatherings, or even at home. Her parents had pushed her academically, and she had thrived under that pressure. She knew facts, statistics, history, and politics. She knew how to strategize and think critically. But here, none of that seemed to matter.

*“I am weak,”* she thought to herself, the realization settling heavily in her chest. She glanced around the room, at the other recruits. Some of them looked strong, muscular, and confident in their physical abilities. She had assumed she could get by on her knowledge alone, but now, for the first time, she doubted that assumption. What good was her intelligence if she lacked the strength to fight? What use was strategy if she couldn’t hold her ground in combat?

The thought of being “weak” stuck with her for the rest of the lesson, lingering like an unwelcome presence. The instructor's words echoed in her mind—strength and knowledge combined is power. She knew he was right. She needed both. And up until now, she had been missing half of what she needed to truly be powerful.

When the lesson ended, Allaria walked back to the barracks in silence, her mind racing. She barely noticed the other recruits around her, their chatter and laughter as they relaxed after the long day. Up until this point, she thought she could get ahead with her studies alone, that her intelligence would be enough to make her stand out. But now, she began to see the gaps in her plan. She needed to be more than just smart—she needed to be strong. She needed to be capable, to be someone who could stand on the front lines if needed.

As she reached her bunk, she sat down heavily, her body tired from the day's activities but her mind too active to rest. Strength and knowledge, strength and knowledge, she repeated to herself, like a mantra. She needed to change. She needed to push herself beyond her comfort zone, beyond the books and the lessons, and into the physical training that she had always dreaded.

She lay down, pulling the thin blanket over herself. The barracks were quiet now, the lights dimmed, and she stared up at the ceiling, her thoughts still circling. Strength and knowledge. She repeated the words silently, her eyes growing heavy. She imagined herself, not just as the smartest person in the room, but as someone others could rely on, someone who could fight, who could protect. The thought gave her a sense of purpose she hadn't felt before—a determination that began to harden within her.

Strength and knowledge, strength and knowledge, she repeated again, her eyes finally closing as sleep took her. She knew what she needed to do, and for the first time since arriving at the Academy, she felt a clear direction. She would not be weak. She would be ready.

Allaria awoke the following morning in the dimness of the barracks before the others had even stirred, the shadows still heavy in the sleeping quarters. She pushed herself to the edge of her bunk, careful not to make a sound as she lowered herself to the floor. She began to do push-ups, her movements precise and deliberate. Each repetition felt purposeful, a promise she was making to herself to become stronger, to face whatever was thrown her way.

Her arms tensed with each motion, her breath a quiet rhythm. She counted under her breath, keeping her voice low, "...thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty..." The dorm was silent except for the muffled breaths of her fellow recruits, the soft hum of the barracks' air recyclers. She felt the ache building in her muscles, but instead of discouraging her, it fueled her determination. Forty-one, forty-two... Each push-up was an effort to leave behind the version of herself that had been described as weak, to become the version that could endure and overcome.

Her mind flashed back to the instructor's words the day before—strength and knowledge. She could almost hear him saying it in his dry, unrelenting tone. But this morning, the words became her own mantra, repeated with each press against the cold, metallic floor beneath her.

Suddenly, she froze, her heart skipping a beat as the soft but unmistakable sound of footsteps reached her ears. They were coming closer, slow and deliberate, echoing down the narrow aisle

of the barracks. The instructor was making his early rounds. Allaria's pulse quickened; she knew what would happen if she were caught.

Without hesitation, she silently pulled herself back up, her movements fluid despite the tension in her body. She slipped into her bunk, her head landing on the pillow as she tried to steady her breathing, her eyes closing just enough to feign sleep. Her heart hammered in her chest as she heard the footsteps approach, coming closer and closer.

Then they stopped.

Directly beside her bunk.

Allaria held her breath, her muscles coiled in anxiety. She could feel the presence of the instructor standing there, the weight of his gaze pressing down on her even through her closed eyes. She prayed he would just keep moving, that she could return to her quiet morning ritual of building herself up, of proving herself. Seconds stretched like hours.

Then, without a word, he moved on, his steps retreating down the row.

Allaria let out a slow, silent breath, her shoulders sagging with relief. She waited, listening until the footsteps faded before she dared to open her eyes. Slowly, cautiously, she slipped back out of her bunk and onto the floor, her palms pressing into the cool metal again. She resumed her push-ups, her whisper barely audible, *"forty-three, forty-four..."*

She barely got in two more reps when the footsteps stopped again. This time, they were abrupt, filled with purpose. Allaria froze, her body stiffening as the seconds stretched on, her breath caught in her throat. Then, without warning, she heard the harsh click of a switch being flicked.

The barracks' lights blazed on, blinding in the darkness. She squinted, shielding her eyes as she heard the instructor's voice, hoarse and commanding, cut through the sudden brightness.

*"Everyone up! Laskari wants to do push-ups so push-ups we will do!"*

Allaria's stomach dropped, her mind flashing with panic. Oh no, she thought, her heart sinking as she heard the groans of the recruits around her, the scrape of boots against the floor as they were forced out of their bunks. She could feel the weight of their glares even before she looked up.

A few of them shot her dark, menacing looks, their faces twisted in irritation and frustration. She knew they blamed her, and they had every right to. The instructor's voice roared again, "*Everyone onto the deck right now!*"

The recruits scrambled, moving into position on the floor, lining up in rows. Allaria moved along with them, her face flushed, her heart pounding as she tried to focus on the task at hand. She forced herself to keep her gaze on the floor in front of her, trying not to meet the eyes of anyone nearby.

"*UP! - DOWN! - UP! - DOWN!*" the instructor bellowed, his voice echoing off the steel walls of the barracks. Allaria's arms were already aching, her muscles trembling from her earlier effort, but she forced herself to keep going, matching the rhythm of the group. She could hear the labored breathing of the recruits around her, could feel her own breaths growing shallow and strained.

The minutes dragged on, the instructor's commands relentless. Her arms screamed in protest, her body on the edge of exhaustion. She pushed through the discomfort, trying to focus her mind, to remind herself why she was doing this. She could feel her strength faltering, her muscles beginning to give way, and still, the instructor's voice cut through the air like a whip. "*UP! - DOWN! - UP!*"

Suddenly, his voice stopped. There was a pause, and Allaria almost collapsed in relief. She braced herself, trying to steady her breaths, her body shaking from the strain. Then, the instructor's voice came again, quieter but no less commanding, "*Everyone, stand.*"

The recruits scrambled to their feet, Allaria among them, her legs shaky as she stood at attention. Her heart pounded in her ears as she heard him call her name. "*Laskari, front and center.*"

Her stomach twisted, and she swallowed hard, stepping out of line and making her way to the middle of the barracks, where the instructor stood waiting. She came to a stop beside him, her body rigid, her mind racing with a mix of anxiety and dread. Was he going to make an example of her? Was she about to be punished?

She stood there, staring straight ahead, trying to keep her expression neutral as the instructor turned to address the rest of the recruits. His voice echoed through the barracks, resonating in

the tense silence. *"You all should have been trying to do push-ups in your free time. I'm disappointed that none of you had the courage to do what Laskari did."*

Allaria blinked, her heart skipping a beat. She fought to keep her face still, to hold back the sigh of relief that threatened to escape her lips. The tension in her shoulders eased just a little, though her face remained stoic. She could feel the eyes of the recruits on her, a mix of confusion, resentment, and perhaps, begrudging respect.

The instructor continued, his voice sharp, *"From now on, I expect all of you to push yourselves like Laskari has. Strength is not something you wait to be given—it's something you take for yourself!"*

With that, the instructor turned on his heel and marched away, leaving the recruits standing in stunned silence. Allaria swallowed, her eyes still fixed ahead as she tried to process what had just happened. She could feel the lingering tension in the room, the unspoken thoughts of the other recruits as they began to disperse.

She took a deep breath, her eyes lowering for a moment as the recruits moved around her. It wasn't praise, not exactly, but it wasn't the punishment she had feared. She knew the others might still be angry, but she also knew she had done what she needed to do. Strength and knowledge. She would earn both.

The repercussions of her early morning push-up incident rippled through the rest of the day. Allaria found herself isolated from the other recruits, some going as far as refusing to talk to her, their silence pointed and deliberate. Those who did address her offered only rude remarks, biting comments about her supposed privilege. "Rich girl thinks she can impress the instructors," one of them muttered loud enough for her to hear. Another sneered, "Bet Daddy will get her out of any real trouble."

Allaria hated those assumptions. They didn't know her past. They didn't know what it was like for her growing up under the pressure of a family that never expected her to be here, never thought she could be a soldier. They assumed wealth meant easy, but nothing had ever been easy for her—not fitting in, not proving herself. Most of the recruits were simply upset because she had cost them precious sleep, and Allaria understood that. It was her fault, after all. But the glares, the whispered accusations—that was harder to swallow. Still, she kept her head held high and her emotions tightly controlled. She wasn't here to make friends.

When it was time for their combat training, things took a turn she should have expected. It didn't take much for a few of the recruits to arrange themselves, subtly moving so that she ended up paired with the largest partner available. The guy stood just under two meters, his shoulders broad, muscles evident even beneath the Academy training uniform. He was at least twice her size, built like he could wrestle a bull to the ground. She looked up at him, and he looked down at her with a smirk that conveyed just how little he thought of her chances.

*"This isn't very fair,"* she thought, her eyes scanning the sparring circle around them. But even as that thought formed, another immediately followed—was any real fight going to be fair? The answer, she knew, was no. She wasn't about to ask for mercy, not from him, not from anyone.

Her mind raced, formulating a plan. Her size—how could she use it? She wasn't going to outmuscle him, that much was clear. But she was quick, and she hoped that might be enough. Maybe she could work her way behind him, trip him up, use her smaller stature to her advantage somehow. She took a deep breath, steadying herself, her eyes locking onto her opponent's.

The instructor's whistle blew, the sharp sound signaling the beginning of their match. Allaria's opponent wasted no time, lunging toward her with his arms outstretched, trying to wrap her up in his grip. She moved instinctively, ducking beneath his arms, her body dipping low as she pivoted to his right. He let out a frustrated grunt as his hands closed around empty air, his momentum throwing him off balance for a moment.

She darted to his side, then around behind him, adrenaline flooding her veins. This was her chance. But just as she prepared to make her move—maybe jump on his back, try to bring him down—he recovered, turning faster than she anticipated. Suddenly, they were face-to-face again.

The momentary opportunity slipped away, and she could feel the instructor's eyes on her, the weight of expectation heavy on her shoulders. The pressure to prove herself, to show that she belonged here, surged within her. She couldn't afford to falter. Her sparring partner stepped toward her, his footsteps heavy, a smirk playing on his lips. She moved, backing away to create distance, her mind scrambling to formulate her next move. She circled to her right, hoping to wear him out, to create another opening.

He lunged again, and she tried to dodge as she had before. But this time, his arm swung out wide, his fist connecting with the side of her head. The impact was like an explosion—white-hot pain followed by an instant blackout. Everything went dark.

When she opened her eyes, she was on her back, staring up at the ceiling of the training hall. She blinked, disoriented, the blurred forms above her slowly coming into focus—the instructor, her sparring partner, a few others standing nearby. Her head throbbed, and she could feel the warmth of something wet on her face. She touched her nose, her fingers coming away red with blood. She grimaced, wiping it away with her sleeve, her eyes shifting to her sparring partner, who looked down at her with a mix of concern and smug satisfaction.

The instructor leaned over, his face impassive. "*You took quite the hit. How do you feel?*" he asked, his tone giving nothing away.

Allaria pushed herself to a sitting position, her hand still cradling her nose. She felt the heat of embarrassment more than the pain of the punch. "*I feel alright*," she responded, her voice more even than she felt. She turned her head, her eyes narrowing at her sparring partner. Before he could react, she grabbed his right ear, yanking him down toward her, using the leverage to pull herself to her feet in one swift motion.

He yelped in surprise and pain, stumbling as she pulled him down. "*What was that for?*" he yelled, his eyes wide.

Allaria's lips curled into a smirk, her eyes gleaming with a fierce spark. "*I didn't hear the whistle yet, so that means we are still sparring*," she said, her voice carrying a hint of excitement. She could feel the eyes of the other recruits on her, their surprise palpable.

The instructor paused, his brows raised, but a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. He turned to the rest of the recruits. "*She is right. I didn't blow the whistle yet, so technically, this is a draw. She knocked you down once, and you knocked her down once. Those are the rules.*"

The larger recruit—Arturo, she thought she'd heard someone call him—looked incredulous, his face flushed with anger. "*But... but—*" he began, his voice trailing off as he glanced at the instructor.

*"Nothing wrong with what happened. You should pay attention to the rules, Arturo,"* the instructor said, his tone sharp. He glanced at Allaria, his eyes meeting hers briefly, an unspoken acknowledgment passing between them. *"At least Laskari knows the rules."*

Arturo glared at her, his eyes filled with disdain. *"That was NOT honorable, Laskari. Not honorable at all!"* he spat, pushing himself to his feet, rubbing his ear.

Allaria shrugged, her smirk unwavering. *"It's a sparring match, Arturo, not a duel of honor,"* she said simply, her voice carrying an edge. She could feel her heart pounding, adrenaline coursing through her veins. It wasn't about honor—it was about survival. About proving she wasn't weak.

She knew the others were watching, judging her, but she didn't care. She had made her point, even if it meant making more enemies among the recruits. Maybe she wasn't the strongest in the room, but she could be resourceful. She could think under pressure, act quickly, use whatever she had. And for now, that would have to be enough.

As she stood to the side, watching the others take their turns on the mat, she found herself replaying the encounter in her head. Arturo's size, his confidence—it had seemed overwhelming at first, almost insurmountable. But she had found a way. She glanced at the instructor, who was busy guiding the next pair through their bout, and then down at her own hands, still smeared with a bit of blood.

Strength and knowledge. She had used what she knew, taken the opportunity when it had presented itself. But it wasn't enough, not yet. She would need more strength, real strength, to truly become what the Academy demanded. The instructor's words echoed in her mind. Strength and knowledge. With both, you can defeat any enemy.

She watched as the recruits sparred, her eyes sharp, analyzing their movements, their strengths, and weaknesses. Her moment on the mat might have ended, but her training never stopped.

Allaria's head still throbbed from the impact, but the dull ache was drowned out by the sense of satisfaction that kept her smiling as she marched with the other recruits toward the knowledge center. Arturo's incredulous face as she'd pulled him to the ground replayed in her mind, and she couldn't help but feel a flicker of pride. It wasn't just about outsmarting him—it was proof that she could stand her ground. Today, she had proven to herself, and maybe even to some of



her fellow recruits, that she wasn't just another "rich girl" who didn't belong. She'd earned at least a little of their respect, even if most of them would never admit it.

As they approached the knowledge center, the stark white walls seemed to radiate the hum of the station. The lights overhead cast a cool, sterile glow, and the recruits' footsteps echoed softly in the quiet corridor. Allaria glanced around, taking in the details of the Academy's hallways—small things that most people ignored, like the subtle texture of the metallic wall panels, or the tiny maintenance droids whirring along the floor, keeping everything spotless. This environment had become her new normal, and she was slowly becoming attuned to every nuance.

Instructor Rapadas stood at the front of the knowledge room, his face as expressionless as ever. He nodded to the recruits as they entered, his eyes sweeping over them, and then turned to the data board behind him. His voice began in the same dry, monotonous tone as before—steady, unwavering, and strangely comforting in its routine nature. It was a welcome shift from the chaos of physical training.

*"Today, we'll continue our lessons in historical context,"* Rapadas began, gesturing to the holo-display that appeared behind him. He pulled up an image of a ship, sleek and alien in design, with strange glowing nodes along its hull. It looked both elegant and deadly, as though it was made for one purpose—war.

*"When the Humans defeated the Gao-de, we did so with technology much less advanced than that of our aggressors,"* he stated, his tone matter-of-fact. *"The Gao-de's vessels could, it's believed, travel faster than the speed of light. Their weapons systems were significantly more powerful, their shielding technology superior. In short, the Gao-de were far ahead of us, technologically speaking."*

Allaria's eyes widened as she looked at the image on the holo-board. The ship's lines were sharp, almost organic, and she imagined what it must have been like to face a fleet of them, especially with the limited technology humanity had at the time. She had heard stories of the invasion in school, tales of the first encounter, the terror that spread like wildfire through Earth's population. The Gao-de's sudden appearance had been like something out of a nightmare—a menace that seemed unstoppable.

Instructor Rapadas continued, tapping a button on his control pad, causing the image of the alien ship to flicker and transform into a diagram of Earth. *"We had limited weapons at the time, weapons which hurt us almost as much as they hurt the Gao-de."* His words lingered in the room, the gravity of them pressing down on Allaria's thoughts.

She blinked, her brow furrowing. Weapons that hurt us? Why would anyone make a weapon like that, she wondered. It didn't make sense—how could a weapon be as dangerous to the user as it was to the enemy? It felt counterintuitive, and yet, here they were, listening to an instructor speak about those very tools of destruction.

The holo-board shifted again, revealing an iconic mushroom-shaped cloud, eerie and ominous. The instructor's voice broke her concentration. *"Nuclear weaponry. This was the instrument we chose. First outlawed nearly two centuries ago due to its uncontrollable consequences and the rise of more advanced energy-based weaponry,"* Rapadas explained, gesturing at the image. *"And even then, an exception was only made for its use against the Gao-de. The final nuclear warheads were launched on the assault fleet stationed above Earth, ending the First War of the Gao-de. These weapons were devastating, not just for the Gao-de, but for our own cities, our world."*

Allaria leaned forward, fascinated, her eyes fixed on the holo-board as she absorbed every word. Nuclear—she mouthed the word silently, her mind already buzzing with questions. She'd never heard the term before, and it piqued her curiosity in a way that few things could. She made a mental note to research it during her free time. She couldn't let an opportunity for knowledge pass her by, even if the subject was as dark as warfare.

Outside the knowledge center's wide windows, Earth floated against a sea of stars, the vast blues and greens slowly moving below them. For a moment, Allaria thought she saw the lights of the city she'd grown up in, just barely visible in the early dawn creeping across the planet. But the station soon moved on, and the familiar lights vanished, replaced by the dark expanse of the ocean. She sighed softly, wishing she could hold on to that brief connection with home a little longer.

The lesson continued, but her mind was already planning ahead. She knew the recruits had an hour of personal time after dinner—a small luxury in their otherwise rigorous schedule. While she could have chosen to use that hour for physical exercises, to work on her endurance and

strength as she knew she needed, there was another kind of strength she craved even more. Knowledge.

When the day's training finally ended, sore and exhausted as she was, she found her way to the Academy library—a quiet, almost sacred place in her mind. She settled herself in front of a data console, her fingers moving quickly over the touchpad as she searched for “Nuclear Weaponry.” The results were immediate, a deluge of information from an era called the Modern Era, spanning from the 1940s to the 2050s.

She leaned forward, captivated as she began to read. Images of mushroom clouds, old footage of massive explosions, test sites, and scientific diagrams flashed across the screen. She scrolled through detailed descriptions of nuclear fission, chain reactions, and the devastation wrought by these early weapons. It was chilling, but also strangely thrilling—she could see why, in desperation, humans had turned to these powerful weapons to fend off an alien invader.

Her eyes narrowed as she read on, her gaze lingering on phrases like “*total destruction*” and “*radioactive fallout*.” The devastation was unimaginable, and yet she understood why it had seemed like the only choice. When faced with an enemy like the Gao-de, humanity had done what it could to survive, regardless of the cost.

“*The year 2053 marked the end of the First War of the Gao-de, with the use of the final nuclear warhead*,” she read aloud, her voice soft in the silence of the library. “*The last nuclear weapon was detonated on September 29, 2053, against the Gao-de assault fleet staged in the destroyed city of Atlanta*.” She paused, her eyes lingering on the word. Atlanta. Where had she heard that before?

Curiosity piqued, she searched for “Atlanta” in the data console. The results were quick.

“Entry 1: Atlanta — the first city destroyed by the Gao-de during the First War of the Gao-de on January 29, 2053.” Allaria’s eyes widened as she continued reading.

“Entry 2: The Atlanta — the first starship shipyard built in the orbit of Earth, completed on November 14, 2101.”

She tapped her fingers thoughtfully against the console. “*Interesting*,” she murmured, her mind trying to piece together the significance. There were other entries too—Beijing Shipyard at Mars, Moscow Shipyard at Titan. Names of cities that had been destroyed, now memorialized in

starship shipyards, tributes to humanity's resilience. She wished she could have seen those places as they once were—cities full of life, people, history.

But her time was up. A soft chime alerted her that she needed to return to the barracks for inspection. She logged out of the console, reluctantly leaving behind the information that still called to her. She had barely scratched the surface, but she already felt as though she had glimpsed something vital—something that connected her to the past, to those who had fought and survived, just as she was training to do now.

Back in the barracks, she stood in line for inspection, her posture straight, her face a mask of determination. A few of her classmates shot her menacing looks, their expressions filled with disdain. She knew why they were upset—her early morning push-ups had cost them sleep, and now, her actions during sparring had marked her as someone willing to break from convention. But she ignored them, her eyes focused straight ahead.

After inspection, she finally climbed into her bunk, her muscles aching, her head still sore. She closed her eyes, replaying the day's events in her mind—the push-ups, Arturo's challenge, the instructor's words, the history of humanity's desperate fight for survival. Strength and knowledge. She still needed both, and she still had a long way to go. But as she lay there, the sounds of the barracks fading into the background, she allowed herself a small, determined smile.

Strength and knowledge, she repeated in her mind, letting the words echo until she drifted off into a restless sleep.

## CHAPTER 3

The shuttle bay floors gleamed, polished to a level of perfection that could almost pass for a mirror. Allaria glanced down and could just make out the vague reflection of her own helmeted face, the contours of her envirosuit shimmering faintly in the immaculate surface. She had to hand it to the crew who worked in the shuttle bay—no detail was too small for them, and no effort was spared. It made her wonder, for a brief moment, what sort of stories the men and women who cleaned these floors might have. They were as much a part of the Atticus as the pilots and soldiers, and their attention to every inch of the ship was what made it feel like a functioning, cohesive whole.

She turned slightly, catching sight of Karega walking just behind her, holding the metal box with the datalink inside. He clutched it tightly, almost possessively, his eyes darting to meet hers before quickly looking away again. The silence among the small team was palpable. Their footsteps were the only noise, echoing through the spacious bay, as they walked in a line towards the airlock hatch that led to the rest of the ship. There was tension in the air—unspoken, heavy, and lingering between them.

Allaria reached the hatch first, her gloved hand pressing against the panel to trigger the opening sequence. She stepped aside, letting her team file through ahead of her. She caught a glimpse of Arturo as he walked past—his jaw was clenched, his eyes forward, a look of frustration evident in his posture. Utekli entered next, his visor already lifted, revealing a face marred by exhaustion but still alert, his eyes darting between the bulkheads and corners, as though half-expecting another surprise to jump out at them.

No one spoke a word.

Allaria followed behind them, her own nerves prickling in the silence. She tried to steady her breathing, but she couldn't help the knot that tightened in her stomach. She knew the others had mixed feelings about her decisions during the mission. She had made a call—one that had worked—but she knew it would be scrutinized, and some of her teammates clearly had their doubts.

As they stepped into the airlock, the doors closing behind them with a soft hiss, Allaria's eyes caught movement to her left. A figure she had not noticed before stood in the airlock with them—a man she had never seen before.

She frowned, her instincts immediately on high alert. The figure wasn't dressed in the standard crew uniform of the Atticus, nor in the combat gear of soldiers. No, his clothing was different. His robes were dark, flowing elegantly with each subtle movement, and they seemed almost out of place in the cold, utilitarian setting of the ship. The fabric shimmered in the artificial lights, and a small silver pendant hung on a thin chain around his neck, resting against his chest.

Allaria's mind raced. Something about this man seemed familiar, but not in a comforting way. It was as if she'd seen him in a distant memory—a dream, perhaps. She couldn't quite place it, but it unsettled her. She looked at him more closely, trying to find some clue as to who he was or why he was here.

*"Do you have the item as requested?"* he asked suddenly, his voice smooth, deep, and startling in the silence. Allaria jumped, her body tensing, her hand instinctively moving closer to her sidearm.

*"If you mean the datalink—yes,"* Karega answered without hesitation, his voice devoid of the usual sarcasm.

Allaria turned sharply, elbowing Karega in the ribs with enough force to make her point clear. He winced, but kept his gaze forward.

*"What are you doing?"* she hissed through clenched teeth, giving him a disapproving look. This was not how you handled unexpected situations, and Karega's loose lips were going to get them into trouble.

The stranger, seemingly unfazed by their exchange, let out a small sigh, his eyes distant as he lifted his head to look at the ceiling of the airlock for a moment. He looked almost wistful, his eyes unfocused, as though lost in thought.

*"Oh, Laskari - always in charge,"* he said, his gaze returning to them. *"Good of you to see that it's safe, though."*

Allaria was tired and nearly missed what he said. She wondered for a moment how he knew her name, before remembering it's on her uniform.

The second set of airlock doors opened in front of them, the mechanical locks disengaging with a series of clicks before the heavy doors split apart, allowing them passage. The stranger moved forward, stepping out before any of them could react, his robes flowing behind him. Allaria shot a glare at Karega, but there was nothing more she could say—not in front of whoever this mysterious figure was. She just wanted to get out of the airlock and put some distance between them.

*"What the fuck was that, Karega?"* she snapped as soon as they were clear of the airlock, her voice low, filled with frustration. *"You can't just go around giving answers to anyone who asks! And how did he know about the mission? We're not even supposed to talk about it!"*

*"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I just blurted it out,"* Karega said, his voice soft, confused. *"And I have no idea."* He looked genuinely puzzled, his brows furrowed as though trying to make sense of it himself.

The silence returned as they moved deeper into the ship, their steps quickening. They reached the armory, where they each placed their service weapons into the lockers assigned to them, following the procedures to the letter. Allaria moved with deliberate precision, her mind focused on the task, trying to keep her thoughts from spinning out of control. The familiar routines helped—unclip the weapon, secure the safety, verify the serial, stow it in the locker. It was calming, almost meditative. With that done, they moved to remove their envirosuits. Allaria unlatched the helmet first. Then moved on to the rest of the suit. The radiation checks came next—standard procedure after exposure, a precaution they all took seriously. Radiation was an unseen enemy, and they each followed the protocols meticulously, running scans and checking for any signs of contamination.

Karega spoke up once the checks were complete. *“I’m going to turn the datalink over. I’ll catch up with you later.”*

“Very well,” Allaria replied, her tone more measured now. *“Send me the sergeant’s signature via our datalinks when you’re done. I’ll need to make a record of the hand-off in my report.”*

Karega nodded and left the room, carrying the metal case with him.

Allaria lingered for a moment, her eyes following Karega as he disappeared down the corridor. She let out a sigh, then turned to the door leading to the barracks. She needed a shower—needed to wash away the grime of the mission, the tension that had built up in her muscles. She wanted to feel clean again.

Back in her shared room, she quickly stripped out of her envirosuit and stepped into the small shower cubicle. The water was lukewarm, not quite as hot as she would have liked, but it was enough. She let the water run over her, her eyes closing as she tried to relax, her mind replaying the events of the mission—the strange man, the heavy airlock doors, the tension among her team. It was all so much, and she still had to face Sergeant Akurati.

She dressed in her formal uniform after the shower, adjusting the collar carefully, checking her reflection in the small mirror above her bunk. She wanted to look as composed as possible. The crisp lines of the uniform helped her feel a little more confident, though her heart still pounded in her chest at the thought of what the sergeant might say. She was certain that Arturo—or maybe even Karega—had already told him about the incident with the window. She had made a call, and it had worked, but she knew it had also been a reckless one.

She made her way to the sergeant’s office, her footsteps echoing in the empty corridor. When she arrived, she took a deep breath before knocking on the door. The muffled voice of Sergeant Akurati called out from within.

*“Enter.”*

Allaria pushed the door open and stepped inside, standing at attention. *“Sergeant Akurati.”*

The sergeant looked up from his desk, his eyes meeting hers, unreadable. He gestured towards the door. *“Shut the door, please.”*



She swallowed hard, her throat feeling tight as she did as he asked, the door closing behind her with a soft click. She turned back to face him, her posture rigid, her hands clasped behind her back. She could feel the tension in the air, her heart pounding in her ears as she waited for what was to come.

*"I understand, after hearing the report from a few others in your team, that you shot out a window and returned to the shuttle by a means other than optimal. Is this correct?"* Sergeant Akurati asked, his voice calm but carrying an unmistakable edge of disapproval.

Allaria straightened her back, looking straight ahead. Her heart was pounding, but she refused to let her nerves show. She drew in a breath and replied clearly, *"Sergeant, that is not correct. The optimal way back to the shuttle was out the window. The envirohatch was locked behind us, and the ship was contaminated with radiation. The optimal way was out the window."* She repeated herself with determination, her eyes fixed on the empty space just above the sergeant's head.

Akurati's eyes narrowed, his lips pressing into a thin line. The silence stretched between them, and Allaria could feel the tension building, each second feeling like an eternity. She knew she was taking a risk with her answer, but she believed in her decision. She knew that hesitation could have meant death for her entire team.

*"I see,"* Akurati finally said, his tone clipped. He studied her for a long moment, his gaze piercing. *"And what in the hell made you choose the window?"* he asked, his words deliberate, each one striking like a hammer.

Allaria hesitated for the briefest of moments, choosing her words, but then let them out too quickly. *"My bullets wouldn't break open the door. I knew they would break out the window, though."* She quipped without thinking, her tone slightly defensive, almost as if she were trying to justify herself to herself as well.

Immediately, she regretted the way she answered. The sergeant's expression hardened, and she could see the anger simmering beneath the surface. The line of his jaw tensed, his eyes narrowing further. She braced herself, knowing she had overstepped.

Sergeant Akurati closed his eyes for a moment, taking in a deep breath. When he spoke again, his voice was controlled but carried a weight that Allaria could almost feel pressing down on her.

*“Listen to me when I say this: I’ve never met someone with the brains you have, but you’ve got to start making decisions with the consideration of everyone in your squad.”*

He turned away from her, his gaze drifting to a picture hanging on the office wall. Allaria followed his gaze—it was an old photo, sepia-toned, showing a group of soldiers standing together, their faces proud but weary. Akurati stared at the photo for a moment longer before speaking again, his tone softer but still firm. *“Your ability to see the situation as it was may have saved everyone’s lives today, but your decision was made selfishly—to be the hero.”*

He turned back to face her, his eyes locking onto hers. *“If you had made that same decision after discussing it with your group, if they understood why it had to be done, I’d put your promotion recommendation papers through right now. But you didn’t. You made a call alone, and while it worked, it could have cost lives if they hadn’t trusted you enough to follow.”*

Allaria swallowed hard, her throat dry. The sergeant’s words cut through her, and she could feel a lump forming in her throat. She forced herself to remain still, to keep her gaze forward, even as she felt the weight of his disappointment settling over her like a heavy blanket.

“Aye,” she answered, her voice steady but quiet, standing at attention.

Akurati took a step closer, his tone softening just a fraction. *“You have work to do. Do you understand me?”*

“Yes, Sergeant,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She could feel her cheeks burning, a mix of embarrassment and frustration churning within her. She had wanted to prove herself capable, and instead, she had made a mistake—a mistake that, while not fatal, had cost her the respect of her team.

*“You are dismissed,”* Akurati said, his tone dismissive, his eyes no longer focused on her but instead on a stack of reports on his desk.

Allaria snapped a salute, though she doubted he even noticed, then turned on her heel and exited the office without another word. As she stepped out into the corridor, the door closing behind her with a soft thud, she let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She checked her datalink—it was 0530 hours. The corridor was still dim, the ship’s lighting system not yet set to full day mode. She stared at the time for a moment, letting her mind catch up with everything that had just happened.

That conversation could have been worse, she thought to herself. Could have been better, but it certainly could have been worse. The sergeant's words echoed in her mind—*selfishly, to be the hero*. She hadn't thought of it that way at the time. She had thought she was doing what needed to be done, but now, she couldn't help but wonder if there was a part of her that had wanted to prove something—to her team, to Akurati, to herself.

She shook her head, trying to push the thoughts away as she made her way back to her shared room. When she entered, she was careful not to make any noise. The room was dark, her roommate still asleep. Allaria closed the door softly behind her, her eyes adjusting to the dim light. She moved quietly to her rack, sitting down heavily, her body suddenly feeling the exhaustion of the day.

She leaned back against the wall, letting her head rest against the cool metal. She allowed herself a long, well-deserved sigh of relief, her eyes closing for a moment. She had survived the mission, and she had survived her meeting with the sergeant, but she knew that wasn't enough. She needed to be better. She needed to *become* the leader her team could rely on.

She picked up her datalink, staring at the blank screen. Her reflection stared back at her—tired eyes, a smudge of dirt still on her cheek, her hair sticking out at odd angles. She looked as worn as she felt, but she knew there was no one else to blame. Her goals of being the captain of her own ship seemed farther away than ever, but she wasn't going to give up. She had work to do, within herself, to make it happen.

Her thoughts drifted back to Akurati's words. He had said that if she had made that same decision with the input of her team, he would have put her officer recommendation papers through. It wasn't that she lacked the skills or the knowledge—it was her approach, her need to control every aspect without letting others in. She had to trust her team, to rely on them as much as they relied on her.

The silence of the room enveloped her, her roommate's soft breathing the only sound. Allaria took a deep breath, setting the datalink down beside her. She had to start somewhere. Tomorrow, she would talk to Karega and Arturo, she would listen to their frustrations, and she would try to make things right. She would earn their trust, one step at a time.

"Radiation," Allaria typed into her datalink. The results came up on the screen, downloaded from the main computer within the Atticus. The datalink detailed different types of radiation, their

origins, and the hazards they posed. It was the kind of data that was usually dry, meant for engineers and specialists—but Allaria found herself intrigued.

*What could have caused the radiation on the Ottmar?* she wondered. The ship was relatively small, barely fifty meters in length, and it was equipped with a fusion reactor core. Not a nuclear reactor core—those were phased out decades ago.

Allaria narrowed her search to nuclear reactor cores. Her datalink displayed additional information:

"...Nuclear reactor cores were phased out in the year 2080 after fusion reactor cores were fully developed, allowing for more powerful engines, weapons, and utility systems. It allowed the introduction of electromagnetic shield technology across a wide variety of applications..."

She frowned, reading over the words carefully. *If all nuclear cores were phased out, then where did that radiation come from?*

It didn't add up. The Ottmar's systems, while old, shouldn't have emitted that level of radiation. And the onboard diagnostics showed nothing wrong with the fusion core. Allaria let out a sigh and set the datalink down on the small table next to her rack. Her eyelids felt heavy, and she could feel the exhaustion from the day's mission pressing down on her.

The datalink chirped, reminding her that she had a scheduled watch in nine hours. *Rest*. She should get some rest. But the mystery gnawed at her, something out of place that refused to settle. *There has to be something we're missing*, she thought.

Just as her body began to sink into the mattress, the realization hit her, snapping her wide awake. She bolted upright, the thought crystallizing in her mind. *A bomb*. She dressed in a rush, fumbling with her boots, before running out of the shared room and through the dimly lit hallway. *I need to tell the sergeant*.

She hurried to the station where Sergeant Akurati would be. Empty. "*Damn it, he's already off duty*," she thought, glancing at her datalink to confirm the time—1122 hours. Her heart raced with both excitement and anxiety, but she didn't have time to waste. She quickly checked who was on duty.

"Staff Sergeant Becker."

She remembered Becker vaguely—had only met her once during an orientation of the ship. Becker had a reputation among the crew—hard, dismissive, and impatient. But Allaria couldn't let that stop her. She needed answers. She needed someone to listen.

She found Becker at the drone operations bay, hunched over a console, her eyes scanning rows of data. The operations bay was busy, personnel moving between rows of drones, maintenance techs making adjustments to weapon systems, engineers conferring over diagnostics. The hum of machinery filled the air, mixed with chatter and the occasional clatter of tools.

"*Staff Sergeant?*" Allaria called, a hint of urgency in her voice.

Becker turned, her expression a mix of irritation and curiosity. "*What can I do for you, Laskari?*" she asked, her tone conveying annoyance at the interruption. The way she spoke her name made Allaria pause for a moment—she hadn't expected Becker to know who she was.

"*I—it's about the mission I was on earlier today,*" Allaria began, taking a deep breath to steady herself. "*Something about it isn't sitting right with me. I can't shake the feeling that something was missed.*"

Becker crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes narrowing. "I know," she said flatly. "You're lucky you didn't hurt anyone with that stunt you pulled."

Allaria felt her frustration rising. She didn't have time for this, not now. She pushed the annoyance aside, forcing her voice to stay level. "I know, and I'm sorry about that. But that's not why I'm here."

Becker raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. "*Then why are you here, Laskari? Shouldn't you be in your rack getting some rest for your post tomorrow—in a few hours?*" She said, emphasizing the last part with a mocking tone.

Allaria clenched her jaw, taking a moment to collect her thoughts. *Be calm. Just explain.*

"*Well, as you know, the Ottmar had been exposed to a significant amount of radiation. We didn't even have five minutes on board before the contamination reached critical levels.*" She spoke slowly, deliberately, making sure Becker heard every word. "*The ship had a fusion core, and there were no indications of a radiation leak from it.*"

Becker sighed, clearly growing impatient. "Get to your point, Laskari."

Allaria nodded. "*Once we left the ship—*" she began, only to be interrupted again.

"*You mean once you shot out the window,*" Becker said with a hint of arrogance.

Allaria clenched her fists, swallowing her frustration. *Focus.* "Yes. *Once I shot out the window and we left the ship, the radiation wasn't detected anymore. Something on the ship was causing that radiation—something external to the fusion core.*"

She paused, and Becker stared at her, her expression skeptical. "*I believe it was a bomb. I think the Gao-de were using one of our own ships to sneak a bomb past our defenses,*" she said, her voice trembling slightly with uncertainty but also determination.

Becker frowned, her expression softening slightly as she considered the information. "*And what evidence do you have for this?*" she asked.

Allaria took a deep breath, trying to organize her thoughts. "*If we pull up the flight plan for the Ottmar, we'll see that it was heading for the Beijing Shipyard at Mars. We know it was slowly moving, and the engines were intact. If that's where it was headed, and if it was carrying that kind of radiation, it could be an attempt to get a bomb into one of our shipyards.*"

Becker studied her for a moment, her eyes narrowing as she considered what Allaria was saying. It was a wild theory, but it wasn't impossible. "*That's quite an assumption, Laskari,*" she finally said. "*But I'll have a technician pull the flight data from the Ottmar. If there's anything to this, we'll act on it.*" She sighed, her tone softening just a fraction. "*Now, I believe you are on duty in five hours, so go get some more rest.*"

Allaria nodded, her posture rigid, and saluted before turning on her heel and leaving the operations bay. She made her way back through the dimly lit corridor, her mind still racing. "*I know that's what happened*", she thought. "*There can't be any other explanation.*"

She reached her room and sat down heavily on the edge of her rack, her head in her hands. The adrenaline that had been driving her was beginning to fade, replaced by the crushing exhaustion of the day's events. She rubbed her temples, trying to dispel the growing headache. *Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm overthinking it,* she mused, her eyes feeling heavy.

Her rackmate, Hardison, stirred, sitting up in her bunk. *“Laskari, what are you doing? I can’t get a moment’s rest with you around,”* she grumbled, her voice thick with sleep.

*“Please shut up, Hardison,”* Allaria snapped, her patience frayed. *“It’s been a rough day, and I don’t need anything from you right now.”* Her voice carried a sharper edge than she intended, and she could see Hardison’s glare in the dim light, his expression a mix of tired frustration and resentment.

Just as she was about to lie back down, the sudden blare of an alarm filled the room. The alert lights turned on, bright yellow flashes signaling the entire ship to prepare. Allaria sat upright, her heart pounding. *An alert.* It could be a drill, but something about it felt different. She could feel the ship accelerating, the force pressing her back against the bulkhead.

*Combat? Could it be combat?* she wondered, her pulse quickening with excitement. The Atticus had run combat drills before, but this felt different. The ship’s acceleration, the urgency in the alarms—it all pointed to something real.

She stood up, her heart racing, and pulled on her boots as quickly as she could. She turned to Hardison, who seemed wholly uninterested, still lying in her bunk. *“Come on, get moving,”* she urged, but Hardison only groaned in response, turning over.

Allaria didn’t have time to argue. She grabbed her gear and ran out of the room, making her way quickly through the corridor toward her duty station. The shuttle bay—the place she was supposed to guard in the event of an emergency.

The corridors were filled with crew members, all moving with purpose. Some were running to their stations, others giving orders, and Allaria could hear the unmistakable hum of the ship’s systems preparing for battle. The rumble of machinery reverberated through the metal floors beneath her boots, the urgency in the air palpable.

She reached the shuttle bay and took her position, her weapon ready, her eyes scanning the area. The bay was bustling—mechanics securing equipment, soldiers checking their weapons, engineers running diagnostics on the shuttles. The yellow alert lights reflected off the polished floor, their flashes creating a surreal pattern of light and shadow across the space.

Allaria could feel her breath quicken, adrenaline coursing through her veins. *This is it,* she thought, her heart pounding. *This is what I signed up for.* The fear was there, yes—lurking at the

edges of her mind—but it was overshadowed by something else. A sense of purpose, a sense of belonging.

The ship shook slightly, and Allaria felt the reverberation through her boots. The Atticus was preparing to engage, and she could hear the distant rumble of the railguns powering up. The sound sent a shiver down her spine, a thrill of anticipation mixed with fear. She tightened her grip on her weapon, her eyes fixed on the energy barrier at the far end of the bay, watching for any sign of incoming ships.

Allaria arrived at her duty station, her heart pounding as she made her way to the weapons locker. She pulled the heavy rifle from its secure hold, feeling the familiar weight settle against her chest before strapping it across her back. She grabbed a standard-issue pistol, securing it in the holster on her thigh, and then reached for two eight-inch knives, sliding them into the sheaths attached to her belt. *Just in case*, she thought, her fingers brushing the handles as if for reassurance.

Suddenly, the lights in the Atticus changed, flickering before settling into a deep, unwavering red. Red alert. That meant the preparations were done—it was either a drill or actual combat. The shift in lighting was like a change in the air pressure, and Allaria could feel it reverberate in her chest, her breathing quickening as she realized that *this* might be it.

She spotted First Lieutenant Tenore standing at the railing overlooking the bay. His figure was silhouetted by the crimson glow, his posture rigid and commanding as he surveyed the activity below. She had seen Tenore a handful of times during inspections—his eyes sharp, his demeanor unflinching—but she had never seen him present for a drill. *He wouldn't be here unless this was something serious*, she thought, her heart picking up speed.

Allaria and the others in her on-duty squad stood at attention, their boots clicking against the metal floor as they snapped into place. The shuttle bay grew quieter, the background noise of machinery now an undertone to Tenore's commanding presence. He began to speak, his voice carrying with a force that made every recruit straighten their shoulders a little bit more.

*"Not even an hour ago, we received credible intelligence that the Gao-de are attempting an attack on the Beijing Shipyard at Mars."* He spoke with an authority that cut through the tension, his eyes locking onto each of them in turn. *"Shortly after receiving this information, we also*



*received a distress call from the Corbin—a mining vessel operating in Saturn's rings. The transmission was cut off, but the ship's beacon remains active, so we know it wasn't destroyed."*

He paused, letting that information sink in. Allaria felt her throat tighten. *Saturn's rings?* she thought. The Corbin was a mining vessel, much like the Ottmar. She felt a chill run through her spine.

*"Since we are already in the area," Tenore continued, "we are headed there now to investigate the situation further. We will be rendezvousing with the Bastani, which will provide additional support. Don't lose your minds if you see another ship outside the Atticus."*

The mention of the Bastani made Allaria's brow furrow. She had heard of the Bastani before—an electronics ship, loaded with specialized sensors, designed for intelligence gathering. *Full of sensors... radiation detection*, she thought, her mind racing to piece together what it meant.

Lieutenant Tenore's voice rang out again, drawing her focus. *"Upon arrival, we will be monitoring the area for any additional activity. Our objective, as a combat unit, is to maintain the security of the shuttle bay. It is the primary entry and exit point of the ship outside of the drone ports. If anything comes through that forcefield, our task is simple—make sure it either leaves or dies."*

He paused, his gaze sweeping across them, and Allaria could feel her heart pounding in her chest, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She had been waiting for this moment—*this* kind of moment—since she had joined the academy five years ago. She had trained for this, worked relentlessly for it, and now, here it was. The possibility of actual combat, of defending the Atticus from whatever danger might lurk in Saturn's shadow.

Lieutenant Tenore nodded to them, his lips pressed into a thin line, his expression a mix of determination and expectation. *"We'll be arriving in about thirty-five minutes. Until then, stay sharp."*

As Tenore finished, the ship's intercom crackled to life, the electronic voice clear and direct. *"Please find a seat and buckle up until the all-clear is given."*

Allaria glanced around, her gaze finding the row of seats along the bulkhead. She moved quickly, securing herself, her weapon resting on her lap. Her hands were trembling—she wasn't sure if it was from fear or excitement. Probably both. The anticipation was almost overwhelming,

each second that passed tightening the coil of adrenaline that wound itself through her chest. She looked around, her eyes darting over the faces of her squad members. Most looked tense, their jaws set, their eyes focused forward.

The shuttle bay, for all its polish and order, seemed almost dreamlike under the red lights. The hum of the ship reverberated through the walls, vibrating under her boots, a constant reminder of the power that surrounded her. It wasn't comforting—but it was something she could hold onto, something real in the midst of the unknown.

The minutes ticked by, the tension thick in the air. Allaria's thoughts were a tangled mess of uncertainty, hope, fear, and determination. She couldn't shake the sense that something bigger was unfolding—something that reached beyond just a simple distress call or a lone mining ship.

*The Gao-de*, she thought, a chill settling into her bones. They hadn't seen a Gao-de ship in decades. The idea that they could return had always been abstract—a fear that they trained for but never truly faced. But now, here she was, strapped into her seat, her rifle ready, waiting for the unknown.

The hum of the engines changed, a subtle shift that sent a shiver through the metal frame of the Atticus. The ship was preparing for combat, and Allaria felt her heartbeat quicken again. The shuttle bay seemed to grow quieter, the chatter of mechanics and soldiers fading as everyone found their positions. Allaria looked out towards the energy barrier that shimmered at the far end of the bay, her breath caught in her chest. Beyond that forcefield was the void—the darkness of space that held both danger and opportunity.

Suddenly, a vibration ran through the ship, followed by the unmistakable thud of the Atticus's railguns firing. The sound reverberated through her bones, and she could feel the shockwave pass through her body—a visceral reminder of the power that the ship held. It was exhilarating, the kind of feeling that made her blood sing, the anticipation transforming into a cold, sharp focus. *This is it*, she thought. *This is why I'm here*.

She turned her attention back to her squadmates, her eyes meeting Karega's. He gave her a small nod, his expression tight but resolved. Utekli was adjusting the straps on his harness, his jaw set, determination in his eyes. Arturo cracked his knuckles, a grin tugging at the corners of his lips, his excitement palpable.

Allaria looked down at her rifle, her fingers brushing over the cold metal of the barrel. The red lights overhead made the polished surface of the bay look almost like liquid, as if they were floating in some surreal dream. The anticipation was suffocating, the seconds stretching into eternity, the pulse of the ship the only thing keeping her anchored.

She glanced back at Tenore, who was still standing by the railing, his eyes fixed on the energy barrier. She couldn't read his expression—it was a mask of calm, but there was a sharpness in his gaze, a readiness that mirrored the unease in her chest.

*Thirty-five minutes*, she reminded herself, her mind racing through the possibilities. Thirty-five minutes until they arrived at Saturn, until they would find out whether the distress call was a genuine threat or just another false alarm.

She took a deep breath, letting the air fill her lungs, and closed her eyes for a brief moment. *Strength and knowledge*, she reminded herself, the words steadying her. She was ready. Whatever was waiting for them out there, she would face it head-on, no hesitation.

Nearly every room on the Atticus had seats installed for high acceleration travel, but Allaria had never experienced the feeling before. She had trained for it, read about it, even visualized it in her mind, but theory was a poor substitute for reality. The air around her hummed with anticipation, a kind of collective breath held by the entire crew as they prepared for whatever was to come. The shuttle bay was dimly lit, the red emergency lights casting long shadows that seemed to stretch across the polished floor, dancing with each flicker of the overhead lamps.

The countdown echoed through the ship's intercom, the automated voice seemingly emotionless. *"Ten... Nine... Eight..."* The room felt charged, as if every recruit was holding their breath, the air itself buzzing with anticipation. Allaria glanced at her squadmates. Utekli's eyes were closed, his lips moving as if in silent prayer. Karega was tapping his fingers against his rifle, his gaze focused straight ahead, his jaw clenched. Arturo sat with his head resting against the back of his chair, a grin playing at the corners of his lips.

*"Three... Two... One... Zero."*

All at once, it felt like the universe shifted beneath her. The force of the acceleration was immediate, a crushing pressure that pushed her back into her seat. Allaria's vision blurred at the edges, her breathing labored as she forced herself to take measured breaths. She could feel the weight of her body, like lead, pressing into the seat, her ribs straining against the harness. The

Atticus was pushing its engines to their limits—somewhere between 1.5g and 3g, according to her reading—but the exact figure was classified. She assumed it could push even harder if it needed to, though that would probably be dangerous for everyone aboard.

The acceleration lasted for about twelve minutes, the pressure relentless until finally, it eased. Allaria exhaled, her breath coming out shaky. She could feel the ship turning, a sensation that was both strange and disorienting, like being twisted in a centrifuge. Then, just as the crushing pressure had let up, it returned. The ship was decelerating, and she braced herself against the renewed force for the next twelve minutes. Every muscle in her body screamed, her mind racing to calculate the distance they'd traveled. She ran the numbers quickly in her head—acceleration, deceleration, time—and determined they had traveled at least one hundred and twenty thousand kilometers. *Saturn*, she thought. They had reached the other side of the planet.

The automated voice chimed in again, "*All clear*," followed by a series of flashes—green to red, then green again before finally settling on red. It was time.

Before she could remove her safety harness, Allaria felt the Atticus shudder, the unmistakable thud of the railguns firing vibrating through the metal floor and up her spine. The ship's twelve railguns were unloading their ammunition, firing thirty-two kilogram uranium projectiles—massive, dense rounds capable of tearing through enemy hulls. The Atticus also had six smaller mechanical guns, relics of older technology that still found their place in the arsenal. Allaria understood the appeal of those weapons; they were reliable, easy to maintain, and provided a comforting familiarity to boarding teams and ship crews alike.

She unbuckled her harness, her fingers moving quickly as her heart pounded in her ears. She stood, her rifle sliding down to her side, supported by the shoulder strap. Around her, the rest of the squad followed suit, removing their harnesses and rising to their feet. The atmosphere in the shuttle bay was electric—everyone was on edge, ready for action, and Allaria could feel her blood racing, her senses heightened as they prepared for whatever was coming.

The large energy forcefield shimmered at the far end of the bay, a thin veil of blue and green light that held the atmosphere in while still allowing ships to pass through. The blast doors—massive, heavy slabs of metal—were open, exposing the bay to the void beyond. Allaria knew they left them open to facilitate quick access to the shuttles, but she couldn't help but feel

a sense of unease. The forcefield wouldn't stop a ship from entering; it was simply a barrier to keep the vacuum of space from swallowing them whole.

The team arranged themselves into three pairs, each taking up a position around the shuttle bay, covering different angles. Allaria paired up with Utekli, and she could see the tension in his posture, the way his eyes darted around, scanning for threats. Arturo and Karega took the other side, their stances wide, rifles at the ready, and the final pair positioned themselves on the catwalk midway up the bay, overlooking the forcefield. Allaria could feel her heart pounding, her fingers tightening around her rifle. *This was it.*

She grabbed the harness that was attached to the bulkhead, clipping it to the back of her envirosuit. It was a precaution—if the forcefield failed or the shuttle bay was depressurized, they would be tethered to the ship, preventing them from being blown into space. The blast doors were supposed to close automatically in the event of depressurization, but in combat, anything could go wrong. She pulled on the tether, testing its strength, and took a deep breath.

The shuttle bay, which had seemed so calm just a few minutes ago, now felt like a pressure cooker—silent, tense, waiting for the first sign of chaos. The polished floor gleamed under the red lights, the reflections shimmering like liquid, and Allaria found herself staring at her own distorted image for a moment before she shook her head, focusing on the task at hand. She could feel the ship vibrating beneath her boots, the railguns still firing, the dull *thud-thud-thud* reverberating through the walls. It was almost like a heartbeat—steady, relentless, a reminder of the power of the Atticus.

She glanced at Utekli, his face pale but determined, his fingers tapping nervously on the side of his rifle. He gave her a small nod, and she returned it, her lips pressing into a thin line. There was no room for fear here, no room for hesitation. They were a team, and they had a job to do.

The minutes ticked by, each second feeling like an eternity, the red lights overhead casting an eerie glow over the bay. Allaria's muscles were tense, her eyes fixed on the forcefield, watching for any sign of movement. She could feel the adrenaline coursing through her veins, her senses heightened, every sound, every vibration amplified in her mind.

Suddenly, the intercom crackled to life, and Tenore's voice rang out, clear and commanding. *"Attention all personnel. We are approaching the Corbin's position. All hands, prepare for possible engagement."*

Allaria took a deep breath, her grip on her rifle tightening. This was it. The moment she had trained for, the moment she had waited for. The unknown loomed ahead, a dark void that held both danger and opportunity, and she was ready to face it. She could feel the tension in the bay, the collective breath held by every recruit, every soldier, every crew member.

The railguns fell silent, the sudden absence of sound almost deafening in its own way. Allaria's eyes were fixed on the shimmering forcefield, her heart pounding in her chest. She could feel the weight of her rifle in her hands, the cold metal grounding her, giving her something to hold onto in the midst of the chaos.

Allaria felt the Atticus lurch violently to its starboard side, a shudder running through the entire ship. She barely managed to keep her balance, her boots slipping slightly against the polished shuttle bay floor. The unmistakable sound of metal against metal—a deafening *clank*—resonated from somewhere near the bow. It reverberated through her body, nearly buckling her knees, but she fought to stay upright, gripping her rifle tighter as the ship rocked.

The sudden movement made her stomach turn, and she instinctively reached for the bulkhead to steady herself. She squinted through the shimmering blue and green forcefield, her eyes catching a glimpse of the Bastani about four kilometers away. Even from this distance, she could see its condition—plumes of smoke billowed from several points, and flames danced across its exterior. The sight of the Bastani burning ignited a spark of dread within her. It was chaos—real chaos, not the drills or the scenarios they trained for, but the kind that left you wondering if you would make it out alive.

Then something caught her eye—movement just outside the forcefield.

Allaria's heart leapt into her throat. She turned her head just in time to see the glint of metal, the ominous shape of a Gao-de ship closing in, its silhouette unmistakable even against the vast blackness of space.

*“Close the blast doors!”* First Lieutenant Tenore's voice roared through the shuttle bay, filled with urgency and desperation. *“Close them, fucking now!”*

The tension snapped into motion, and one of the soldiers near the emergency panel slammed their hand down on the button. Allaria could hear the motors whirring, the heavy metal doors starting to grind their way shut. She knew it would take too long—the gap was still too wide. Her instincts screamed that they were out of time.

The Gao-de ship surged through the forcefield, its jagged hull scraping against the shuttle bay's deck as it forced its way in. The high-pitched screech of metal on metal pierced her ears, the sound reverberating through her helmet and setting her teeth on edge. Allaria clenched her jaw, fighting the urge to cover her ears. The ship skidded across the polished deck, leaving deep gouges in the once pristine surface, and came to a shuddering halt against the internal bulkhead.

Time seemed to slow down. Allaria watched as the ship's hatch opened, her body reacting before her mind caught up. She pulled her rifle from her side, raising it to her shoulder, her heart pounding in her ears. The familiar weight of the gun was a comfort, a reminder that she had trained for this moment.

Two Gao-de leapt out of the ship first, wielding swords that seemed to shimmer in the red emergency lighting. Their movements were fluid, almost predatory, their tall forms cutting through the haze of the shuttle bay. Two more Gao-de followed, each one armed with rifles that looked both alien and terrifying. Allaria's breath caught in her throat at the sight of them—larger than any human, towering over her at well over 2.5 meters tall. Their bodies were covered in patches of a hard, exoskeletal armor that glinted in the dim light, shielding the most vulnerable parts of their anatomy.

She'd read countless reports about the Gao-de, studied their physiology, their tactics, but nothing could have prepared her for seeing them in person. They were monstrous—an imposing blend of muscle and natural armor, their long limbs moving with an eerie grace. Their skulls had protrusions, horn-like structures that jutted out at odd angles, which she knew were used for their telepathic communication. They had no need for words, no shouts or commands—only silence as they coordinated their attack, their expressions blank and unreadable.

*"Hold your positions and fire!"* Tenore shouted, his voice strained as he tried to maintain order amidst the chaos.

The Gao-de moved quickly, their eyes locking onto Tenore. Without hesitation, they raised their rifles and began firing, the crack of alien weaponry filling the shuttle bay. Allaria could see the bright flashes of energy discharging from the Gao-de rifles, the shots striking the metal railings where Tenore stood.

Allaria didn't wait for a command. Her training kicked in, her body reacting on instinct. She took a deep breath, her finger squeezing the trigger of her rifle. *Crack. Crack. Crack.* Three shots fired in quick succession, her aim trained on the back of their ship. The recoil jolted her shoulder, and she watched as the bullets struck the Gao-de's armor, the dull *thud* of impact echoing through the bay. The bullets hit but didn't penetrate, bouncing off the thick exoskeletal plating.

*Their armor is too strong*, she realized, her mind racing as she adjusted her aim, searching for a weakness. The rest of her squad opened fire as well, their shots ringing out, filling the bay with the deafening roar of gunfire. She could feel her pulse quickening, her nerves on edge as she squeezed the trigger again and again, the force of each shot reverberating through her body.

Despite the chaos, there was a part of her that felt exhilarated—a rush that drowned out her fear. She had waited for this moment for years, trained for it, visualized it in her mind over and over.

She watched as one of the Gao-de lunged toward Tenore, his sword raised high, the blade glinting menacingly. Tenore ducked just in time, the blade slicing through the air where his head had been moments before. Allaria's heart pounded as she took aim, her sights locking onto the unarmored section beneath the Gao-de's arm. She fired, the crack of her rifle blending with the chaos around her.

The bullet struck, and the Gao-de staggered, a grunt escaping from somewhere deep in its chest. It wasn't enough to take it down, but it was enough to throw it off balance, enough for Tenore to roll to safety behind a stack of supply crates.

*Keep moving. Keep firing.* The thought pulsed through her mind, her finger squeezing the trigger as she fired again and again, each shot aimed with precision. The bay was filled with the acrid scent of gunpowder and the metallic tang of blood, the flashes of red emergency lighting casting an eerie glow over the scene. She could hear the shouts of her squadmates, the crack of rifle fire, the screams of pain as bullets found their marks.

Utekli moved beside her, his rifle trained on the Gao-de nearest the ship, his face pale but determined. Karega and Arturo had taken up positions on the opposite side of the bay, their rifles firing in unison, their eyes focused and intense. They were holding their ground, pushing back against the Gao-de, refusing to give an inch.



One of the Gao-de with a rifle aimed toward Allaria's side of the bay, its eyes locking onto her. She felt a chill run down her spine, her muscles tensing as she saw the barrel of the weapon swing in her direction. *Move!* her mind screamed, and she dropped to the floor just as the shot rang out, the energy blast passing inches above her head, scorching the metal bulkhead behind her. Her mind raced and for the briefest of moments wondered how she knew where to move to.

She rolled to her side, her rifle still in her hands, and took aim once more. Her finger squeezed the trigger, the shot striking the Gao-de's leg, causing it to stumble. It wasn't enough, but it bought her a few precious seconds. She pushed herself back to her feet, her eyes locking onto the next target.

The Gao-de were relentless, their movements coordinated and precise, their attacks calculated. But Allaria and her squad were just as determined. They moved together, their training kicking in, each of them covering the other's blind spots, their weapons firing in a near-constant rhythm.

The bay was chaos—gunfire, shouts, the screech of metal as the Gao-de ship shifted against the bulkhead. But amidst the chaos, Allaria felt a sense of purpose. This was what she had been waiting for, what she had trained for. The fear, the uncertainty—it all faded away, replaced by a fierce determination. She was a soldier, and she would fight, no matter the cost.

*"Keep pushing!"* Tenore's voice rang out over the chaos, his command clear and steady. *"Don't let them gain any ground!"*

Allaria's heart pounded, her muscles aching, but she pushed forward, her rifle firing shot after shot. The Gao-de were formidable—strong, resilient, and terrifying. But she could see the cracks in their armor, the moments of vulnerability. And she knew, deep down, that they could win this.

## CHAPTER 4 - FOUR AND A HALF YEARS AGO

Allaria stood toe-to-toe with Arturo once more, a familiar intensity settling between them. It had been six months since their last sparring match—an encounter that had ended with her getting knocked out, only for her to still manage to pull him to the floor. This time, she felt different—stronger, more prepared. She had spent those six months training relentlessly, sparring with others, pushing herself to her limits, honing her skills. She was ready to face Arturo again, though she couldn't ignore the butterflies of anxiety fluttering in her stomach. She took a deep breath, steadying herself, her eyes locked on Arturo's.

The sparring room was quiet, the atmosphere heavy with anticipation. The rest of her class gathered around the edges of the mat, their eyes glued to the two of them. They remembered what had happened last time, the unpredictability of that final move, and now they were eager to see what would unfold. Allaria ignored their whispers, focusing on the opponent in front of her. Arturo looked as confident as ever, a smirk playing on his lips as he eyed her.

The whistle blew.

Without missing a beat, Arturo lunged forward, his hand reaching low to get under her left arm. His movements were fast, precise. But Allaria had anticipated it. She stepped back, twisting her

body to the right, lifting her arm high out of his reach. In one fluid motion, she grabbed his left arm and twisted it at the wrist. Arturo let out a sharp hiss of pain, his eyes narrowing, but he didn't waste time struggling. Instead, he let his body roll, his movements smooth and practiced, using the momentum to escape her grip.

Arturo retaliated quickly, landing a jab just under her armpit. Allaria felt the sharp pain radiate through her side, her breath catching in her throat for a moment. She recoiled, her body twisting away from him, but she didn't let the pain slow her down. She reacted instinctively, wrapping her leg around his, trying to throw him off balance. Arturo stumbled, his arms flailing for a second before he caught himself with his free foot. He ducked down, and Allaria swung her arm, her fist missing by a fraction of an inch as he dodged the blow.

She growled softly in frustration, her eyes narrowing. Arturo was slippery, quick on his feet, and she knew she couldn't afford to let her guard down for even a second. He moved to step around her, and she countered with an elbow, throwing it into his chest. This time, she found her mark. Arturo grunted in pain as her elbow connected, the force knocking him backward. He fell to the mat, catching himself with his hands, his eyes widening in shock.

Allaria didn't hesitate. She leapt forward, landing hard on his back, her full weight crashing down on him, forcing him face-first into the mat. Arturo let out a gasp, the air knocked out of his lungs, his body crumpling beneath her. She could feel the resistance as he tried to push himself up, but she pressed down harder, keeping him pinned.

*"That's against the rules, Laskari!"* Arturo snapped, his voice dripping with frustration and anger.

*"Oh please,"* Allaria retorted, pushing herself off of him, her voice filled with irritation. *"You're always trying to find a way to say you didn't lose. I've studied the rules, and there's nothing in them that says I can't jump on someone."* She offered a small, taunting smile, her eyes narrowing as she watched him.

The whistle blew, signaling the end of the match. Allaria stepped back, her heart pounding, her muscles aching. She could see Arturo's face, flushed with anger and embarrassment, his hands clenched into fists.

The instructor, standing just off the mat, interjected, his voice steady and authoritative. *"Laskari is correct, as usual, Arturo,"* he said, his gaze shifting to Arturo. *"You should know by now that she's usually right about these things."*

Arturo's face twisted with displeasure, his eyes flashing as he pushed himself up to his feet. *"I didn't think she'd do that. Who jumps on someone, anyway?"* he shot back, the frustration evident in his tone.

The instructor shook his head, his expression stern as he placed a hand on Arturo's shoulder. *"That is why you lose, recruit. What you do not expect may kill you. Always expect everything, and nothing will surprise you."*

Arturo looked up at the instructor, his lips pressed into a thin line, his frustration clear. Allaria watched him, her chest tightening with a mix of emotions. She knew Arturo struggled in his studies; she had offered to help him more than once, but he had only reacted with anger, refusing her assistance. She could see it now—that simmering frustration in his eyes, a reflection of his own struggles and shortcomings. He couldn't beat her on the knowledge tests, and now, once again, he had failed to beat her on the mat. She understood why he was upset, but she wasn't going to let that stop her from doing her best.

The instructor's voice interrupted her thoughts. *"Next match. Laskari, you're going again since you seem to be doing well today."*

*"Shit,"* Allaria muttered under her breath, her eyes widening in dismay. Her muscles were aching from the exertion, her heart still racing from the match, and she wasn't sure she could keep up for another round.

*"What was that?"* The instructor's sharp tone cut through the air, his gaze snapping to her.

Allaria stood straighter, trying to mask her exhaustion with a forced smile. *"Nothing, instructor. I'm happy to go again!"* she said, her voice overly enthusiastic. She knew she didn't have a choice—if the instructor said she was going again, then that was that. But the thought of another match, so soon after the first, made her stomach twist with apprehension.

*Strength and knowledge*, she reminded herself. *Strength and knowledge*. It was all she needed, and she would prove it to herself, one match at a time.

The instructor called out the name of her next opponent. "Whitbey," he said loudly, his voice echoing across the sparring room.

Allaria's eyes flicked over to the waiting mats, where a girl stood up, her expression unreadable. Whitbey was around her size, but Allaria knew better than to underestimate her. She had seen Whitbey fight before—she was fast, almost unnervingly so. Allaria had only spoken to her once, briefly, but she had heard the rumors that circulated around the Academy. People whispered that Whitbey had grown up on the streets, that she had been part of a gang, that she had stabbed someone with a knife. Some said that a judge had given her a choice—either join the fleet or go to prison.

Allaria swallowed hard, her eyes narrowing as she watched Whitbey approach the mat. If even half of those rumors were true, then this was going to be an interesting match, to say the least. She adjusted her stance, planting her feet firmly on the ground, her hands rising instinctively to a ready position. Whitbey moved in front of her, her gaze locked onto Allaria, her posture relaxed but ready, like a coiled spring. Allaria could see the intensity in her eyes, the determination, the fire.

The whistle blew.

Whitbey moved like lightning. Before Allaria could even fully process the sound of the whistle, Whitbey was already closing the gap between them, her fist shooting forward. The punch landed squarely in Allaria's stomach, knocking the wind out of her, her body instinctively recoiling from the impact. It wasn't a particularly hard punch, but the suddenness of it caught her off guard. Her breath left her in a sharp gasp, her vision momentarily blurring.

But she didn't have time to think about the pain. As Whitbey pulled her arm back, Allaria reacted on instinct, dropping her elbow into her opponent's chest before she could retreat. Whitbey let out a grunt, her body twisting to the side as she stepped back at an angle, her movements quick and calculated. Allaria followed, turning her body to keep her eyes on her opponent, her heart pounding in her ears, her mind racing.

Whitbey threw another punch, her arm arcing through the air, her movements fluid. Allaria saw it coming, her eyes narrowing, her body tensing. At the last second, she reached out, her fingers wrapping around Whitbey's wrist, using her momentum against her. She pulled, yanking Whitbey off balance, her opponent's body lurching forward. Without missing a beat, Allaria formed a fist with her left hand, driving it into Whitbey's stomach, the force of the punch combined with the pull sending her opponent to the ground.

Whitbey hit the mat with a soft thud, her breath leaving her in a pained gasp, her face contorting in discomfort. The instructor blew the whistle, signaling the end of the match.

Allaria took a deep breath, her body relaxing slightly, the tension in her muscles easing. She looked down at Whitbey, her expression softening. She reached out, offering her hand to help her opponent up. It was an automatic gesture, a sign of respect, a way to acknowledge the fight they had both just endured.

But Whitbey's eyes narrowed, her gaze locking onto Allaria's, a flash of something dark and intense crossing her face. Without a word, she slapped Allaria's hand away, the force of the motion making Allaria's arm drop to her side. Whitbey pushed herself to her feet, her movements stiff, her eyes never leaving Allaria's. There was something in her gaze—anger, resentment, pride. Allaria wasn't sure which, or maybe it was all of them. Whitbey stood there for a moment, her chest rising and falling as she caught her breath, her eyes boring into Allaria's.

Allaria could feel the tension between them, a heavy, almost tangible weight. She understood, in that moment, that this fight wasn't just a match to Whitbey. It was something more, something personal. Allaria held her gaze, refusing to look away, her face expressionless. She knew better than to take it personally. She had learned early on in the Academy that people came from all sorts of backgrounds, carrying all sorts of baggage. For some, it was a way to prove themselves. For others, it was survival. And for people like Whitbey, it was both.

Allaria stood in the center of the training mat, her breaths coming in heavy, uneven gasps. Her body ached from the last two matches—muscles sore, bruises forming under her skin. She could feel her energy draining, her legs shaking slightly beneath her, her arms feeling like lead.

Then the instructor told her to stay where she was.

She couldn't stop now, not when the instructor had called her name again, not when everyone was watching. She was determined to prove herself, even if her body protested every movement.

The instructor's voice echoed across the training room, calling the next recruit to the mat. "*Ritterman!*" he barked.

Allaria's eyes widened slightly, her gaze snapping towards the waiting area where a large recruit stood up. Ritterman was nearly as big as Arturo, tall and broad-shouldered, his muscles rippling as he moved towards the mat. *"What the hell is going on right now?"* she thought to herself, a sense of unease settling in her chest. She was exhausted, barely able to stand without her legs trembling, and now she had to go up against someone as big as Ritterman.

The instructor's voice cut through her thoughts. *"Square up!"* he said firmly. *"Combat isn't about fighting when you're ready. It's about knowing your limits and how to hold your own when you're tired and worn down."*

Allaria took a deep breath, swallowing her anxiety as she squared up with Ritterman, her feet planted firmly on the mat, her hands rising into a defensive position. She knew she was at a disadvantage here—her energy was nearly spent, and Ritterman was fresh, full of energy, ready to fight. But she also knew that she had one advantage—her speed. She needed to stay calm, to think, to keep her mind clear.

The whistle blew.

Allaria moved first, throwing a punch towards Ritterman, but he dodged it easily. Damn. I'm slower this time, she thought, frustration bubbling up inside her. Her mind began to race, her thoughts jumbled, panic beginning to set in. Calm down. Calm down. Stay focused and THINK, she reminded herself, taking a step back to regain her composure.

Ritterman moved in, attempting to sweep her legs with his own, but she stepped back, narrowly avoiding the maneuver. He was bigger, stronger—maybe she could wear him down, tire him out, she thought. He threw a punch, his fist coming towards her face, and she ducked, feeling the rush of air as his fist brushed against her hair, missing her by only an inch. He wasn't holding back, and that thought sent a shiver down her spine.

They were standing near the center of the mat, and she knew she needed to use the space to her advantage. She moved towards the edge of the mat, putting some distance between herself and Ritterman. He followed. Allaria allowed herself a moment to catch her breath, her eyes locked on Ritterman, watching his every movement. He was slower than she was, his size working against him. She moved in close, then darted back out of his reach, her movements quick, fluid. She could see the frustration growing on his face, his eyes narrowing, his lips pressing into a thin line.

*"Good. I can use this"*, she thought, a plan forming in her mind. She had seen Ritterman lose his temper before, seen the way he let his emotions cloud his judgment. If she could get him angry, make him lose control, she could win this match. She moved in close again, this time reaching out and tapping his chest with her fingertips before dodging out of his range once more. His face flushed red, his eyes widening in anger. She could hear a few of the other recruits snickering, the sound fueling Ritterman's rage.

*"Fight me, Laskari!"* he yelled, his voice echoing across the training room.

Allaria's heart pounded in her chest, her eyes narrowing as she watched him charge towards her. He was moving faster now, his movements aggressive, uncalculated, driven by anger. She could see the way his muscles tensed, the way his body moved with reckless abandon. As he threw a punch, she stepped to the side, her body moving fluidly out of his path. He stumbled, his momentum carrying him forward, his foot stepping off the edge of the training mat, disqualifying him.

The instructor blew the whistle, signaling the end of the match.

*"Damn you, Laskari!"* Ritterman yelled, his face contorted in rage. *"You can't ever fight fair, it's always tricks with you!"*

Allaria stood there, her body still tense, her eyes locked on Ritterman. She had expected this reaction, had wanted it, but now that she had won, she felt a pang of guilt. She hadn't overpowered him; she had outsmarted him. She had used his anger against him, and while it was a legitimate strategy, it didn't feel like a true victory.

Before she could react, Ritterman turned around, stepping back onto the training mat, his face twisted in anger. *Shit, shit, shit*, she thought, her heart skipping a beat. But before Ritterman could reach her, the instructor grabbed him by the collar, pulling him to the ground.

*"The match is over!"* the instructor said firmly, his voice cutting through the tension in the room. *"Laskari won because you let her get under your skin. You let her win. She didn't win by overpowering you—she won because you have a weak mind, and she used that against you! Learn from this and be better next time."*



Allaria stood still, her chest rising and falling with each heavy breath. She didn't say anything, didn't want to make things worse for Ritterman. She had won, but it didn't feel like a real victory—not in the way she had wanted it to.

The instructor's voice cut through her thoughts. *"Laskari! Ritterman is correct. You do not fight with honor. For the rest of you, if you think the Gao-de will fight you with honor, you are mistaken. They will not. They will do everything they can to kill you, and you must respond in the same manner. You must fight them with the intention of killing them. Nothing less will suffice."*

Allaria swallowed hard, her eyes dropping to the mat. The words stung, but she knew the instructor was right. The Gao-de wouldn't fight fair. They would do whatever it took to win, to survive, and she would have to do the same.

The instructor dismissed the class, and Allaria let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. Her body was sore, her muscles aching, her mind spinning with everything that had happened. She had bested three people today, but now she felt like she had a target on her back. She could feel the eyes of the other recruits on her, the weight of their judgment pressing down on her shoulders.

A few of the recruits congratulated her as they made their way to the knowledge center, but she barely heard them, her mind too distracted by everything that had happened. She didn't care much for their praise anyway—it didn't feel deserved. She had won, but it wasn't the kind of victory she had wanted. She wanted to be strong, to prove herself, to fight with honor. But today, she had fought with tricks, with strategy, with cunning.

Sitting in the knowledge center, Allaria stared out of the window, her gaze unfocused, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. The Earth passed beneath her, a blur of blue and green, but she barely noticed. The lessons for the day faded into the background, the instructor's voice a dull hum in her ears.

She wanted to be strong. She wanted to be honorable. She wanted to be the best. But today, she had learned that sometimes, being the best meant doing whatever it took to survive—even if it meant fighting without honor. And that realization left her feeling more conflicted than ever before.

When Allaria finally got back to the barracks at the end of the day, she was exhausted, every inch of her body sore and aching from the relentless combat training. She was still cautious, watching her back, her senses heightened. She had known that today's victories on the mat had put her in the crosshairs of some of her fellow recruits. She had felt their eyes on her all day, sensed the resentment radiating from them. She knew they wouldn't let it go easily.

After a quick shower, she wrapped herself in a towel and began making her way back to her bunk. The barracks were quieter than usual, most recruits already in their bunks or preparing for bed. The steam from the showers still clung to the air, making it thick and humid. Her muscles relaxed slightly from the heat, her mind finally starting to unwind after the long day.

That was when she saw them—Arturo, Ritterman, and Whitbey—waiting for her near the entrance to the barracks. Their expressions were dark, their eyes narrowed with anger and resentment. She stopped in her tracks, her pulse quickening. Her eyes darted around, looking for an exit, a way to get around them, but they had her cornered. She could feel the tension in the air, her instincts screaming at her that this wasn't going to end well.

*"Well, what's your plan now, Laskari?"* Ritterman asked, a smirk spreading across his face.

*"Let's see you get out of this,"* Arturo added, his tone dripping with mockery.

Whitbey's voice was cold as she chimed in, *"I've stabbed people for less, so they say."*

Allaria swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry. She glanced around again, looking for an opening, a way to escape. If she could just get past them, get to the other side of the room, maybe she could run for it. But every time she moved, they moved with her, cutting her off, their eyes filled with malice.

*"Listen, I'm sure..."* she started, hoping to reason with them, to talk her way out of it. She knew the rules—there was no fighting allowed outside of the training mats. If she could just remind them of that, maybe they would back off.

But before she could finish her sentence, she saw Ritterman's arm move. A second later, she felt it—a sharp, sickening crack as his fist connected with her jaw. Pain exploded through her head, radiating up into her skull, wrapping around her senses like a suffocating blanket. She stumbled backward, her vision blurring for a moment.

Then another blow came, this time to her gut. She doubled over, gasping for breath, her towel slipping from her body and falling to the floor. She was naked, exposed, her bruises from the earlier fights clearly visible on her skin. But they didn't stop.

Arturo had swept her legs out from under her, and she fell hard to the floor, her head bouncing off the cold metal. Before she could even attempt to stand, she felt a sharp kick to her ribs—crack!—the pain seared through her chest, her vision swimming with black spots.

She tried to crawl, to get away, but another kick caught her in the chest, forcing her down again, her head slamming into the ground. She couldn't breathe, the air knocked out of her lungs. She tried to say something, anything, but her jaw wouldn't move, her voice coming out in a strangled mumble.

Then, everything went dark.

When Allaria woke up, she found herself lying on a cot in a part of the station she didn't recognize. The lights were dim, the walls a dull, sterile white. Her entire body ached, a deep, throbbing pain that radiated through every muscle, every bone. Her jaw was tight and sore, her face swollen, her right eye completely shut. She could barely move, her chest wrapped tightly in bandages that restricted her movement.

She moaned as she tried to sit up, her head pounding with the effort.

*"Lay down, Laskari. You took quite a beating. You'll be alright, but you need to rest."*

She recognized the voice as her barracks instructor, Sergeant Kaylor. His voice was stern, but there was an edge of concern in it, a softness she wasn't used to hearing from him.

*"What happened?"* she asked, her words muffled, her jaw barely able to move.

*"Well, it seems not everyone likes you,"* Kaylor replied, his tone dry, almost amused.

Allaria managed a small grin, but the pain in her jaw flared, and she immediately regretted it. The throbbing pain was relentless, her entire face feeling like it was on fire.

*"We were outside of the fighting mat,"* she said slowly, her voice strained, each word a struggle. *"The rules say no fighting outside the fighting mat."*

Kaylor shook his head, a sigh escaping his lips. *"You and the rules. You know them all, don't you?"* He looked at her for a moment, his expression softening. *"Listen, I've talked with Instructor Rapadas, and he says that he'll make sure you get your studies while you recover. That way, you don't get behind. Once you're able to participate in the physical activities again, we'll see to it that you don't fall behind in that either. Now, get some rest."*

With that, Kaylor turned and left the room, the door sliding shut behind him.

Allaria lay there in silence, her mind racing despite the exhaustion that weighed her down. She could still hear Ritterman's voice in her head, still feel the hatred in his words, the malice in his eyes. She had always known that her intelligence, her ability to outsmart her opponents, made her a target. But she hadn't expected this—not the brutality, the hatred, the violence. She had thought the rules would protect her, that as long as she stayed within the boundaries, she would be safe. But she had been wrong.

The pain in her body was overwhelming, each breath sending a sharp ache through her chest. She closed her eyes, trying to block out the memory of the attack, trying to focus on anything else. But all she could think about was how vulnerable she had been, how easily they had overpowered her. She had thought she was strong, thought she could hold her own. But tonight had shown her just how wrong she had been.

As she lay there, her body battered and broken, she made a promise to herself. She would get stronger. She would train harder, push herself further. She wouldn't let this happen again. She wouldn't be vulnerable again. She would become stronger, not just in her mind, but in her body, in her spirit. She would become the soldier she needed to be, the soldier she knew she could be.

And she wouldn't let anyone, not Ritterman, not Arturo, not Whitbey, stand in her way.

Allaria's body slipped into a restless sleep, her consciousness fading in and out as the painkillers dulled the sharpest edges of her pain. Her dreams came swiftly, overtaking her as though they had been waiting for her to close her eyes, lurking in the shadows, ready to strike the moment her defenses were down.

She found herself standing in a vast, barren landscape—a place unlike any she had ever seen. The sky was dark, a swirling mass of black and red, the clouds twisting and shifting as though they were alive. The ground beneath her feet was cracked and dry, the earth scorched and

lifeless. There was no sun, no moon, no stars—just an endless void above her, a yawning abyss that seemed to stretch on forever.

She felt a presence. It was distant, yet unmistakably there—an entity far beyond her comprehension, something that defied the limits of her understanding. It was as if the air around her was alive with its awareness, an all-seeing gaze that pressed in on her from all sides, like invisible hands trying to force her to her knees. She couldn't see it, couldn't hear it, but she could feel it. It was cold and ancient, something that had existed long before her, something that would continue to exist long after she was gone.

Allaria's heart pounded in her chest, her breaths coming in ragged gasps. The landscape around her shifted, the ground beneath her feet cracking and breaking apart, the earth falling away into nothingness. She stumbled, trying to keep her balance, her eyes darting around as she looked for something—anything—to hold onto. But there was nothing. The landscape was empty, barren, devoid of life. She was alone.

Then, out of the darkness, she heard a voice. It was faint, almost like a whisper, carried on the wind that swirled around her. She couldn't understand the words, but they filled her with a sense of unease, a deep, gnawing dread that clawed at her insides. The voice was both soothing and terrifying, a contradiction that left her feeling disoriented, her head spinning as she tried to make sense of it.

The presence grew stronger, the air around her growing colder, the darkness pressing in on her. She could feel it in her bones, a chill that seeped into her very core, her body trembling as the fear took hold of her. She wanted to run, to escape, but her legs wouldn't move. She was frozen, rooted to the spot, unable to do anything but stand there, her eyes wide with terror as the presence loomed closer and closer.

She tried to scream, but no sound came out. Her voice was gone, her throat constricted, her mouth opening in a silent plea for help. The ground beneath her feet gave way, and she fell, her body plummeting into the darkness below. The wind rushed past her, the world around her blurring as she fell faster and faster, her heart pounding in her ears, her mind filled with a sense of dread that consumed her entirely.

Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. She jolted awake, her body drenched in sweat, her heart racing in her chest. The room around her was dim, the sterile white walls of the

medical bay coming into focus as her eyes adjusted to the low light. She could still feel the presence, a lingering sense of something watching her, something far away yet undeniably real. Her skin prickled, her body tense, her senses on high alert as she looked around, her eyes scanning the room for any sign that she wasn't alone.

But there was nothing. Just the hum of the ventilation system, the soft beeping of the medical equipment, the sterile smell of antiseptic hanging in the air. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself, her hands trembling as she wiped the sweat from her forehead. It was just a dream, she told herself, just a figment of her imagination, a side effect of the pain and the medication. But the feeling wouldn't leave her—that sense of dread, that cold, ancient presence that had touched her mind, leaving a mark that she couldn't shake.

She closed her eyes, trying to calm her racing heart, but the images from the dream lingered in her mind. The barren landscape, the swirling sky, the presence that had watched her from the shadows. It was all too vivid, too real, as though it had been more than just a dream. She could still feel it, that cold awareness, that sense of something vast and unknowable pressing in on her, threatening to swallow her whole.

Allaria took another deep breath, forcing herself to push the fear aside. She was stronger than this, she told herself. She had faced challenges before, she had fought and won. She wasn't going to let a dream shake her. But deep down, she knew this was different. This wasn't something she could fight, something she could outsmart or overpower. This was something beyond her, something she couldn't touch, couldn't understand. And that terrified her more than anything else.

The nurse came by to check on Allaria, her cheery demeanor almost out of place in the sterile, harsh environment of the medbay. The overhead lights cast a cold, fluorescent glow across the room, highlighting the austere white of the walls and the soft blue of the hospital gowns.

*"How are you feeling?"* the nurse asked, her tone a stark contrast to Allaria's groggy state.

*"Sore,"* Allaria muttered, her voice low and gravelly. The words came out almost in a whisper, muffled as they passed through her still bruised jaw.

*"I'm sure you are!"* the nurse responded with an upbeat cheeriness. *"You've got a few broken ribs, a broken jaw, a bruised femur, a concussion, and some other less serious injuries. But*

*you're healing up nicely. Just a few days more for the bone regeneration to fully set in, and you'll be good as new."*

To Allaria, the nurse seemed strangely optimistic. It felt like a joke to her, considering how her whole body felt like one throbbing, interconnected bruise. Every breath brought a dull ache through her ribs, and her head swam with the slightest movement. Her body felt so fragile, like a house of cards ready to collapse with one wrong touch.

She tried to twist her body slightly, attempting to reach her datalink resting on the small table beside her bed. The effort sent a jagged shock of pain through her chest, forcing her to fall back onto her pillow, her breath knocked out in a painful wheeze.

*"Here, let me,"* the nurse said, quickly handing her the datalink. *"If you need anything, just let us know. You focus on resting, alright? Try not to move too much."*

*"Thanks,"* Allaria said through gritted teeth as she took the datalink. The moment the nurse left, Allaria immediately opened the datalink, her fingers swiping across the screen. She needed a distraction. Something to take her mind off the pain, off the feeling of being weak, vulnerable.

"How did humans defeat the Gao-de on Earth?" she typed into the datalink. The device blinked with activity as the data came up on the screen.

*"Humanity was saved by sacrifice,"* the screen read. *"Using the technology of the time, humanity used nuclear weapons against the Gao-de at their staging areas."*

Staging areas, Allaria thought, her mind drifting through the haze of pain medication. Moscow, Atlanta, Beijing... Humans destroyed their own cities to drive out the Gao-de.

She searched again, her eyes scanning the information that scrolled by.

"Current Date: 12 Nov 2152."

She blinked. Had it really been three days? "Three days gone," she muttered to herself, barely believing it.

With nothing else to occupy her mind, she decided to reach out to her Knowledge instructor. The thought of falling behind made her uneasy. She sent a quick message, requesting material

to study. Within minutes, her inbox was overflowing with reading assignments and lessons, more than she could probably handle in her current state. Still, she welcomed the distraction.

Over the next week, Allaria slowly healed. The bone regeneration treatments were working better than expected, and after four days, the wires in her jaw were removed, allowing her to speak properly again. A few fellow recruits visited, their expressions a mixture of concern and curiosity.

"So, *are they still around?*" she asked her visitor, Andon, a recruit she'd sparred with a few times before.

"Yeah," he said, looking uncomfortable. *"I think some of the instructors talked to them. They got formal reprimands, I heard, but you know how it is. We don't get much detail on those things."*

Allaria's face tightened with disappointment. She had hoped that maybe, just maybe, there'd be some real consequences.

Andon offered her a weak smile. *"Hey, on the bright side, you're kind of a legend now. The rule zealot who won't back down. It's a good reputation to have, honestly. Keeps people on their toes."* He chuckled lightly.

Allaria huffed a small laugh, then winced at the pull in her ribs. *"Rules are there for a reason, Andon. They're what keeps order. Without them, we're no better than—"* She trailed off, her mind drifting to the memory of the Gao-de invasion. She didn't need to finish the sentence.

*"I heard,"* Andon continued, his voice lower now, *"that they almost got kicked out for what they did. But with all the whispers of Gao-de sightings, they're keeping everyone on deck just in case. You know, just rumors for now. But I guess they don't want to lose any potential soldiers."*

Allaria's heart tightened at his words. The Gao-de. After all these years. She shook her head, dismissing the thoughts. Rumors, she reminded herself. No use worrying about them now.

*"Thanks for coming by, Andon. I appreciate it."*

"Anytime," he replied before he left, leaving Allaria alone with her thoughts.

She sighed, her mind restless, her body aching to move. *"I've got to get out of this bed,"* she muttered under her breath.



The medic, overhearing her, walked over and looked her up and down, considering. *"Alright, I suppose you can get up today,"* he said, smiling. *"You must be losing your mind here."*

Allaria smiled faintly, grateful for the permission. It wasn't just the bed that was driving her crazy—it was the inactivity, the helplessness. She carefully swung her legs over the side of the bed, putting one foot on the floor, then the other. Her ribs protested, a sharp ache spreading over her left side and into her spine.

*"Those ribs are still tender, but they're mostly healed,"* the medic said, offering her a supportive arm as she found her balance.

Allaria took a deep breath, steadying herself. The pain was still there, but it was manageable. She slowly stood up, feeling the stiffness in her muscles, the soreness from the week of immobility. She stretched slightly, testing her body's limits, then jumped up and down a few times. Her bones held. She smiled to herself, a mix of relief and determination washing over her.

*"Just don't leave the medbay until we sign your release, alright?"* the medic reminded her.

*"Fine,"* Allaria replied, just happy to be on her feet again.

*"Take these,"* the medic said, handing her a small bottle of pills. *"Twice a day, for the pain. But take it easy, alright?"*

*"Sure thing,"* Allaria responded absently, already walking to the end of the room, her body slowly waking up again. She could feel every ache, every strain in her bones, but it felt good to be moving, to not be confined.

As she walked, she considered everything she had learned—the history of the war, the destruction of cities, the whispers of new Gao-de sightings. She couldn't help but feel a growing sense of unease. There were too many pieces, and they didn't fit together neatly. Something was missing. Something they hadn't seen yet.

But for now, she was grateful to be on her feet. To be able to think and move, to have a goal again—even if it was just getting through another day of recovery.

## CHAPTER 5

One of the Gao-de turned, its strange, glowing eyes locking directly onto Allaria. The feeling that surged through her was unlike anything she had ever experienced — a bone-chilling, visceral fear, as if the creature's gaze pierced into her very soul. Her stomach twisted, and for a moment, it felt as though the weight of the universe had been dropped onto her shoulders. Shaking herself out of the trance, she steadied her rifle and took aim, forcing herself to breathe, even as her heartbeat pounded in her ears. She zeroed in on the creature's forehead and squeezed the trigger. The recoil snapped her back to the moment, the creature's body collapsing in an almost dreamlike slow motion. The Gao-de crumpled to the ground, its lifeless form slumping heavily against the steel flooring. Relief mixed with adrenaline, but there was no time to dwell on it.

The blast doors of the bay had fully shut by now, the heavy metal groaning as they locked into place, sealing the room and cutting off all possible exit routes. Nothing could come in or out, not until they completed the lockdown procedures. The hiss of hydraulic steam echoed, adding to the surreal sense of isolation. Allaria's eyes darted to her left just in time to see another Gao-de go down, a neat shot through the chest from her partner.

"*Nice shot!*" Allaria shouted over the cacophony of the firefight, her voice cracking from the strain.

"*You too!*" her partner, Layna, called back without taking her eyes off her next target, her finger still squeezing the trigger in controlled bursts.

Two Gao-de remained. One of them moved suddenly, its body coiling like a spring before launching itself upwards. In a single bound, it cleared the ten feet from the flight deck to the catwalk. It almost floated as it rose, as if gravity itself had lost its grip on the monstrous figure. Its fluidity, its silence, made Allaria's blood run cold. Up close, the Gao-de was even more terrifying—a towering figure clad in an otherworldly exoskeleton, its dull metallic sheen barely reflecting the emergency lights flashing overhead. In its hand, it carried a blade that seemed alive, humming with an eerie blue energy.

Allaria locked eyes with the Gao-de, and for a moment, her vision blurred. The world around her seemed to dim, the edges of her perception closing in as if she was being sucked into a void. It felt like the creature was reaching into her mind, probing her thoughts, seeking her fears. She clenched her jaw, struggling to resist the crushing weight of its psychic assault. "Focus," she whispered to herself, her voice trembling.

She snapped back into action, just in time to see the Gao-de's blade begin its arc. Instinct took over—Allaria dropped onto her back, rolling off the catwalk. The blade sliced silently through the space she had just occupied, its edge almost vibrating with some alien energy. When it struck the catwalk railing, it made an electrifying sound, like a live wire snapping against metal. Her tether jerked her to a stop, the harness digging painfully into her ribs. She grunted, pushing off the wall with her feet, her body swinging in a wide arc underneath the catwalk.

As she swung out, Allaria raised her rifle. She aimed at the Gao-de's back, her eyes locking onto the weak points in the creature's armor. She fired, each shot landing true. The Gao-de convulsed as the rounds punched into its lower back, slipping beneath the armor plating. It let

out a guttural, almost mechanical groan, then crumpled forward, collapsing onto the catwalk at Layna's feet.

*"One left!"* Layna shouted, her voice edged with adrenaline, her eyes searching for the remaining enemy.

The team kept their weapons trained on the alien shuttle, rounds hammering the side of the craft to keep any survivors pinned. Allaria scanned the bay, her eyes darting over the scene. She unhooked her tether and dropped the few feet to the flight deck, landing with a dull thud, her knees absorbing the impact. Dust and smoke hung in the air, lit by the flashing red lights. Somewhere in the distance, she could hear the distant rumble of the ship's systems, the low thrum of the engines echoing through the deck plating.

"Hold your fire!" Allaria yelled, her voice sharp and commanding, cutting through the noise. The firing stopped immediately, the sudden silence almost deafening. Even her commanding officer held back, watching her closely but giving her the lead. There was a moment—just a heartbeat—where everything felt frozen, as if the entire universe was holding its breath.

Another teammate, Corin, climbed down a ladder to the flight deck, landing beside her, his rifle at the ready. He said nothing, but his presence was a silent reassurance. Allaria nodded at him, then turned her attention to the alien craft. The shuttle loomed over them, a dark, angular shape that seemed to absorb the light around it. Its surface was slick and polished, etched with glowing symbols that pulsed with an unnatural rhythm.

Allaria moved quietly, her boots making barely a sound on the metal deck as she approached the shuttle. She could see through the narrow window—shadows shifting inside, but no sign of movement. She slung her rifle over her shoulder and drew her pistol from its holster on her thigh. The smaller weapon felt more precise in her hand, more intimate. She kept her breath steady, her senses sharp.

As she rounded the back of the shuttle, she saw it—the last Gao-de, lying in the open doorway. Its chest rose and fell in shallow, labored breaths, a pool of blue blood spreading out beneath it. Its eyes, those haunting, glowing eyes, stared up at her, filled with a mixture of rage and something else—resignation, perhaps. Allaria didn't hesitate. She leveled her pistol at the creature's head, her finger tightening on the trigger.

For a split second, she wondered if it understood her, if it knew what was about to happen. But then she pulled the trigger. The shot echoed in the silence, and the Gao-de's body went completely limp, its eyes dulling as the last traces of life faded away. Blue blood trickled from the wound, glistening in the dim emergency lighting.

Allaria took a deep breath, holstering her pistol. Corin stepped up beside her, placing a hand on her shoulder, a silent acknowledgment of what they had just been through. She looked up at him, her face smeared with grime and sweat, but her eyes were resolute. The immediate threat was over, but the war was far from won.

*"We did it,"* she said, her voice barely above a whisper, more to herself than to anyone else.

*"Yeah,"* Corin replied, his eyes scanning the bay. *"For now."*

Allaria and Corin pulled the heavy creature out of the craft, its alien armor clinking on the metal floor as they dragged it clear. Its rough, scaled skin was unlike anything she had imagined. Allaria exchanged a quick glance with Corin, both of them quietly acknowledging the significance of what they'd just accomplished. She looked back inside the craft as the rest of her team made their way over, their boots clattering on the surface of the landing deck.

Allaria had never seen an actual Gao-de ship before. Only sketches and renderings made from second-hand accounts and recovered tech fragments, but never the real thing. She ran her gloved fingers over the smooth, iridescent interior walls. It almost felt alive, as if the ship itself pulsed with a faint rhythm. She wondered briefly if she might be the first human to step foot inside one. But the thought quickly faded, replaced by her knowledge from training—how humanity had reverse-engineered Gao-de technology. Someone had been inside these before.

*"All clear!"* Allaria called back to the others, her voice echoing slightly in the cramped compartment of the alien ship. She reached up to the overhead weapon rack and pulled out a Gao-de rifle. Its design was bizarre, a mix of sleek curves and ridges, with a stock that folded inward almost organically. The weight felt strange in her hands, lighter than she expected. The alien material seemed to shimmer, its colors shifting ever so subtly as if adapting to the surroundings.

*"Interesting,"* she muttered to herself, running her fingers along the weapon's surface. Her eyes drifted further along the weapon racks, and there she found something that made her pause—swords. The blades were of varying lengths, each sheathed in intricate scabbards that

appeared both ceremonial and practical. The hilts were decorated with designs she couldn't understand—symbols that seemed to swim when looked at too long.

*“Very interesting,”* Allaria whispered, almost in awe. These weren't just tools of war, they were something more, something symbolic. She knew that the Gao-de culture placed value on hand-to-hand combat, a fact often dismissed by humans who saw them only as cold, alien invaders. There was a history here, something almost honorable beneath the menace.

Before she could delve deeper into the mystery of the ship's contents, First Lieutenant Tenore appeared, his presence marked by the stern look of someone always evaluating the next move. He walked around the craft, surveying the damage it had done to the deck. There were deep gouges in the steel, charred black where the ship had skidded across the landing zone, narrowly missing their shuttles. His eyes went to the Gao-de ship itself—untouched, still pristine despite the crash.

*“Good work,”* Tenore said, giving Allaria a brief nod before his gaze turned toward the ship's inner compartment. She could tell he was impressed. The alien vessel's durability meant there might be valuable tech to scavenge, something that could turn the tide of their struggle.

Allaria felt the vibrations beneath her boots intensify. The Atticus was still firing, its railguns roaring with each shot. The ship's counter-boosters fired intermittently, stabilizing the vessel after each recoil. She frowned. That meant there were more targets still active—the battle wasn't over. Her stomach tightened with unease.

She stepped out of the alien ship, moving quickly toward a narrow window set beside the blast doors. Beyond the thick, reinforced glass, she caught sight of the void—the vast emptiness of space filled with streaks of light as energy weapons discharged. The alien vessel out there was much larger than the Atticus, its dark silhouette illuminated briefly by the flashes of its own weaponry.

Allaria swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry. It was one thing to face a downed ship, its occupants scattered or dead. It was entirely another to see that their enemy still had the upper hand out there, and that humanity's tenuous grip on survival was hanging by a thread. She could feel the enormity of it—the lives depending on them, the fragile line between victory and utter defeat.

The electronic voice echoed over the comms once again, "Hull breach on deck four. Hull breach on deck four."

"*Shit*," Tenore muttered, his eyes darting across the console. The weight of the situation pressed down on his shoulders like a ton of neutronium. "*I have an idea if you guys are up for it, but we don't have much time.*"

"*Do we get to kill more Gao-de?*" Allaria asked, her voice almost hopeful. There was something cold and determined in her expression—a fire that had grown during this battle

"*We'll see*," Tenore replied.

"*Then let's go. What's the plan?*" asked Karega, wiping grime and sweat from his forehead, trying to mask the anxiety tightening his voice.

Tenore turned to them, the expression on his face leaving no room for argument. "Here's what I have in mind. I can fly most small craft, so let's take a shuttle and see about rescuing any survivors on or near the Bastani. We'll need someone to stay here and close the blast doors behind us."

"I'll do it," Stevens volunteered. Her voice trembled slightly, and her hands still shook from the last firefight. It was clear that Stevens had barely managed to keep it together.

Allaria looked over at Stevens, concern written on her face. She didn't seem like she was cut out for this—not today, at least. Staying back was likely the best call for everyone involved.

"*We'll let you know when to open the blast doors again, okay?*"

Stevens swallowed, then nodded, raising a shaky thumb in approval.

"*Let's move!*" Tenore barked. The rest of the team scrambled toward the shuttle with a large "004" painted on its side. They piled in, each one taking their designated stations. Allaria made a quick detour back to the alien ship—the one they had just cleared out—grabbing a Gao-de rifle. She wasn't about to go on a rescue mission unarmed, not with what they had just been through.

She rushed back and boarded the shuttle, strapping herself in. The shuttle's thrusters roared to life, lifting off the broken flight deck as the blast doors in front of them started opening. The

metallic groaning of the doors seemed to mirror the mood inside the shuttle—tense and heavy with the weight of uncertainty.

The second the blast doors parted, Tenore cursed under his breath. *“This is going to be a lot rougher than I thought.”*

The Gao-de ship fired its energy weapons again, bright flashes of purplish energy cutting across the blackness of space. They struck the Atticus, causing its shield to ripple, glowing bright and flickering at points. The shield absorbed most of the impact, but some energy crackled across the ship’s hull, leaving scorched trails in its wake. The Atticus was getting pummeled—there was no telling how much longer the shields could hold.

Allaria silently slipped into an envirosuit. If—no, when—things went sideways, she wasn’t going to be caught off guard. Seeing her getting suited up, the LT turned and spoke to the rest of the crew, *“Everyone, envirosuits on—now. I’m not taking any chances.”* The rest of the team hurried to do the same, their faces pale in the dim cabin lights. After a tense minute, everyone was sealed and ready.

The shuttle detached from the bay, and Tenore piloted them away from the Atticus with a steady hand. An announcement crackled over the comms system from the Atticus commander, approving their impromptu rescue mission. “Just keep us updated on your progress, Lieutenant. We need all the help we can get.”

As they flew out, Tenore kept an eye on the overview scanner, checking for any drones or smaller ships—anything that might decide to make them a target. Allaria looked out the side window, her eyes tracing over the bright yellow markings against the dull gray of the Atticus’s hull. The damage was worse than she thought. They were putting up a fight, but it looked like a losing battle—scorch marks and breaches were spread across the ship’s surface like a disease.

*“Holy hell,”* someone muttered behind her.

The Gao-de ship loomed in the distance, an ominous silhouette against the stars. Its organic lines, almost reminiscent of deep-sea creatures, glowed faintly with a purplish light. It was easily twice the size of the Atticus, an intimidating presence that seemed completely out of place compared to human ship designs. The Gao-de ship’s weaponry clearly prioritized spreading the damage over the entire surface—testing, weakening—like they were toying with their prey.



The comms crackled again. It was the Atticus commander, his voice strained. *"What's the situation report from your vantage point, First Lieutenant?"*

Tenore responded, his tone clipped, *"Not the greatest. Your shield has weak points, and the Gao-de are spreading their fire evenly to weaken it. If I had to guess, once the shield drops, they'll concentrate fire on a single point."*

*"Roger that,"* the commander acknowledged, urgency creeping into his voice. *"We need to hold out for five more minutes. We're down to twelve percent shield strength, rerouting auxiliary power now."*

*"Five minutes,"* Allaria muttered to herself. *"What could happen in five minutes?"* Her eyes narrowed as she glanced toward the burning Bastani.

The shuttle was closing in on the wrecked ship, and the sight before them was grim. Fires still raged in sections of the Bastani, its small frame buckling under the heat. A few lights still flickered desperately—a sign of a compromised but not completely extinguished power source. Through the haze of smoke and fire, Allaria could make out figures in envirosuits still moving—trying to fight the flames, working tirelessly, despite the chaos.

*"Looks like there are survivors,"* she called out, her eyes locking onto the movement. *"We're going in. Brace yourselves."*

Tenore guided the shuttle alongside the wreck, using the thrusters to adjust their position with pinpoint precision. *"Get ready to latch onto the hull,"* he said, and Allaria stood up, gripping her rifle. The LT was already up beside her, nodding in agreement.

*"We're not leaving anyone behind today,"* he said, and the whole team nodded in silence, determination solidifying their resolve.

The shuttle's mechanical arm extended, gripping onto the Bastani's battered hull with a heavy clunk, locking both ships in place.

The "LT" got on the comms and tried to contact the Bastani crew, his voice steady despite the tension, *"This is Lieutenant Harlan, shuttle from the drone destroyer Atticus. Do you copy? Make your way to your emergency hatch for rescue."*

No response.

He repeated it once. Twice. Three times. Silence answered back, the faint static of the comms the only sound. LT's brow furrowed under his helmet. He looked back at the few members of the impromptu rescue team seated behind him, their faces partially hidden behind visors, each bearing an expression ranging from anxiety to outright dread.

*"Who wants to visit the Bastani?"*

A tense pause filled the cabin as each member glanced at the others, hesitant to volunteer. The silence stretched until finally, Allaria cleared her throat and spoke up, her voice shaky but resolute. *"I'll go, Lieutenant."*

LT gave her a curt nod, respect touching his gaze. *"Fine, head to the airlock. I'll align the shuttle for access."*

Allaria swallowed her nerves, adjusted her envirosuit, and moved to the airlock at the rear of the shuttle. Her hands trembled as she checked her tether twice, securing herself to the craft. She forced herself to focus, taking in a deep breath before nodding to LT through the glass panel of the shuttle door.

The shuttle shuddered slightly as it maneuvered into position, LT aligning it perfectly over the Bastani's emergency hatch. He initiated the airlock sequence, and with a deep groan, the outer door of the shuttle opened, revealing the dark abyss of space beyond. Allaria exhaled, her breath fogging her visor momentarily before she stepped out, the tether stretching taut behind her.

With cautious but determined movements, she made her way to the Bastani's emergency hatch, her boots magnetizing her to the surface. She tried to pull the hatch open, but it wouldn't budge. Sweat began to bead on her forehead despite the cold void surrounding her.

Frustration mounting, Allaria drew her pistol, rapping it hard against the hull of the Bastani. The clang echoed dully in her helmet, but there was still no response from within. She glanced back at the shuttle, knowing that time was running out for the crew.

She called over comms, "What do you want me to do, LT?"

*"Not sure, really,"* LT responded, a hint of frustration in his voice. *"Come on back inside the shuttle. We'll figure something else out."*

Allaria hesitated, looking back at the silent Bastani. She imagined the crew inside, potentially struggling against smoke, fire, and diminishing oxygen. Could they even hear her attempts to contact them? Gritting her teeth, she pushed off from the hatch, making her way back to the shuttle's airlock..

Thinking back to what her Sergeant had told her just a few hours earlier, Allaria spoke up over comms before re-entering the cabin. *"LT, let's say for example, the crew of the Bastani didn't have any fires to put out. Do you think they'd be less distracted?"*

*"Well... yeah, I assume so,"* LT replied, an inquisitive edge to his tone, as if he was unsure where she was going with this.

The two other members of the rescue team rolled their eyes. *"Here we go again. This'll be good,"* one of them muttered sarcastically, nudging the other.

Allaria ignored the comment, her focus unwavering. *"I can see they're all wearing their envirosuits. What if we open one of the windows for them? That'll blow the fire out and get their attention. They should be fine as long as their suits are on properly."*

LT pursed his lips, clearly skeptical but lacking a better solution. He glanced at the other members of the team before nodding reluctantly. *"Okay, but no guns!"*

Allaria smirked. *"No guns, got it."* She thought for a second, then grabbed her pistol again, shrugging slightly. *"Well, maybe just a little gun."*

She made her way over to one of the Bastani's windows, close to where she thought the crew might be located. She banged on it with the butt of her gun, but still received no response. The glass was thicker than she anticipated.

*"Alright,"* she muttered to herself, her voice barely audible over her breathing. She looked back at the shuttle. LT was watching her, a concerned expression etched across his face through the small window.

*"I need to shoot out this window. It's the only thing that'll work,"* she stated firmly over comms.

A beat of silence passed before LT's voice crackled in her ear, *"Fine, but be careful!"*

Allaria nodded, bracing herself. She took aim and fired a single shot. The window cracked, spiderwebbing under the force of the bullet. The projectile ricocheted off, narrowly missing her shoulder as it careened into the void. She repositioned, taking a safer angle before firing again. Another shot—another crack. The integrity of the glass was failing, but it still held.

Deciding to finish the job manually. Raising the butt of her gun, she slammed it against the weakened glass. Once, twice—the third hit shattered it. The glass exploded outward, shards twinkling like stars as they were cast off into space.

Instantly, the oxygen from inside the Bastani vented out, carrying with it the fire that had likely engulfed part of the interior. Allaria squinted through her visor, her eyes catching movement. Figures in envirosuits were scrambling, now clearly aware of their rapidly worsening situation.

*“This is Lieutenant Harlan, shuttle from the drone destroyer Atticus. Do you copy? Make your way to your emergency hatch for rescue,”* LT’s voice echoed over the open comms.

No response still, but Allaria could see the crew now. Four figures in total, each moving frantically. One of them finally looked out of the shattered window, locking eyes with her. She waved, gesturing emphatically towards the hatch. The crew member hesitated, clearly confused. Allaria cursed under her breath. How could it be this difficult? Their ship was on fire; escape should be their first instinct.

She began gesturing more exaggeratedly, pointing repeatedly towards the hatch, banging on the bulkhead to grab their attention. Finally, comprehension seemed to dawn on them. One by one, the crew began making their way towards the emergency hatch. Allaria floated alongside them, guiding and assisting where needed as they clambered out of the Bastani, their movements clumsy and sluggish in the heavy envirosuits.

The first crew member reached the shuttle, LT extending an arm to pull them in. One by one, they made it across, Allaria staying behind to ensure no one was left behind. She cast a final glance into the Bastani, the darkened, scorched interior a haunting reminder of how close they’d come to losing these lives.

She exhaled, a sense of relief washing over her as she made her way back to the shuttle. Once inside, she sealed the airlock, giving LT a thumbs-up through the window. The pressure equalized, and the inner door slid open, revealing the shaken but safe crew of the Bastani huddled inside the shuttle.

LT turned to Allaria as she stepped in, a rare smile touching his lips. *“Nice work, Allaria. Risky, but it paid off.”*

Allaria nodded, exhaustion finally catching up with her. *“Just doing what needed to be done, sir.”* She glanced at the rescued crew, their eyes wide with gratitude, and felt a warmth spread through her chest. This was why she was here—to save lives, no matter the cost.

LT gave her a pat on the shoulder before turning back to the controls. *“Alright team, let's get these people home.”*

Just as the bastani crew finished climbing into the shuttle, another ship arrived on scene. It was the Einhorn! Allaria watched through the shuttle window as it came to a stop about four kilometers to the starboard side of the Atticus. The colossal form of the Einhorn seemed to cast a shadow even across the void of space. Its sleek, dark hull glimmered under the scattered beams of the distant star, and its unmistakable silhouette radiated a formidable presence that left no doubt about its capabilities. Allaria felt a wave of hope and awe sweep over her, mingled with a profound sense of relief.

The Einhorn was an enormous ship, larger than almost anything else in the fleet. As it came to a halt, it seemed to grow even more daunting. Before it had fully stopped, the ship began deploying its arsenal—the main guns extending outward like colossal, mechanized limbs poised for destruction. A shiver went down Allaria's spine, as she realized the sheer force that was about to be unleashed.

The first volley from its massive railguns fired, the flash of light almost blinding through the shuttle's narrow window slit. Allaria flinched instinctively. In an instant, the enemy ship's shields collapsed under the unimaginable force of the blast, fading from a glowing protective barrier to an invisible nothingness. There was no time for the Gao-de ship to react. It was as if their shields, once a shimmering symbol of defense, had simply been erased from existence.

The second volley followed barely a breath later. Six powerful slugs accelerated to mind-bending speeds slammed into the Gao-de vessel with devastating precision. The force of impact was beyond anything Allaria had ever witnessed. The railgun rounds ripped through the alien ship like paper, creating six perfect, smoking holes through its hull. Through the rapidly spreading clouds of debris, she could see bits of the alien ship's superstructure break apart and

scatter. Whole segments of the ship cracked and splintered, spinning away from the vessel in wild, uncontrolled trajectories, tiny against the infinite void.

Allaria could feel her heart pounding as she watched the aftermath unfold. She glanced at the rest of the bastani crew—they were transfixed, staring at the display of power that the Einhorn had brought to bear. The sheer dominance was staggering; they all knew they had just narrowly escaped an enemy that now seemed to be no match at all.

Within seconds, the Gao-de ship was reduced to a twisted, crumbling wreck, the remaining portions of its hull lit by flickering, dying lights as if the vessel itself was gasping for breath. Then, almost as if in resignation, the ship erupted in a ball of blue and red fire, a cataclysmic end that illuminated the darkness of space. The shockwave rippled outward, a silent expression of destruction that shook their shuttle gently, and sent a cloud of debris expanding slowly outward.

The sight was mesmerizing. Bits and scraps of the enemy ship scattered across the area, shimmering as they caught the light of the distant sun, turning and glinting in all directions like a morbid rain of stars. For a moment, Allaria couldn't help but think of how quickly things had changed—only minutes before, they had been facing certain destruction, running from an enemy ship that was now nothing but dust and shattered metal.

Allaria exhaled, realizing she'd been holding her breath. The Einhorn had not just arrived—it had saved them, crushed the enemy, and restored hope. She looked out at the debris field, the twisted remains of their pursuer, and marveled at the power that had saved them. Though they were still a long way from safety, with their shuttle barely operational, she knew with the Einhorn at their side, their chances had just significantly improved.

Back in the Atticus shuttle bay, Allaria leaned against the railing of the catwalk, looking down at the bustle below. The shuttle bay had transformed in a matter of minutes. Engineers in their orange jumpsuits, tech specialists, security personnel, and medical teams moved with purpose around the remains of the Gao-de craft. The air smelled faintly of burnt metal, a reminder of the battle they had barely survived.

She watched as the two men and woman examined the alien body, the medical crew cautiously moving it onto a stretcher while the tech specialists scanned it with handheld devices. The alien's armored suit, dark and angular, had an otherworldly quality—foreign in every sense. One

of the techs gingerly picked up the soldier's weapon, an unfamiliar energy rifle that looked almost menacingly organic in its design, like it was somehow alive. For a moment, Allaria felt a pang of regret again for not using the alien rifle when she had the chance. In a way, she thought, it might have been her chance to prove herself, to show that she was capable of facing the enemy head-on.

She sighed, shaking her head, trying to push the thoughts away. It wasn't just about weapons or moments of action. Today had been more complicated than that—it was about teamwork, survival, and the realization of her own vulnerabilities. Her "LT" had praised her, told her she had a bright future if she could keep herself focused. But what if she couldn't? The doubts gnawed at her as she looked at the organized chaos in the bay, the repairs being carried out, the engineers scurrying to stabilize the damaged systems. This wasn't a holovid where the heroes emerged victorious without a scratch. The Atticus had held the line, yes, but it was bruised and battered, and so was she—inside, at least.

Suddenly there was a noise reverberating through the entire bay, and a voice spoke over the loudspeakers. "*Attention: Admiral Lars has boarded the Atticus. All personnel, prepare for inspection.*" The words echoed in Allaria's ears, and she straightened almost instinctively, pushing away her inner turmoil. She looked down at her disheveled uniform, stained and dusty from her earlier efforts, and tried to make herself look a bit more presentable.

Below her, the personnel snapped to attention, making way as the Admiral entered the bay. Admiral Lars was a figure Allaria had only ever heard about—a tactical genius with a legendary reputation, known for his unyielding sense of duty and his keen eye for detail. Now, as he strode into the bay, she could see why. He moved with confidence, his presence commanding respect, his uniform pristine and medals glinting under the shuttle bay lights. He nodded to Commander Esser, who had stepped forward to greet him, their voices low but carrying an undertone of urgency and mutual understanding.

Allaria watched, taking it all in—the Admiral inspecting the damaged Gao-de craft, nodding as the tech specialists reported their findings. He paused by the alien corpse, his eyes narrowing slightly as he studied it, his expression unreadable. He seemed to notice everything, and for a brief second, Allaria found herself holding her breath as his gaze swept up to the catwalk where she stood. She quickly looked away, hoping he hadn't seen her standing there idly.

"Attention to detail, discipline, and resilience," the Admiral's voice boomed suddenly, reaching all corners of the bay. "That is what has kept the Atticus in this fight. And that is what will keep her in the fights to come." His eyes seemed to pierce through everyone present, a silent challenge that Allaria felt directed at her, too. She took a deep breath, feeling a mix of fear and determination settle within her. Maybe she still wasn't sure of herself, maybe she still had a lot to learn—but if there was one thing she could do, it was to keep standing, to keep fighting, just like the Atticus.

The Admiral's inspection moved on, and Allaria took one last look at the activity in the bay before turning away. There was still a lot of work to do, and she wasn't about to let her doubts keep her from doing her part. The Atticus needed her, and for now, that was enough. She adjusted her uniform, held her head up a little higher, and headed towards her duty station, ready to face whatever else the day had in store.

Before Allaria could leave the shuttle bay, her 'LT' intercepted her again, a stern expression on his face. "Allaria, make sure that uniform is cleaned up before your next shift," he ordered, glancing pointedly at the blue-stained mess across her chest and sleeves.

Allaria looked down, only just now taking in the state of her uniform. Thick splatters of blue, alien blood had soaked through the fabric, drying into a sticky, foul-smelling mess. The bright blue contrasted violently against the dark uniform, and she wrinkled her nose in disgust. The alien blood had an acrid, almost metallic scent, and she had no idea how difficult it would be to wash out. She groaned under her breath, her lips curling in a look of utter repulsion.

"*Absolutely gross!*" she muttered aloud, earning her a chuckle from one of the retrieval crew members nearby. The woman, who was busy cataloging parts of the destroyed Gao-de craft, gave Allaria a knowing smile.

"*First time dealing with alien guts, huh?*" the crew member said, her tone lightly teasing. "*Just try not to think about what it might do to your laundry,*" she added, giving Allaria a playful wink.

Allaria gave a weary grin. "*Thanks for the advice, I'll keep that in mind,*" she replied sarcastically, shaking her head. She tried to wipe off some of the drying blood with the back of her hand, but it only seemed to smear it around more, leaving a bluish streak on her glove. She sighed—it was no use, she was going to need a serious deep clean for this mess.



The 'LT' walked by again, his eyes narrowing at the sight of her still in the shuttle bay. "*Allaria, quit dawdling. Get that uniform sorted and report back to me after. Understood?*"

After a quick uniform change in the adjacent locker room, Allaria was back at her duty station in no time. She took a deep breath, feeling somewhat refreshed as she settled in. As the admiral made his way across the shuttle bay, the atmosphere was tense. The crew stood at attention, maintaining a respectful silence while the admiral conducted his inspection. The officers left the shuttle bay through the lower hatch, following the admiral's lead. Up until that point, the other crew members in the bay were utterly silent, but once the officers left, the noise level slowly picked up again, growing into the usual symphony of activity.

Allaria scanned the area, taking in the commotion. The shuttle bay had turned back into a bustling hive of engineers, technicians, and drones working to assess the damage and conduct repairs. It was almost overwhelming—so many people, so many moving parts. The clangs and whirs of machinery filled the air, and the overlapping chatter of voices added to the chaos. Allaria quickly decided that the best way to keep herself focused was to stick to her assignment—keeping watch over the main entry and exit hatch to the rest of the ship. She had been assigned as a security presence in the bay, and if someone unauthorized tried to gain entry, she would be ready.

She stood on the catwalk, her gaze fixed firmly on the hatch, observing the ebb and flow of personnel entering and exiting. Time seemed to stretch on as she watched, her senses on high alert, though nothing out of the ordinary seemed to happen. The minutes dragged, and an hour passed with no change. Allaria had only slept for two hours in the last forty, and the activity in the bay was almost hypnotic, the constant motion making it difficult to stay sharp. She was starting to think that maybe her vigilance was unneeded—until she saw him.

A figure entered the shuttle bay, catching her attention immediately. The man wore a dark robe, the fabric flowing around him as he moved. Allaria narrowed her eyes, a flicker of recognition sparking in her mind. It was the same man from the elevator earlier, the one who had given her an uneasy feeling. She tensed, her instincts kicking in. Something wasn't right.

"*Stop there!*" she commanded, her voice cutting through the noise of the bay. The technicians nearby glanced over, their attention drawn by the sudden confrontation. Allaria started down the metal steps from the catwalk, her gaze never leaving the robed man. "*ID card, please, and access authorization proof is needed,*" she demanded, her tone firm.

The man paused, his head tilting slightly as he looked up at her, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips. *"You're the girl from the elevator earlier, right?"* he said, his voice carrying a slight snark that grated on her nerves.

Allaria ignored the comment as she stepped onto the deck, closing the distance between them. *"That's right. We met earlier. But I'm sorry, I can't let you into this shuttle bay without proper authorization. This is currently a secure scene,"* she responded, her voice carrying across the bay, loud enough for half of the technicians to hear her. She wanted witnesses—if things went south, she didn't want it to be her word against his. The tension in the shuttle bay seemed to rise, several heads turning in their direction.

The man sighed, rolling his eyes slightly. *"Alright, alright. You are quite persistent. Here's my authorization,"* he said, his tone suggesting he found the situation more amusing than serious. He reached into his robes and pulled out a data card, handing it to her.

Allaria took the card, quickly inserting it into her datalink. The datapad's screen flickered to life, displaying the information she needed. *"Rohith, Tulek - Age 51, Class 4 Security Clearance, Xenanthropology, PhD,"* she read aloud, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinized the data. Everything seemed to check out, but that didn't do much to settle her unease. What was a xenanthropologist doing in the shuttle bay, and why now, in the aftermath of a battle?

She handed the data card back, her expression still guarded. *"Alright, Dr. Tulek. Your clearance checks out. But I'll be keeping an eye on you while you're here. This is still a restricted area, and I have my orders."*

The man—Dr. Rohith—smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes. *"Of course, Officer. I wouldn't expect anything less,"* he said, his tone almost mocking. He tucked the card back into his robes, his gaze lingering on her for a moment before he turned and walked deeper into the shuttle bay, his robes flowing behind him.

Allaria didn't appreciate his attitude, and in a slip of the tongue, she spoke up again. *"Thank you, sir. I apologize for the inconvenience. We have strict rules for these things. I hope you understand. You're good to go but you'll have to check back here with me before you leave."*

Dr. Rohith nodded in agreement and quickly walked towards the shuttle, mumbling the whole way. Allaria couldn't quite make out what he was saying, but she assumed it was about her. She found him peculiar. He seemed frustrated or upset about something. What is there to be upset

about? she thought. This is a researcher's dream! She watched the hatch as she had before, but now her attention was firmly focused on the researcher. Something about him felt off, considering the situation.

Dr. Rohith moved to the shuttle and entered through the rear hatch. He wasted no time, immediately barking orders to the data analysts nearby. His voice carried through the shuttle bay, sharp and demanding. Allaria frowned, her suspicion deepening as she listened. She slowly made her way back up to the catwalk, where she could maintain a better vantage point, her eyes trained on the scene below.

*"Get out of my way!"* he yelled at one of the analysts, his frustration evident. The analyst, a young man with a nervous expression, scurried away, his face flushing with embarrassment. He shot a cautious glance towards Allaria, almost as if seeking reassurance. Allaria gave a slight nod in his direction, silently acknowledging the tension.

Dr. Rohith pulled out several scanning instruments, the devices beeping and whirring as he ran them over the hull of the alien shuttle. He worked with a kind of aggressive precision, his movements abrupt and forceful. It struck Allaria as odd—most researchers she had seen in action treated their work with almost reverent care, but not Dr. Rohith. It was as if he was in a race against time, or maybe as if he was angry with the ship itself.

Allaria kept her gaze fixed on him, her instincts on high alert. Something about the way he carried himself, the hurried motions, the barking of orders—it all felt wrong. She shifted her stance on the catwalk, crossing her arms over her chest. Below, the analysts exchanged wary glances, clearly uneasy under Dr. Rohith's commands.

*"I need these readings now!"* he shouted, his voice echoing through the shuttle bay. The analysts scrambled to comply, their hands moving quickly over their datapads as they tried to keep up with his demands. One of the analysts, a woman with dark hair tied back in a tight bun, hesitated for a moment before stepping closer to the doctor, her voice barely audible as she attempted to ask a question.

Dr. Rohith waved her off impatiently, barely even glancing at her. "No questions! Just do what I asked!" he snapped. The woman recoiled slightly, her face falling as she stepped back, her eyes dropping to the floor. Allaria felt a surge of irritation at his treatment of the crew. Whatever his clearance was, it didn't give him the right to treat the team like this.

Allaria leaned over the railing slightly, her gaze narrowing as she studied Dr. Rohith's behavior. She made a mental note to report his actions to her superior officer later. Something was definitely not right here, and she had no intention of letting it slide. The doctor was up to something, and until she figured out what it was, she wasn't going to let her guard down for a second.

She watched as Dr. Rohith moved to the interior of the shuttle, disappearing from view for a moment. The analysts continued their work, visibly more relaxed now that his immediate presence was out of sight. Allaria took a deep breath, trying to push aside her exhaustion—the last 40 hours had been relentless, with barely two hours of sleep, and it was starting to take a toll on her focus. But she couldn't afford to let her guard down, not now.

Dr. Rohith reappeared moments later, a datapad in his hand, his expression intense. He didn't look up at the analysts, nor did he acknowledge Allaria on the catwalk above. Instead, he seemed to be absorbed in whatever data he had gathered, his eyes scanning the screen with a kind of manic determination. Allaria watched him carefully, every instinct telling her that whatever was going on here was far from ordinary.

*Another hour of this, then I'm off duty, Allaria reminded herself. Can't wait for a hot shower. I feel like I've been in these clothes for ages! Plus, I'm ready for some real sleep.* She kept watch over the alien shuttle, her attention constantly drifting back to Dr. Rohith, who seemed engrossed in his examination. At one point, they even brought in a couple of firearm experts to handle and process the Gao-de rifles. *I sure wish I could have used one of those, she mused,* watching as the experts carefully analyzed the alien weapons.

Finally, her shift ended, and Allaria felt an overwhelming sense of relief. She sought out Sergeant Akurati, finding him at his own duty station.

"Sergeant Akurati?" she called to get his attention. *"Do you have a moment?"*

"Yeah, I guess so. What do you need?" he responded, glancing up from his datapad.

*"Well, I was wondering about the anthropologist on the ship. Is he the only one, and where did he come from?"* she asked, her curiosity gnawing at her.

*"There are anthropologists on every fleet ship, Laskari. They're here to evaluate and investigate any interactions we have with the Gao-de, both from a military standpoint to better understand*

*their weaknesses and from a cultural standpoint," Akurati explained, his tone almost dismissive. "I don't know what good that second one will do us, but I suppose it's interesting to someone higher up in the chain than myself."*

*"I see. So, him investigating the shuttle crash in the shuttle bay would just be standard procedure then?"* Allaria responded, nodding slowly.

*"I suppose so. What's this all about, anyway?"* Akurati asked, looking at her more intently now.

*"Well, he took custody of the data we found on the Ottmar earlier, and now he's investigating the hell outta the alien shuttle. Just seems like there's something else going on. I mean, we got sent on a mission to find a datalink. Someone already knew it was there. I think somehow he knew there was a datalink with some kind of secret information on the Ottmar. How would he know that?"* she asked, her voice laced with frustration.

Akurati shook his head, a frown forming on his face. *"I don't know, okay? I really don't care too much, either. Besides, what business is it of yours? Now go take a damn shower. You smell,"* he quipped, his lips curling into a slight grin.

*"Thanks, Sergeant,"* she said with a sigh, turning away. There was no point pushing the matter further with him.

Allaria walked back to her shared quarters and collected her shower items. The hot water felt like heaven on her tired body, washing away the grime, sweat, and the faint traces of alien blood that seemed to cling to her skin no matter how much she scrubbed. She let herself savor the warmth for a few moments longer before reluctantly turning off the shower and returning to her room.

She tried to sleep, her body exhausted but her mind still buzzing with everything that had happened. As her eyes closed, her thoughts slowly blurred, and she slipped into a restless sleep.

The man with his dark robes and cross-shaped necklace filled her dreams. He stood there, watching her with an intensity that made her stomach twist. She tried to speak, to ask him what he was doing, but her voice refused to come. He put his finger over her lips, shushing her, and then looked up into the sky. Then, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he vanished, leaving her standing alone. In his place stood a Gao-de soldier, its massive frame casting a shadow

over her. The alien rifle was clutched in its hands, and its eyes seemed to pierce into her soul—as if trying to send her a message. She could hear words, but they were garbled, warped beyond understanding. The creature stepped closer, its large hand reaching out until it rested on her head. The distorted words came faster, flowing into her mind, and she felt a wave of nausea wash over her. The eyes of the creature seemed to bore into her mind, and then—

Allaria jerked awake, her body drenched in sweat, her bedding soaked through. She took deep, shaky breaths, her heart pounding in her chest. She looked over at her datalink—she had less than an hour before she needed to be up again. She groaned, rubbing her face, trying to shake the lingering unease.

The next few nights were the same. Each time she closed her eyes, the robed man consumed her dreams, only to disappear and be replaced by the Gao-de, filling her mind with incomprehensible words. She would wake up in a sweat, the fear clinging to her like a second skin. It left her exhausted, her nerves frayed, and her thoughts clouded by the lack of sleep. What's happening to me? I'm losing my mind, she thought. Then, after three days of the recurring nightmares, it stopped—just as suddenly as it had begun. No more dark-robed figures, no more Gao-de, no more haunting dreams.

As the Atticus made its slow journey back to Mars, Allaria found herself with too much time to think. The engines weren't being used at full capacity, and the trip was taking longer than usual, especially with the Einhorn lumbering alongside them as an escort. The threat of danger felt almost nonexistent, but her mind was anything but settled. She kept turning over the events of the past days, wondering about Dr. Rohith, about the datalink, and why it felt like she was missing something crucial. It was hard to let it go—the feeling that there was a piece of the puzzle just out of her reach.

Mars was over 1.3 billion kilometers away from Saturn, and the full journey took nearly thirteen days. Thirteen days with nothing to do but replay everything that had happened, her suspicions growing stronger with each passing hour. The nightmares might have stopped, but the sense that something was wrong lingered, gnawing at her as they drew closer to their destination.

## CHAPTER 6 - FOUR AND A HALF YEARS AGO

After four days of rest, Allaria was finally discharged from the medical bay. The journey back to her training barracks felt strangely surreal, the sterile environment of the medical facility replaced by the cold steel of the halls she had come to know well. She arrived just after midnight, her body still aching but her resolve unwavering. She slipped into her bunk, falling asleep almost instantly, her exhaustion pulling her into a deep, dreamless rest.

The next morning, the familiar sound of the instructor's voice yanked her back to reality. The lights flicked on harshly, and the yelling began—just another morning in the barracks. Allaria sprang to her feet, standing at attention along with the rest of the recruits. As she scanned the room, she noticed the side glances from a few of them. Their faces bore a mix of surprise and confusion—clearly, nobody had been informed that she would be back so soon.

After morning inspection, the training group marched to the mess hall for breakfast, then assembled on the field for their daily physical combat training. The atmosphere was thick with tension. No one spoke to Allaria, not a word—not even the casual ribbing or offhand comments that usually filled the air during training. It felt deliberate, an unspoken message, and it made her uneasy. She shrugged it off, pushing down the irritation, and focused instead on her body—on how the movements felt, on what she needed to do to keep herself limber. She was still sore, her muscles protesting as she stretched, but it wasn't anything she couldn't handle. She settled onto the bench along the edge of the training mat, waiting for her turn.

As she sat there, her bunkmate—a tall, wiry girl named Kelsa—leaned in close, her voice barely a whisper. “*You know that if you beat them again, they'll kill you, right?*,” Kelsa said, her eyes fixed straight ahead, her expression unreadable.

Allaria blinked, her heart skipping a beat. She turned her head slightly, but Kelsa had already leaned away, her focus seemingly on the training mat ahead. Allaria frowned, her mind racing. She thought back to her last match—the one that had put her in the medical bay. She had fought hard, pushed herself beyond what she thought she was capable of, and she had won. But the cost had been high—too high, maybe. She hadn't thought much about the others—about how they might react to her victory. Had she humiliated them? Had she made herself a target?

Allaria sat up straighter, her eyes narrowing slightly as she watched the ongoing matches. She needed to think, to come up with a plan. The rules, she reminded herself. What do the rules say about my conduct during a training match? She forced herself to remember, her mind sifting through the regulations they had been drilled on. No strikes to incapacitate, no breaking bones, no targeting vital areas—those were the basics. But beyond that, combat training was designed to push each recruit to their limit. They were encouraged to be aggressive, to think outside the box, to prove their worth. The instructors wanted to see who could adapt, who could handle the pressure.

Her name was soon called, and Allaria rose from her seat on the padded mat, her heart pounding as she approached the fighting pad. She stood facing her opponent, and her stomach twisted when she saw who it was—Whitbey. A knot of unease formed, one she hadn't anticipated. She could feel the weight of the other recruits' eyes on her, and the pressure settled heavily on her shoulders.

The sharp noise of the whistle rang in her ears, momentarily giving her a headache. She shook her head slightly, trying to shake away the nerves, forcing herself to focus on Whitbey's movements. Whitbey was fast—she knew that—but Allaria also knew that she had to be quicker. She took a deep breath, her eyes narrowing. “Don't break the skin,” she whispered to herself, her voice barely audible.

“*What was that?*” Whitbey asked, her tone sharp, her eyes locked on Allaria.

“*Just reminding myself not to break the skin,*” Allaria quipped, her lips curling into a grin. “*Those are the rules,*” she added, her voice firm, though there was an edge of confidence that she hoped would unnerve Whitbey.

Whitbey wasted no time, lunging forward, her fist cutting through the air towards Allaria. Allaria dodged, her body twisting out of the way, her feet moving almost on instinct. Whitbey followed up with another punch, then another, but each one missed its mark. Allaria's movements were fluid, her body weaving out of range, her focus entirely on Whitbey's attacks.

She found herself near the edge of the mat, having taken several steps back in her attempts to avoid Whitbey's rapid strikes. She knew she couldn't keep retreating. Allaria squatted slightly, her knees bent, her body lowering until her head was level with Whitbey's chest. She kept her hands up, ready to block, her eyes watching for any opening. As soon as Whitbey moved close



enough, Allaria acted. She sprang up with all her strength, her arms wrapping around Whitbey's waist, lifting her off the ground.

Whitbey grunted, her fists pounding into Allaria's back, the impact making her wince. Pain shot through her, but she gritted her teeth, staying focused. She twisted her body, using all her strength to swing Whitbey over her shoulder, her muscles straining as she spun. With a final, determined movement, she threw Whitbey to the ground, her opponent landing with a heavy thud.

Whitbey lay still, her body sprawled across the mat. Allaria stood over her, her breathing heavy, her heart racing. The instructor hurried over, followed closely by a medic. Allaria took a step back, her eyes scanning Whitbey's face, searching for any sign of movement.

*"She'll be alright,"* said the medic, his voice calm. He knelt beside Whitbey, checking her pulse. *"She's just unconscious for now, but she'll come around."*

Allaria couldn't help herself. *"So you're saying I'll be able to beat her again?"* she quipped, her voice carrying across the training room. She turned her head slightly, her eyes locking onto the recruit who had whispered to her before the match. She wanted them to hear it, to know that she wasn't afraid.

A few of the recruits exchanged glances, their expressions a mix of surprise and wariness. Ritterman and Arturo both glared at her, their eyes filled with anger. Allaria forced herself to remain expressionless, her face a mask of calm confidence. *Show no fear. Show no fear,* she repeated to herself, her body stiff with tension. Inside, though, her fear coiled tightly around her heart. What would happen now? What would they do in response to this?

The medic and the instructor worked together to move Whitbey, lifting her carefully off the mat and carrying her to a safe spot at the edge of the training area. Allaria watched, her eyes following them as they went. As they set Whitbey down, she began to stir, her eyes blinking open, her face a mask of confusion. She looked around, disoriented, her gaze eventually finding Allaria, who stood silently at the edge of the mat.

Allaria felt a strange mix of emotions as she watched Whitbey—relief that she was okay, but also a sense of unease. The fight had been intense, and she knew that she had made herself a target. But she wasn't going to back down. She had survived this far by being strong, by refusing to let fear control her. And she would keep doing that, no matter what.

Allaria stood on the mat, her adrenaline still pumping, her body aching but her spirit defiant. She looked directly at Whitbey, her gaze steady, her voice clear as she asked, "*Who's next?*" The question was directed at everyone but meant especially for Whitbey, a reminder of what had just happened.

The instructor stepped forward, his tone authoritative. "*You're still recovering, Allaria. That will be all for you today.*" His words were final, leaving no room for argument. Allaria felt a pang of disappointment—the thrill of the fight, the rush of adrenaline had made her want to keep going. But deep down, she was also relieved. Her muscles ached, and she could feel the exhaustion creeping in, her body demanding rest.

The recruits were dismissed, and Allaria joined the others as they made their way to their next class—knowledge training. The walk was eerily quiet, the atmosphere tense. No one spoke to her, and she could sense the others keeping their distance, almost as if she were radioactive. A small part of her was glad—maybe now they would leave her alone, at least for a while. She hoped they would. She kept her head up, her eyes focused ahead, ignoring the furtive glances cast in her direction.

As they approached the door to the knowledge classroom, an instructor she wasn't familiar with stepped forward, motioning for Allaria to come with him. She hesitated for a moment, her brow furrowing in confusion, but then followed, breaking away from the rest of the group. The instructor pulled her to the side, away from the others.

"*You did well today,*" he said, his voice low but firm. "*Especially considering your recent situation.*" There was a hint of something in his voice—approval, maybe even admiration. Allaria studied him for a moment, her eyes catching sight of the brass on his shoulder. He wasn't just any instructor.

"*My recent situation? Who are you, sir?*" she asked, her voice respectful, though there was an edge of curiosity to her tone.

The instructor gave her a faint smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "*I'm Lieutenant Kenneck. I'm in charge of a few training modules here at the academy. I've had my eye on you for a few weeks now.*" He paused, his gaze appraising. "*I'm putting together a group of exceptional students for a special project. Would you be interested?*"

Allaria blinked, her surprise evident. “*Exceptional students?*” she repeated, her brow knitting in confusion. She had never considered herself exceptional—not here, not among the best and brightest recruits. She was just trying to survive, to prove she belonged.

Lieutenant Kenneck seemed to sense her hesitation. “*I’ve spoken with your knowledge instructor for the day, and he has approved your absence per my request. If you’d like to discuss this opportunity further, we can go to my office.*”

Allaria felt a mix of emotions—curiosity, uncertainty, and a hint of excitement. Why would he want her for something like this? And why did she need to miss class? The questions swirled in her mind, but she didn’t dare voice them. There was something about the lieutenant’s demeanor—a sense of authority, of rigidity—that made her think it would be best not to push him. She straightened her posture, her body snapping to attention.

“*Yes, sir. I am interested in this project,*” she responded, her voice steady. She still had no idea what he was talking about, but if it meant a chance to prove herself, to stand out, she wasn’t about to turn it down.

Lieutenant Kenneck nodded, his expression unreadable. “Good. Follow me, Recruit Laskari.” He turned, leading her away from the classroom, down a series of hallways that Allaria had never been down before. The academy was large, and there were areas that were off-limits to recruits—she wondered if that was where they were headed now. The hallways were quieter here, the noise of training drills and classrooms fading away as they moved deeper into the facility.

Allaria couldn’t help but feel a sense of anticipation building within her. Whatever this project was, it was different from the usual training routine. She glanced at the lieutenant as they walked, trying to gauge what kind of man he was. His face was stern, his eyes focused straight ahead. He was older than most of the instructors she had worked with, and there was something about him she couldn’t quite place.

Finally, they reached a door at the end of the hallway. Lieutenant Kenneck keyed in a code, and the door slid open with a quiet hiss. He gestured for her to enter, and Allaria stepped inside, her eyes widening slightly as she took in the room. It was an office, but not just any office—there were screens along the walls, each one displaying various data feeds, maps, and mission reports. She noticed a few commendation medals framed and hanging on the walls, and a

graduation diploma from the academy indicating that Kenneck had graduated within the top five in his class. Her gaze shifted to another framed certificate—his Officer School graduation diploma from just two years ago. *He's a new officer. I wonder how he got this position?* she thought. A large desk sat in the center of the room, papers and datapads scattered across its surface.

"*Take a seat,*" Kenneck said, his voice breaking through her thoughts. Allaria moved to the chair in front of the desk, sitting down, her back straight, her hands resting on her knees. The lieutenant sat behind the desk, his eyes meeting hers.

"*This project,*" he began, "*is not something we offer to just anyone. It's demanding, and it's dangerous. But it's also an opportunity—an opportunity to be part of something bigger, to contribute in a way that most recruits never will.*" He paused, letting his words sink in. "*I need people who are resilient, who can handle pressure, who can think on their feet. You've shown me that you can do that.*"

Lieutenant Kenneck studied her for a moment, then nodded. "*We are looking for students who stand out among their peers. Students who have both excelled in their studies and in their combat training. Have you begun training with weapons yet?*" he asked.

"*No. Our class hasn't gotten to that point yet. I believe that's part of the second-year training course,*" responded Allaria.

"*Ok. What we'll be doing then, is moving you to an accelerated weapons training course. You'll report directly to me each week with your progress. We'll make sure that the weapons training doesn't interfere with your other training. At the end of the training, we'll be holding evaluations. If you do well, we'll be able to promote you to Private First Class upon graduation from the academy. In addition, there may be other opportunities along the way. Is this something you are interested in?*" Kenneck asked.

"*Yes, very much so,*" responded Allaria.

"*Good. Your training will begin today. At 2000 hours, visit the weapons simulator on deck 5.*" Kenneck handed Allaria a red key card. "*You'll need this to access the weapons training deck. Don't be late. I will coordinate your schedule with your superiors to ensure you aren't counted absent from your evening inspections. Now, head back to your class.*"

Allaria stood, giving him a sharp salute. “Yes, sir.”

As she left the office, her mind was racing. She still didn’t know what she was getting herself into, but one thing was clear—this was her chance to prove herself, to show that she was more than just another recruit. And she wasn’t going to waste it. She walked back to her knowledge class, her smile refusing to fade, her steps lighter than they had been in days.

She slipped into the classroom, her smile still lingering, though she tried her best to keep her composure. The other recruits glanced at her curiously, some of them frowning, others whispering among themselves. Allaria ignored the looks, making her way to her seat and settling down, the excitement still simmering within her.

“*What’s got you so happy, Allaria?*” whispered Kaiwel, the recruit seated beside her. His voice was low, careful not to draw the attention of the instructor at the front of the room. He leaned in slightly, his curiosity evident.

Allaria didn’t respond, her gaze fixed on the instructor, trying to focus on the lesson. She wasn’t about to let Kaiwel—or anyone else—in on her news just yet. She wanted to savor the moment, to let the reality of the situation sink in. It was her opportunity, and she didn’t want anyone else tainting it with their opinions or jealousy.

“*I said, what’s got you so happy?*” Kaiwel repeated, his voice a little louder, his tone more insistent. He nudged her arm with his elbow, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Allaria turned her head, her expression hardening. “*Mind your own business, Kaiwel,*” she said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. She kept her tone even, trying not to let the annoyance show. The last thing she needed was to cause a scene in the middle of class.

Kaiwel huffed, a small smirk tugging at his lips as he turned to face the front of the classroom. As he moved, he bumped Allaria in the ribs with his elbow, the impact sharp and deliberate. Pain shot through her side, and Allaria clenched her jaw, her body tensing. She winced, the soreness flaring up, her ribs still tender from her recent injury. She took a slow breath, trying to steady herself, her eyes focusing on the instructor once again.

The instructor spoke, his voice steady and commanding: “The Gao-de are named so because of their height, and named so by General Feng, as you have already learned. General Volkov is the one who came up with the plan to bomb their staging areas—Atlanta, Moscow, and Beijing.

He claimed that they chose those cities because there would be no way humans could remove them without destroying the cities at the same time. The Gao-de were mostly correct in assuming this. What the Gao-de failed to realize was that humanity would actually destroy the cities in an act of desperation.”

Allaria focused her attention on the instructor, her brow furrowed in concentration. She found the history of the Gao-de fascinating—their tactics, their ruthlessness. It was a harsh reminder of what they were up against. But the growing pain in her side was making it hard to stay focused. She shifted slightly in her seat, her hand pressing against her sore ribs in an attempt to ease the ache. It didn't help much, and she could feel the pain intensifying. She had already taken one of the painkillers prescribed by the nurse earlier, and she knew she couldn't take another until bedtime. She clenched her jaw, willing herself to push through it.

The lesson continued, the instructor detailing the history of the conflict with the Gao-de, the sacrifices that had been made, the decisions that had cost millions of lives. Allaria listened, her mind trying to absorb the information, even as her body protested. She was determined not to let the pain distract her—this was important. She needed to understand their enemy if she was ever going to be a part of the fight against them.

After the knowledge class ended, Allaria joined the other recruits as they made their way to the mess hall for dinner. The noise of the mess hall was overwhelming at first—the clatter of trays, the chatter of recruits, the hum of machinery. She grabbed her tray, loading it with the standard fare, her eyes scanning the room for an empty spot to sit. She could feel Kaiwel behind her, his presence looming, his footsteps too close for comfort. He had been following her since they left the classroom, his silence making her uneasy.

Allaria tried to ignore him, her eyes narrowing slightly as she spotted an empty table near the back of the mess hall. She moved towards it, her tray balanced carefully in her hands. But Kaiwel was still there, trailing her, his eyes never leaving her. She could feel his gaze boring into her back, and her discomfort grew with every step.

She sat down, placing her tray on the table, her movements deliberate, her focus on her food. Kaiwel sat across from her, his tray clattering onto the table, his expression unreadable. Allaria didn't look up, her eyes fixed on her plate as she took a slow breath, trying to calm her nerves. Why was he doing this? What did he want from her?

*"You know, you really ought to be more careful,"* Kaiwel said, his voice low, almost a whisper. There was something in his tone—something that made Allaria's skin crawl. She kept her eyes on her plate, her jaw tightening.

*"I don't know what you're talking about,"* she responded, her voice flat. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of reacting, of showing that he was getting to her.

Kaiwel chuckled, the sound devoid of humor. *"You're making waves, Allaria. People notice. Not everyone likes it."*

Allaria finally looked up, her eyes locking onto his. *"I'm just doing what I'm supposed to do. If people have a problem with that, it's their problem, not mine."* Her voice was steady, but inside, she could feel the tension coiling tighter, the pain in her ribs a constant reminder of just how vulnerable she still was.

*"Please let me be, Kaiwel,"* Allaria pleaded, her voice low, her patience wearing thin.

Kaiwel's smirk only widened, his eyes narrowing as he leaned across the table, his tone mocking. *"Why should I? You're up to something, and I'm going to figure out what it is."*

Allaria clenched her jaw, her frustration boiling over. She was tired—tired of the pain, tired of the constant tension, tired of Kaiwel's relentless badgering. She had tried to ignore him, to push him away, but it was no use. He wasn't going to stop until he got what he wanted. She looked up, her eyes locking onto his, her expression hardened.

*"You want to know?"* she said, her voice sharp. *"I'll tell you!"* She could feel the other recruits in the mess hall turning to watch, but she didn't care. Let them hear. *"I'm going to be participating in some additional training,"* she continued, her tone laced with annoyance. *"Part of something new that the officers are trying. I have no idea what I'm doing or what to expect, but it seems exciting. And it gets me away from some of the people here in our class—including you."*

Kaiwel blinked, clearly not expecting her to reveal anything, let alone something like this. His smirk faltered, replaced by a look of surprise. He leaned back, his eyes narrowing as he studied her. *"Additional training? What kind of training?"* he asked, his voice softer now, the mocking edge gone.

Allaria shook her head, her lips pressing into a thin line. *“That’s all I’m going to say, Kaiwel. If you think you can intimidate me into telling you more, you’re wrong.”* She picked up her fork, her attention turning back to her food, her hands shaking slightly from the rush of adrenaline. She could feel the tension in the air, the other recruits watching, waiting to see what would happen next.

Kaiwel was quiet for a moment, his eyes still on her. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again, his gaze flickering away. Finally, he pushed his tray away, standing up abruptly. *“You better be careful, Allaria,”* he said, his voice low, almost a growl.

Allaria didn’t look up, her eyes fixed on her plate as she forced herself to take a bite of her food. Her heart was still pounding, her hands still trembling. She heard Kaiwel’s footsteps as he walked away, the tension in her chest slowly easing as he disappeared from her sight.

The mess hall seemed to breathe again, the noise slowly returning as the other recruits resumed their conversations. Allaria let out a shaky breath, her body slumping slightly as the adrenaline wore off. She knew this wasn’t over—Kaiwel wasn’t the type to let things go. But she also knew that she wasn’t alone. She had Lieutenant Kenneck’s project, a chance to prove herself, a path forward that she could focus on. And she would use it to rise above all of this—to rise above Kaiwel and anyone else who tried to stand in her way.

After her meal, Allaria made her way to deck 5, her footsteps echoing in the quiet corridor. She found the door to the training room, her heart pounding with a mix of anticipation and nerves. She pulled out her datapad, checking the time—1955. Right on time, perfect, she thought, a sense of satisfaction settling over her. She grabbed the hatch handle, pulling and twisting it. The door opened easily, and she stepped inside.

The room was not what she had expected. Instead of a combat training area, she saw nine other people sitting at desks, their eyes turning to her as she entered. There were no instructors in sight, just rows of desks and recruits looking as puzzled as she felt. Wasn’t this supposed to be combat training? Allaria thought, her brow furrowing slightly. She scanned the room, her eyes searching for any clues as to what was happening.

She decided to take a seat next to another trainee, her curiosity piqued. Before she could ask any questions, the door opened again, and an older woman entered the room, her presence commanding. *“I am Captain Ellis,”* she announced, her voice carrying through the room. *“I’m the*



*head of training for your group and will be managing all evaluations, instruction, simulations, and non-simulated training."*

Two men followed her in, their expressions stern. Captain Ellis gestured to them. *"This is First Sergeant Gonzalez and Staff Sergeant Dahar. You will follow every command they give. You will consider them to be god during this training. Everything they say, you do. Everything they do, you watch."* She paused, her gaze sweeping over the group. *"Do you understand?"* she yelled, her voice sharp and demanding.

*"Yes, ma'am!"* the ten-person training group shouted in unison, their voices echoing in the room.

Captain Ellis gave a curt nod, not wasting any time. *"Good. Follow me to the simulation room."*

The group stood up quickly, falling into step behind the instructors. They moved down the hallway, their footsteps echoing in the narrow space. Allaria felt her pulse quicken as they approached a door at the end of the hall. Captain Ellis opened it, leading them into a room that was almost entirely dark. Allaria stepped in, her eyes struggling to adjust. She could barely make out the outlines of her fellow trainees, the shadows blending together until they were indistinguishable. The walls were hidden in the shadows. It was impossible to know the size of the room.

The door shut behind them with a heavy thud, and the room plunged into complete darkness. Allaria's breath caught in her throat, her senses heightened. She could hear the shuffling of feet, the soft, uncertain breaths of the others around her. She blinked, trying to see something—anything—but the darkness was absolute. Her heart pounded harder, a mix of fear and excitement coursing through her veins. What was this? What were they about to face?

A voice came through the darkness—Captain Ellis, her tone calm, almost detached. *"This is your first lesson. In combat, you will often find yourself in situations where you lack information—where you are forced to adapt, to trust your instincts, to stay focused even when you cannot see the full picture. You must rely on your senses, on each other, and on your training. Remember this. Now, let's see how well you can handle the unknown."*

There was a moment of silence, the tension in the room almost palpable. Allaria took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She could feel the presence of the others around her, the uncertainty they shared. Whatever this training was, it was unlike anything she had experienced before—and she had a feeling that this was only the beginning.

Ellis spoke again, her voice cutting through the darkness: *"Space is dark!"*

A new voice spoke next, deep and commanding. *"So dark, in fact, that if there are no artificial lights, and you aren't near a star, you can't see anything. And if you're out far enough, even in our own home system, and the lights go out, you'll be operating blindly."*

Allaria tensed, her eyes widening even though she couldn't see anything. She didn't recognize the voice. *Was it an instructor or another trainee? It certainly couldn't be a trainee, she thought—nobody would be brave enough to interrupt Captain Ellis as she spoke.*

"First Sergeant Gonzalez is correct," Ellis said, her voice confirming Allaria's suspicions. "It's so dark that you would never know if a Gao-de were in the same room with you or not."

A chill ran down Allaria's spine at the mention of the Gao-de. The thought of one of the enemy—those towering, ruthless creatures—standing silently in the darkness beside her made her skin crawl. She swallowed, trying to steady herself, but then she felt something cold brush against her leg. Her heart skipped a beat, and she forced herself to stay still, her senses straining to pick up any sound, any movement that might explain what she had felt.

Suddenly, a scream pierced the silence, coming from her left. Allaria spun instinctively, her body moving towards the source, but it was no use—the darkness was absolute. She couldn't see a thing, couldn't tell who had screamed or why. Her breathing quickened, her mind racing. *What was happening? Who was out there?*

*"What do you do when you can't see anything? What do you do when your enemy can?"*

Captain Ellis's voice rang out, her tone challenging, almost taunting.

Allaria heard shuffling, the sound of someone trying to find the hatch. Panic was setting in among the group, and she could hear the frantic breathing, the whispered curses. She clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms as she tried to think. *What did Ellis mean? Could the Gao-de see in this darkness? Was that what she was trying to teach them?*

*"The door is locked, trainee. You can't leave, so stop trying,"* Ellis said, her voice cutting through the chaos. Allaria could hear the fear in the trainee's movements, the desperation. She took a deep breath, trying to focus, trying to find something—anything—to hold onto in the darkness.

*"What's the point of this?"* someone called out, their voice trembling. The question hung in the air, unanswered. Another scream. The silence that followed was heavy, oppressive, the darkness pressing in on them from all sides. Allaria could feel her heart pounding, her mind struggling to stay calm. She needed to focus, to think. There had to be a way through this—a way to adapt, to overcome the fear and the uncertainty.

Allaria moved towards the wall until she could touch it, the cold metal a reassuring anchor in the oppressive darkness. She walked away from where she remembered the door being, her hands skimming the surface until she reached a corner. It took her a few seconds, and she guessed the room to be about thirty feet on each side, though she really didn't know for sure. Once in the corner, she squatted down, leaning against the wall for stability. Hopefully nothing can come up from behind now, she thought, trying to calm her racing heart.

*"Don't stay still. Keep moving,"* Ellis said calmly, her voice echoing through the darkness. *"You don't want to find yourself trapped in a corner."*

Allaria stood up, her pulse quickening again. *Was that directed at me?* she wondered, feeling a chill run down her spine. What the actual hell is going on? Her mind was racing now, her instincts telling her that staying still was dangerous. She moved along the wall, keeping her hand against it for guidance, until she felt something different—a change in texture. She ran her fingers over the surface, feeling ridges and cool air flowing through. It was a vent, or something like it. Perfect! she thought, a spark of hope igniting. I wonder if I can get through this thing.

She felt around until she found some screws protruding from the corners. They were loose enough that she could grip them and twist them out. She worked quickly, her hands shaking slightly from the adrenaline coursing through her veins. The darkness felt suffocating, the uncertainty gnawing at her nerves.

*"What the hell kind of training is this?"* someone called out, their voice filled with frustration. The words were followed immediately by a scream. *"Shit! That hurts! What the hell was that?"* The scream was cut off abruptly, followed by a heavy thud that echoed through the room.

Allaria's heart pounded harder, and she tried to remove the screws faster, her fingers slipping slightly. Calm down. Breathe, she told herself, forcing her hands to steady. She needed to stay focused if she was going to get out of here.

*"Did someone just collapse?"* another voice questioned, their tone filled with fear and confusion.

Ellis spoke again, her voice calm and unyielding. *“If someone did, what are you going to do about it? Do you help them? Do you know where they are? If they didn’t collapse, what was the noise? What’s your plan?”*

Allaria had managed to remove three of the screws. Rather than waste time with the fourth, she rotated the vent cover around the fourth and climbed into the opening backwards, pulling the vent cover back into place as quietly as she could. She felt the cool air envelop her as she moved into the tight space, her body trembling slightly as she crawled forward. She followed the vent for a few feet until she reached a turn to the right. She took it, her hands and knees moving carefully, her senses on high alert. The darkness here was different—less oppressive, more contained. It was just her now, alone in the vent.

*What the hell am I doing?* she thought, a wry smile tugging at her lips despite the fear. *Where does this even lead?* She kept moving, her body twisting and turning through the narrow duct. After what felt like an eternity, she saw it—a faint light up ahead. *There must be another vent here*, she surmised, her heart lifting slightly.

Allaria pushed her way through a narrow part of the duct, her body straining as she reached the light source. She positioned herself, using her foot to kick out the vent cover. It gave way with a soft clang, and she crawled out, her hands landing on solid ground. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness. She found herself in an in-session classroom, the eyes of every student turning towards her in shock.

For a moment, there was silence—a stunned pause as the trainees and the instructor stared at her, their faces a mix of confusion and surprise. Allaria slowly got to her feet, her heart still racing, her body sore from crawling through the vent. She dusted herself off, her eyes meeting those of the instructor at the front of the room. The instructor’s brow arched, and Allaria could see the curiosity and suspicion in their gaze.

*“Um... hi,”* Allaria said, her voice a little breathless. *“Sorry to interrupt. Just... passing through.”*

The room remained silent for a beat longer before the instructor cleared their throat, their expression shifting to one of stern authority. *“And who, exactly, are you?”* they asked, their voice sharp.

Allaria took a deep breath, straightening her posture. *“Recruit Allaria Laskari, sir. I’m in the middle of a training exercise,”* she said, trying to keep her tone steady and respectful.

Allaria quickly left the classroom, her heart still pounding from the rush of adrenaline. She found a wall-mounted datapad, her eyes scanning the map to figure out where she was and how to get back to the training room. Once she had her bearings, she made her way back, her footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. She reached the hatch, her hands pulling and twisting the handle. The door swung open, light spilling into the dark room, illuminating the scene before her.

There, on the floor, lay a trainee—his leg twisted at an unnatural angle, clearly broken, his face pale and unconscious. The other trainees turned to look at her, their expressions a mix of disbelief and confusion. They had no idea where she had gone or what she had done, and now here she was, opening the door.

Captain Ellis's voice rang out, breaking the silence. *"You see! There is a survivor. Let's head back to the classroom and discuss the exercise."* Her tone was firm, as though the outcome had been exactly what she had anticipated.

Staff Sergeant Dahar stepped forward, lifting the injured trainee with practiced ease. He carried the unconscious recruit towards the medical bay, while the rest of the trainees fell in line behind Captain Ellis, following her back to the classroom. Allaria walked silently, her mind racing as she tried to process everything that had just happened.

Once they were all seated again, Captain Ellis turned to face them. *"What was the lesson here?"* she asked, her eyes scanning the group.

One of the trainees spoke up, his voice dripping with sarcasm. *"Don't get stuck in a dark room?"*

Captain Ellis's lips twitched, but she didn't smile. *"That's certainly something we should avoid when we can, but that's not what this lesson was about. Can anyone here tell me what the lesson was about?"*

Allaria took a deep breath, her hand still aching slightly from unscrewing the vent. *"The lesson was that we shouldn't stop. We should keep moving no matter what, right?"* she offered.

"Yes, very good," First Sergeant Gonzalez said, nodding in approval. *"There were three vents in the room. You found one quickly and decided to exit through it. That was the right choice. None of the vents would have been a wrong choice. The wrong choice was to do nothing."*

One of the other trainees raised their hand, concern evident in their voice. *"What happened to Mander? Is he gonna be alright?"*

Captain Ellis gave a curt nod. *"He'll be fine. He's being checked out right now by the doctors."*

Another trainee spoke up, their voice hesitant. *"Yeah, but how did he break his leg?"*

Staff Sergeant Dahar's expression remained stoic as he answered. *"Mander had his leg broken by me,"* he said matter-of-factly. *"I was about to break your leg too, Wallis, but Allaria came through the door. You sit in one spot too long, you get hurt. You stay there long enough in a real combat situation, you die. That's what this lesson was about. Always keep moving."*

Captain Ellis spoke up again, her tone unwavering. *"Here's what I want each of you to do tonight: write a simple action report based on what you experienced here. It doesn't have to be complex or overloaded with too many words, but it should capture the experience in full, from your own perspective. Dismissed."*

The nine remaining trainees stood at attention, saluting before they left the room to head back to their barracks. Allaria checked the time on her datapad—2045. *I've gotta be up in 7 hours,* she thought, exhaustion settling in. *This training is going to really suck, especially if it runs longer than this one did.* She trudged back to her barracks, her body aching, her mind replaying the events of the night.

Once back, she climbed into her bunk, pulling the thin blanket over herself. She closed her eyes, trying to settle her mind, but her thoughts kept drifting back to the darkness of the training room, the screams, the uncertainty. It was all still so vivid.

*"Psst. Hey! Laskari!"* a voice whispered, breaking through her thoughts.

Allaria turned over on her side, squinting through the dim light to see who it was. *"Kaiwel. What do you want?"* she whispered back, her voice tired.

Kaiwel's eyes glinted with curiosity. *"I just wanted to ask how it went. How the training went. Was it fun?"*

Allaria let out a sigh, her frustration bubbling to the surface. *"Well, I had to climb through a vent, and one of the other trainees broke his leg. Can I please sleep now?"*

Kaiwel frowned slightly, but nodded. *"Fine. Go to bed then. But I wanna hear about it in the morning."*

Allaria rolled her eyes, turning her back to him. *"Sure. Whatever,"* she muttered, closing her eyes again, hoping that sleep would come soon. She needed rest—tomorrow was another day, and she knew that the training was only going to get harder from here.

## CHAPTER 7

Allaria sighed, leaning back in her chair, the metal frame creaking slightly under the strain. She swiped at her datalink absentmindedly, scrolling through messages, news updates, and pointless advertisements. She wondered how it had already been three months since they stopped for repairs. The low hum of the shipyard reverberated through the walls, a constant reminder of the machinery working tirelessly around her. She could hear muffled voices down the corridor, the echo of hurried footsteps and the occasional clank of tools hitting metal, all blending into a monotonous symphony that had become her everyday soundtrack.

The truth was, Allaria missed the Atticus. Life on a ship, despite its confined quarters and the constant vigilance required, had a rhythm she thrived on. It was dynamic, with ever-changing destinations, new orders, and the unexpected challenges that space threw at them. She missed the camaraderie with her crewmates—the shared meals, the late-night laughs, even the tensions that occasionally flared up when someone had a bad day. There was none of that here. The Beijing Shipyard was more of a pitstop, a place where people came and went, and nobody stayed long enough to care about anyone else.

She closed her eyes for a moment, imagining herself standing in the observation room of the Atticus, the vastness of space stretching out before her. The sight of distant stars, the darkness sprinkled with the light of countless worlds, gave her a sense of purpose. She longed for that now, for something beyond the red wasteland that taunted her outside the shipyard's viewport.

The PA system crackled to life, pulling her out of her thoughts. *"Attention all personnel. Reminder: Section C will undergo maintenance checks at 1400 hours. Please avoid unnecessary presence in that area."*



Allaria groaned. Section C, of course, was right next to the crew lounge, the one place she could go to try and get some peace and quiet away from her quarters. Now it was going to be overrun with maintenance crews, and any hope of relaxing was gone. She looked back at her datalink and tapped to open her study notes for the Officer test. If she couldn't get away from this place physically, maybe she could get lost in something productive—at least until she finally got out of here for good.

She scrolled through the endless regulations, protocols, and case studies, trying to focus. It was hard, though. Her mind kept drifting back to the endless red below, and the thought of how stuck she felt. She wondered what it would take to request a reassignment, to speed up her transfer back to active duty on a ship. But she knew the answer—pass the Officer test. Get promoted. Show them she was ready for something bigger, something more than orbiting a dusty planet and counting the days.

A sudden knock on her door broke her concentration. She looked up to see Ensign Delgado peering in, his expression as tired as she felt. "Hey, Allaria," he said, his voice barely carrying over the hum of the shipyard. "*You busy?*"

"*Not really,*" she said, setting her datalink aside. "*What's up?*"

"*They're organizing a poker game in the mess hall,*" Delgado said, shrugging. "*Figured you might want in. Better than sitting here staring at Mars, right?*"

Allaria hesitated. The thought of trying to concentrate on her studies felt almost unbearable at the moment. Maybe a distraction was what she needed—even if it was just a poker game with a bunch of shipyard personnel she barely knew.

"*Yeah, alright,*" she said, pushing herself up from her chair. "*Lead the way.*"

As they walked down the dimly lit corridor, Delgado looked over at her. "*You alright? You seem... I don't know. Restless.*"

Allaria laughed dryly. "*Restless is one way to put it. I just need to get off this station, Del. I need to be doing something that matters.*"

He nodded, a sympathetic smile crossing his face. "*I get it. Just hang in there. You'll pass that Officer test and be out of here before you know it.*"

*"I hope so," she muttered, glancing at the dull red glow coming from one of the viewports they passed. "Because if I have to look at Mars for one more month, I might lose it."*

Delgado chuckled. *"Then let's make sure you win a few hands tonight, huh? Might make things a little more bearable."*

Allaria smiled, the first genuine one she felt in a while. Maybe a small distraction was just what she needed to get through another day on this stupid station.

The mess hall was buzzing with chatter and laughter as Allaria and Delgado walked in. A small crowd had gathered around one of the tables, and there was an air of casual excitement that was a welcome change from the usual monotony. Delgado led her over to the group, where a few other members of the shipyard personnel were already seated, shuffling cards and arranging chips.

*"Hey, look who decided to join us!"* one of the men called out, a broad grin on his face. *"Allaria, right? Hope you're ready to lose some credits."*

Allaria smirked, taking a seat between Delgado and another crew member. *"We'll see about that,"* she said, rolling her shoulders as if to loosen up. *"I think I could use a little extra luck tonight."*

The cards were dealt, and Allaria quickly settled into the rhythm of the game. The first few hands went by without much excitement—players folded, chips were exchanged, and small jokes were passed around the table. But when the next hand came around, Allaria found herself with a promising set of cards: a pair of kings.

She kept her expression neutral, her face giving nothing away as she made her bets. Delgado raised an eyebrow at her across the table, a half-smile on his lips. *"You got something good, Allaria?"* he teased, tossing a couple of chips into the pot.

*"Maybe,"* she replied, her voice carefully measured. The others at the table eyed her, trying to gauge whether she was bluffing. The betting went around the table, and Allaria stayed in, raising just enough to keep the others on edge.

The final card was revealed, and it was all or nothing. Allaria glanced at her opponents, her heart pounding with the thrill of the moment. She pushed more chips into the center, her gaze

locking with Delgado's. He hesitated for a moment, then sighed and folded, leaning back in his chair.

*"Alright, alright. You got me,"* he said, shaking his head.

The others folded one by one, and the pot was hers. Allaria allowed herself a small smile as she pulled the chips towards her. It wasn't much, but it was a win—something she hadn't felt in a while. The small victory sent a flicker of satisfaction through her, a reminder that she still had some fight left in her.

*"Nice one,"* Delgado said, clapping her on the shoulder. *"See? Maybe Mars isn't all bad."*

Allaria chuckled, shaking her head. *"Don't push your luck, Del."* She glanced at the clock on the wall and stifled a yawn. The excitement of the win was already fading, replaced by the familiar exhaustion of another long day.

She stood, gathering her small pile of chips. *"I think that's it for me tonight,"* she said. *"One win's enough. I need some sleep if I'm going to keep my head straight for studying tomorrow."*

The others groaned in mock disappointment, but they waved her off with smiles. *"Alright, Allaria. Go get some rest,"* one of them said. *"Next time, we'll be ready for you."*

*"Looking forward to it,"* she replied, giving them a nod before turning to head back to her dormitory.

The walk back was quiet, the shipyard dimly lit and deserted at this hour. Allaria's thoughts drifted as she moved through the empty corridors, the silence almost comforting after the noise of the mess hall. She reached her quarters, slipping inside quietly so as not to wake Sienna. She set her winnings down on her desk, a small pile of chips that seemed almost insignificant—but it represented something more to her. A reminder that she could still win, even if it was just a hand of poker.

Allaria sat up in her bunk, her breathing ragged and her heart pounding against her chest. The dim lights of the crew quarters flickered slightly, an effect of the station's aging power supply that had always been a minor annoyance. But now, in the darkness of her post-dream daze, it seemed almost alive—as if the station itself shared in her sense of unease. She swung her legs over the edge of the bunk, her bare feet touching the cold metal floor, trying to focus on her

surroundings. It was just a dream, she told herself, but the image of the burning ships lingered in her mind.

She rubbed her eyes, trying to shake the lingering feeling of helplessness. Something about the dream was different from the others she had before, more vivid, more pressing. Those dead ships... they weren't just random fragments from her imagination. They meant something. Allaria could feel it deep in her bones.

A soft chime broke the silence, and the door to her quarters slid open, revealing the silhouette of her crewmate, Kiran. His eyes, usually filled with a casual confidence, were narrowed in concern as he took in her disheveled appearance.

"You okay, Allaria? I heard something—like you were talking in your sleep or something," Kiran said, his voice unusually gentle.

Allaria hesitated, unsure of how much to share. She wasn't one to talk about dreams, let alone ones that left her shaken. "Yeah, I'm fine," she said, her voice sounding steadier than she felt. "Just... a bad dream."

Kiran stepped further into the room, the door sliding shut behind him. He leaned against the wall, folding his arms. "Look, I'm no expert on dreams or anything, but you look like you've seen a ghost. Want to talk about it?"

A soft chime broke the silence, and the door to her quarters slid open, revealing the silhouette of her crewmate, Karega. His eyes, usually filled with a casual confidence, were narrowed in concern as he took in her disheveled appearance.

"You okay, Allaria? I heard something—like you were talking in your sleep or something," Karega said, his voice unusually gentle.

Allaria hesitated, unsure of how much to share. She wasn't one to talk about dreams, let alone ones that left her shaken. "Yeah, I'm fine," she said, her voice sounding steadier than she felt. "Just... a bad dream."

Karega stepped further into the room, the door sliding shut behind him. He leaned against the wall, folding his arms. "Look, I'm no expert on dreams or anything, but you look like you've seen a ghost. Want to talk about it?"

For a moment, Allaria considered brushing him off. She could crack a joke, tell him to mind his own business. But something in his eyes made her pause. Maybe it was the lingering fear she couldn't shake, or the eerie vividness of the dream that still clung to her, but she found herself nodding.

*"It was strange," she began, her voice barely a whisper. "There were ships, Karega. Ships on fire, just... drifting. Empty, broken. I could feel this... this sense of dread, like something terrible was coming. And then there were words, but I couldn't understand them."*

Karega frowned, his casual demeanor dropping away entirely. *"Ships on fire, huh? You think it means something?"*

Allaria shrugged, feeling the weight of the pendant around her neck. *"I don't know. Maybe it's just my mind playing tricks on me. Or maybe..."* she trailed off, her eyes meeting Karega's. *"Nevermind..."*

Karega was silent for a moment, then nodded. *"All right. Let's keep an eye out, just in case. You never know, right? Space is full of weird stuff."* He offered a small, reassuring smile.

Allaria and Karega sat down in the few chairs in the shared dormitory, and she thought about the training she completed, now almost six months since the Academy. While most of the individuals in the Earth Defense Fleet were enlisted with no expectation of becoming officers, Officers in Training, as they're called, were required to start their careers as enlisted members, then be promoted to Officer after meeting various requirements and passing the Officer Candidate Test. Allaria's ambition pushed her to be better than everyone else when she was in the Academy, but being in the fleet wasn't the same. Out here, she was just another soldier. She took orders from her superiors and gave orders to those under her command. She remembered her classwork and the explanation given as to why officers were required to serve as enlisted members before being promoted to officer, *"To allow sufficient experience to be gained as an enlisted member of the EDF in order to be a better officer."* The trainer's words were still clear in her memory.

Karega noticed her distant expression and nudged her gently. *"Thinking about the old days, huh?"* he said, a hint of nostalgia in his voice.

Allaria shook her head, smiling faintly. *"Yeah, I guess so. The Academy feels like a lifetime ago. It was all so different back then—everything was a competition. I needed to prove myself. Now... it's less about proving something and more about surviving, you know?"*

Karega nodded thoughtfully. *"I get it. It's funny how things change when you're actually out here. The real world isn't about top marks or impressing the instructors. It's about making sure everyone gets back in one piece. That's what really counts."*

They sat in silence for a moment, the hum of the station around them. Allaria found herself feeling a bit lighter, the weight of the dream easing slightly. It wasn't gone, but having someone to share the burden with made it more bearable. For now, that was enough.

Then, a chime echoed through the dormitory, signaling the change of shift rotations. Karega rose from his chair, stretching his arms above his head. *"Well, that's my cue. Gotta go make myself useful."*

Allaria watched him head out, his easy stride carrying him into the hallway beyond. She stayed seated for a moment longer, staring at the small, scratched table in front of her. It wasn't about being better than everyone else anymore, she realized. It was about figuring out how to lead in a place where the unknown lurked behind every corner, where every decision felt like stepping into darkness. She had a lot to learn, but for now, she was here—in the fleet, among her fellow soldiers, facing the same vast emptiness together. And that was enough.

The datalink in Allaria's hand sprang to life with a vibration and a screen flash: *"All Atticus Crew Members - Please Report to Dock 11-B At 0400 In Preparation For the Atticus Departure."* Allaria's heart skipped a beat with excitement. Finally, after three months in this hell, she was leaving.

The following day, Allaria stood in her designated meeting location near Dock 11-B. One of the lights overhead flickered, most likely having not been replaced in a decade or more. A wave of nervous energy rippled through the assembled squads, everyone straightening, adjusting gear, trying to maintain an aura of confidence despite the anticipation gnawing at them. Allaria looked to her left, catching the eye of her shipmate, someone she didn't know the name of. He gave her a slight nod, a silent exchange that said, *"We got this."*

She smiled back, but her mind wandered to the past months on the Beijing Station. The smell of mildew in the corridors, the broken climate control system, the terrible food that always seemed

to taste like metal. She had counted each day, marking time, always with the departure date of the Atticus in her mind. The ship meant freedom, action, a purpose beyond the daily drudgery that she had experienced in this stagnant place. More than anything, it was a chance to start fresh, to be among her crew, her family in space.

Allaria's gaze shifted to the Atticus, looming large and powerful behind the docking window. She could see maintenance workers scurrying around it, making last-minute checks, and the automated drone units adjusting a few panels. The ship's hull was covered in fresh paint—yellow stripes standing out sharply against the gunmetal black, giving it a menacing yet regal look. The sharp lines of the battlecruiser, with no curves at all, made it appear even more formidable, a blade ready to cut through space. She noticed areas where the repairs had taken place—newly welded plates seamlessly integrated into the hull, replacing the sections that had been damaged during battle. The Atticus looked proud, almost defiant, as if it knew it was about to embark on a journey that demanded both courage and resilience. Through the windows, she could also see crew members cleaning and preparing the ship's bridge for the officers, ensuring everything was pristine for the upcoming mission. The sight filled her with a sense of pride. This ship wasn't just a vessel; it was a symbol of their strength, their ability to overcome. She felt this in her soul.

*"Move out!"* a voice boomed, and the squads began to shuffle into motion. The heavy boots of hundreds of soldiers and crew members echoed against the metal deck plates, each step deliberate, calculated. Allaria felt the weight of her pack on her shoulders, the familiar burden grounding her to the moment. She followed her squad forward, her eyes moving from the floor to the docking hatch ahead, revealing the entryway to her future.

As they approached the hatch, Allaria took in a deep breath, the air tinged with the familiar scent of hydraulic fluid and metal shavings. Then, with a sharp hiss and a heavy, mechanical clank, the thick door to the ship began to slide open. Allaria jumped as the sound startled her. A sense of expectancy rippled through the line of crew members as the unique smell of the atmosphere from within the Atticus rushed out, enveloping them in a distinctive aroma that could only be found aboard this particular vessel. The aroma was a combination of its construction materials, air handling mechanisms, cleaning chemicals, fresh paint, and the people. She couldn't help but feel a shiver of excitement. She was finally leaving this place, leaving behind the rust and the flickering lights, the heat of laundry day and the confinement of Beijing Station. With each step towards the Atticus, it felt like she was peeling away a layer of her temporary self—one that had

been worn thin by waiting, hoping, and struggling to keep her spirit alive amidst the station's suffocating stillness.

One by one, her squad members climbed into the ship, and when it was her turn, Allaria placed her hand on the edge of the hatch. It felt cool under her fingers, and she paused for just a second, savoring the moment. Then, with a final push, she stepped across the threshold and onto the Atticus.

Inside, the ship was alive with energy. Crew members were already bustling about, securing gear, running system checks, shouting orders and greetings across the narrow corridors. The air was thick with purpose, the tension almost palpable. It was everything she had craved while she was stuck on the station—movement, action, direction.

Allaria moved quickly to her bunk, throwing her gear into the storage compartment above it. She could hear the hum of the ship's power core, a constant reminder that soon, they would be cutting through space again. As she sat down for a moment, just to catch her breath, she thought about what lay ahead—new missions, new challenges, and the unknowns of space.

Whatever was to come, she was ready for it. Because this was her place, among these people, on this ship. And for the first time in months, she felt truly alive.

The excitement in the air was palpable, and Allaria quickly found the passageway her room was

The sharp tang of metal and faint whiff of oil clung to the recycled air of the ship's passageway. The ceiling lights, a harsh, sterile white, hummed softly above, casting their glow on the bustling activity as crew members passed by with hurried determination. The floor was a polished grey, scuffed in places where boots had left their mark after years of service. Langford, dressed in the typical dark uniform of his rank, stood solidly by the hatch, his face set in the perpetual scowl that came from experience, yet his eyes softened when he spotted her.

"*Laskari*," Langford called out, his voice carrying over the low murmur of the nearby crew. He had a gruff demeanor, his voice like gravel scraping together, but there was a warmth in his eyes that hinted at respect for the crew under his command. "Good to see you made it aboard without incident." He stepped forward, extending his hand to pass her a datapad. "You'll find your assignments uploaded here. Get yourself squared away and be ready for orientation in an hour."



Allaria gave a quick nod, standing a little straighter. "Yes, Sergeant," she responded, her voice steady despite the fluttering nerves beneath. She had only heard of Langford prior to today, tales of his no-nonsense leadership that resonated with the kind of soldier she aspired to be. Langford was efficient, never wasting time on unnecessary formalities, and she liked that.

He gestured towards her quarters, the small rectangular doorway leading into a shared dormitory. The space was even smaller than she imagined, part of a larger shared common room, with barely enough room for a bunk and a storage compartment. The walls were bare, dull metal with a few hooks for hanging gear, and a single overhead light threw shadows into the corners.

"We've got new room and bunk assignments, squad," Langford stated, his voice echoing slightly in the cramped metal space. *"Laskari, you're in 0019 along with Arturo, Karega, Utekli, and Simmons. Simmons will be in our squad until further notice. Get unpacked and settled in. We've got new duty stations and assignments this time around."*

Allaria furrowed her brow as she stepped into the room, her eyes scanning the cramped space. "Shit," she muttered under her breath. "The rooms used to be just two bunks. What the hell happened?"

Langford stood by the doorway, his expression unfazed. *"I've got no idea," he responded with a shrug. "But this is how it is now, for all squads. So get used to it. Best guess is they ripped out the dividing bulkheads to make more room."*

The rest of the squad filed into the room one by one, the clinking of gear and soft curses filling the air as they each claimed a bunk. The metallic clang of their bags echoed in the tight quarters, mixing with the steady hum of the ship. Langford chimed in with a final statement, *"That bunk against the starboard bulkhead, that's Laskari's bunk. Lance Corporals always get the head bunk in a squad bay. Also, Laskari—I forgot to mention—you're Lance Corporal now, so act like it."*

Allaria blinked in shock, the weight of his words almost making her drop her gear. She quickly set it down and followed Langford out into the hallway, her footsteps echoing lightly. She caught up with him, her voice low to keep her emotions in check. *"What do you mean I'm Lance Corporal now?"* she asked, her confusion and excitement simmering just beneath the surface.

Langford glanced at her, his expression unreadable, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box, handing it to her. *"Yeah, it seems your last Sergeant put in the papers just before he transferred. Here're your new insignias—you should wear them,"* he said in a tone that was flat, almost dismissive, leaving her unsure whether he was joking or just being an ass.

She opened the box, the pins glinting under the overhead lights, and stared at them for a long moment. Before she could say anything, Langford added, *"Oh, also—I know we haven't had a chance to spend much time discussing this, but your squad needs a proper name. Make sure you all decide together."* With that, he gave her a nod and walked off, his boots clanking rhythmically on the metal floor.

Back in the room, Arturo had already started unpacking, muttering to himself. *"Did anyone get a look at the other squad rooms? How does ours compare?"*

Allaria walked back in, the stale, recycled air of the room hitting her as she passed through the doorway. *"Ours looks pretty much identical to the one across the gangway,"* she replied, her voice edged with irritation. She dropped her bag on the bunk against the starboard bulkhead, her new assigned space.

*"So instead of having a peaceful, quiet, somewhat secluded space, we are all just crammed in here and expected to sleep peacefully together, by some miracle?"* Utekli said, his deep voice tinged with sarcasm as he eyed the tightly packed bunks.

Karega, sitting cross-legged on his bunk, added, *"They have dividing curtains for each bunk. Not much privacy, but it's something."*

Allaria let out a sigh, her shoulders sagging slightly. *"Yeah,"* she said, her voice dragging, frustration evident. She took a deep breath, trying to keep her composure. *"Look—we're all in this together. Listen to the squad across the passageway for a second."*

Everyone paused, the room going silent as they strained to listen. Muffled voices floated through the thin walls, frustration mirroring their own.

*"This can't be right! It's not fair!"* someone from across the way shouted, their voice filled with indignation.

Arturo chuckled, shaking his head. *"Seems like we're all in the same boat—cramped quarters and all."*

Allaria nodded, glancing around at the others. *"Yeah, well, we're not the only ones dealing with this. Let's just try to make the best of it. We're going to need each other's support if we want to get through this without losing our minds."*

Karega smiled faintly, a glint of mischief in his eyes. *"Well, if we're naming the squad, I say we call ourselves the 'Bunk Rats.' Seems fitting, considering the situation."*

Utekli snorted, shaking his head. *"Bunk Rats? We could do better than that, Karega. How about something that doesn't make us sound like pests?"*

*"Well then, what about the Nightmare,"* added Simmons. This was the first time Simmons had said anything since she joined the Squad a half hour ago.

*"That's perfect!"* Allaria said, both because she wanted to build up the team's comradery and to help Simmons feel like she fit in. *"I'll let Langford know after breakfast."*

The Atticus, a drone carrier battlecruiser, undocks. Expand on this scene and how Allaria and her squad feel as this happens.

The Atticus, a Class III Drone Carrier Battlecruiser, began to undock from the station. The deep rumble of the ship's engines reverberated through the walls, a low vibration that seemed to settle in Allaria's bones. The ship shifted subtly as the docking clamps released, and a soft mechanical hiss signaled their departure. She could feel the faint pull of inertia as the Atticus moved away from the station, the sensation almost like a gentle sway beneath her feet. The entire squad felt it, an unspoken awareness that this was the beginning of something significant.

A sudden chime echoed through the ship, followed by a voice—crisp, clear, and unmistakably synthetic. *"Attention, crew of the Atticus. We are now undocking. Our current mission is to conduct scouting operations and conduct engine trials near Neptune. All crew members, please prepare for extended space travel. Orientation and duty station briefings will follow shortly."*

The AI voice was different—new, upgraded, precise. It resonated perfectly through the ship's comm system, each word enunciated without flaw. Allaria frowned slightly, her gaze drifting up toward the nearest speaker. The voice had a clarity she hadn't heard before, almost as if the

speakers themselves had been replaced along with the AI system. She made a mental note to ask someone in Engineering about it later, her curiosity piqued.

Arturo looked out through the small viewport at the end of the corridor, watching as the station slowly shrank away into the void of space. "*Here we go*," he muttered, half to himself, half to anyone who was listening. There was a mix of emotions—anticipation, anxiety, excitement—all blending together in the pit of Allaria's stomach. She turned to her squad, who were each settling into their assigned tasks, and felt a sense of unity. No matter where they were headed, they would face it together.

"*New AI voice sounds fancy*," Utekli commented, breaking the brief silence that had settled in the room.

"*Yeah*," Allaria replied absently. "*Feels like they upgraded more than just the software. Maybe the entire sound system.*"

Karega looked up from his bunk, a smirk tugging at his lips. "*Maybe they wanted to make sure we didn't miss a single word of all those lovely orders they give us.*"

Arturo chuckled, shaking his head. "*Or maybe it's to make sure we can't pretend we didn't hear them.*"

Allaria allowed herself a small smile, her nerves easing slightly. She adjusted the insignia on her collar, feeling the cool metal under her fingertips. The ship continued its smooth, steady course, the deep hum of the engines almost soothing in its constancy. They were headed for Neptune, and with it, new challenges. But for now, they had each other, and they had a mission. That was all that mattered.

The AI voice came on again, this time softer, almost conversational. "*All personnel, please ensure your gear is secured. We will be performing initial acceleration tests shortly. Expect mild fluctuations in ship stability.*"

The Atticus has a standard acceleration of 1g per second. The artificial gravity helps compensate for this after a few moments, but the initial shift in acceleration can be disorienting. The trip from Mars to Neptune is estimated to be about 15 days.

The Atticus' initial engine tests began in earnest once the ship was clear of the station. The ship's movements were deliberate and precise, as if the Atticus itself were a living entity awakening after a long slumber. The powerful engines thrummed, and the entire vessel responded to each input with a mixture of grace and raw force. The crew could feel the Atticus shift as it went through a series of test maneuvers—small adjustments to bearing and sudden shifts in speed that sent a ripple of subtle vibrations through the walls and floors.

The artificial gravity compensated quickly, but each change in acceleration came with a momentary disorientation. Allaria felt herself sway slightly as the ship surged forward, the sensation like the ground briefly moving beneath her feet. The ship executed a series of sharp turns, each one testing the maneuvering thrusters, and the entire squad held onto their bunks or walls as they adjusted.

Arturo gripped the frame of his bunk, his knuckles turning white. "*Feels like we're riding a beast that's just woken up,*" he remarked with a wry grin, his eyes darting to the viewport where the stars outside blurred with each turn.

"*Better to find out what she's capable of now than in a firefight,*" Karega responded, his voice steady, though his eyes betrayed a hint of unease. The Atticus was flexing her muscles, and the crew had to learn to move with her, to trust in the ship's ability to carry them through whatever lay ahead.

The trip from Mars to Neptune would take fifteen days, a journey that tested both the crew's patience and their ability to adapt to life in confined quarters. The Atticus moved with a constant acceleration of 1g. Any more than this and the artificial gravity system wouldn't be able to keep up. This allowed the crew to function normally—at least, for the most part. Each time the engines shifted, there was a moment when the artificial gravity systems lagged just slightly behind, creating a strange, disorienting sensation that left Allaria feeling like her stomach was doing flips.

The first few moments after each acceleration change were always the hardest. There was a lurch, a pull that felt like being dragged in multiple directions at once, and then, slowly, the gravity systems would compensate, leveling everything out. Allaria often found herself bracing against her bunk or the nearest bulkhead until the sensation passed, her body instinctively tensing against the strange forces.

"*You'd think they'd have figured out a way to make that smoother by now,*" Utekli muttered one day, his face slightly pale after a particularly abrupt shift.

"*Maybe it's part of the charm,*" Arturo replied, his tone light, though his grip on the bunk rail was tight. "Keeps us on our toes."

The days blurred together, marked by the hum of the engines, the chatter of the crew, and the steady routines of shipboard life. Meals were taken in the small mess hall, where the scent of reheated rations mixed with the ever-present metallic tang of the ship's recycled air. The crew spent their downtime playing cards, sharing stories, or simply staring out of the narrow viewports at the endless stretch of stars. Combat drills were also a daily routine, with the crew running through various emergency scenarios—boarding actions, hull breaches, and zero-gravity combat. The drills were intense, leaving everyone drenched in sweat and hearts pounding, but they were necessary. Langford made sure every squad on his gangway was ready for anything, barking orders as they practiced, his voice echoing through the narrow halls. The drills forged the squad into a cohesive unit, each member learning to anticipate the others' moves, building trust that would be crucial in any real combat situation. The vastness of space was both humbling and isolating, a reminder of just how far they were from home.

Allaria found herself growing closer to her squad as the days passed. The shared discomforts, the small victories, and the moments of laughter forged a bond between them that was more than just camaraderie—it was a sense of family. Simmons, the new squad member, was fitting in better than she had expected. Initially quiet, she had slowly started to open up, showing a dry sense of humor that caught them off guard at times. She proved herself during combat drills, quickly picking up the routines and adjusting to the squad's dynamic. The others appreciated her steady demeanor, and she seemed to have an almost calming presence during the more intense moments. They were all in this together, and that unity made the long journey bearable.

For Allaria, each day on the *Atticus* began at 0500 sharp. The harsh blare of the alarm echoed through the cramped quarters, pulling her out of a restless sleep. She would roll out of her bunk, feet hitting the cold metal floor, and head straight for the showers. The water was lukewarm at best, but it was enough to wake her up and shake off the grogginess. By 0600, she was in the mess hall for breakfast—standard rations, nothing fancy, but enough to fuel her for the day ahead.

The Atticus recycled its water with remarkable efficiency—99.2%, to be exact. The system captured every droplet, even extracting moisture from the air to ensure that nothing went to waste. The process was so effective that, despite the ship's size and crew count, water shortages were never a concern. It was a marvel of engineering that made extended space travel possible, though it meant that every drop Allaria used in her lukewarm showers had likely been recycled countless times before.

By 0630, she reported to her duty station, ready for whatever tasks were assigned. This could mean anything from maintenance checks to assisting with system diagnostics, depending on the day's schedule. The mornings were often filled with routine inspections, ensuring every part of the ship was functioning as it should. Langford ran a tight ship, and Allaria knew better than to let anything slip through the cracks.

In addition to her regular duties, Allaria was also working on her officer training, which meant she got time on the bridge at least once every few days, observing the senior officers. The bridge was a completely different environment—hushed, efficient, with a constant flow of data displayed on the screens and senior officers giving commands in calm, measured voices. It was intimidating at first, but Allaria quickly learned to pay attention to the subtleties of leadership and decision-making. She valued these opportunities, knowing that understanding the bigger picture of how the ship operated would only make her a better leader for her squad.

By 1000, it was time for a short break, allowing the crew to catch their breath before diving into the next set of tasks. The rest of the morning was spent in drills or at her station, working alongside the rest of her squad to keep everything running smoothly. Lunch came at 1200, a quick meal in the mess hall before they were back at it again by 1230. The afternoons often included combat drills—simulations and training exercises that pushed the squad to their limits, ensuring they were prepared for any situation.

At 1600, Allaria had a bit of downtime, which she often used to catch up on reports or simply relax with her squadmates. Dinner was served at 1800, followed by more training or maintenance duties until 2000. The evenings were quieter, the hum of the ship more pronounced as the day wound down. By 2100, she was back in her bunk, exhausted but satisfied with the day's work. The lights dimmed, and the recycled air felt a little heavier as the ship settled into its night cycle. It wasn't glamorous, but it was the life she had chosen, and for now, it was enough.

## CHAPTER 8 - THREE YEARS AGO

The academy had been grueling—a five-year program designed to prepare both enlisted crew members and future officers. Now, in her third year, she had been deeply immersed in leadership training theories, an area that was both demanding and fascinating.

The leadership training modules were unlike anything she had experienced before. It wasn't just about learning tactics or strategy; it was about understanding people—how to motivate them, how to inspire them, and how to make tough decisions that affected more than just herself. The instructors at the academy, veterans who had traveled more kilometers than Allaria could count, were unyielding in their expectations. They taught that a true leader must be willing to shoulder the burdens of those under their command, to be the first to step into danger and the last to leave.

One particular exercise left a lasting impression on her. It was a simulation designed to test her ability to lead under pressure. She was placed in command of a small squad tasked with rescuing hostages from a simulated enemy encampment. The simulation was relentless, filled with unexpected variables and constant pressure. Her squad looked to her for guidance, and she quickly realized that every decision she made, every order she gave, had consequences. There were times during the exercise when she doubted herself, when the weight of responsibility felt overwhelming, but she pushed through it, trusting her instincts and the people around her.

Arturo, one of her classmates, had been by her side during the exercise, his calm demeanor a steadying influence. "*Allaria, we need to decide on an approach—now,*" he said, his voice urgent but even. She looked at him, saw the confidence in his eyes, and found her own resolve. "*We're going in from the west,*" she responded, her voice firm. Arturo nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. "*That's what I thought you'd say. Let's move.*" His confidence in her helped steady her nerves, and she led the squad forward.

As they moved into position, Allaria could feel the tension among her squad members. She knew they were all relying on her, and the pressure was immense. Arturo took the lead in navigating through the rocky terrain, while Karega kept watch for any signs of enemy movement. Utekli was in charge of communications, keeping everyone updated on the situation. Their movements were synchronized, each of them playing their part, and Allaria could feel the squad coming together as a cohesive unit. They reached the perimeter of the enemy



encampment, and Allaria signaled for them to take cover. She whispered her plan, her voice steady as she assigned each member their role in the rescue. It was a risky maneuver, but she trusted her team, and more importantly, they trusted her.

The moment they moved in, everything seemed to happen at once. Enemy guards spotted them, and a firefight erupted. Allaria focused on keeping her squad together, shouting orders as they pressed forward. Arturo provided covering fire, his steady aim allowing Karega and Utekli to move in closer to the hostages. Allaria could feel her heart pounding, but she refused to let fear take over. "*Karega, go left! Utekli, get that door open!*" she commanded, her voice cutting through the chaos. Her squad followed her orders without hesitation, their trust in her evident in every move they made. Within minutes, they had secured the hostages, and Allaria signaled for extraction. As they pulled back to safety, she felt a surge of pride—her team had done it. They had come together, trusted each other, and succeeded against the odds.

After they reached the extraction point, Allaria took a moment to look at her squad. They were exhausted, but there was a sense of triumph in their eyes. Arturo gave her a nod, his expression one of respect. "*We did it, Allaria,*" he said, his voice filled with both relief and pride. Utekli, normally so serious, even cracked a rare smile. Karega clapped her on the shoulder. "*Not bad, Lieutenant,*" he teased, knowing she wanted to eventually become an officer. Allaria smiled, feeling the weight of the exercise lifting. It wasn't just her leadership that had made this possible—it was all of them, working together as a team. In that moment, she knew that no matter how tough the challenges ahead might be, they could face them together.

After the exercise, the debrief had been intense. The instructors dissected every decision she made, pointing out where she could have been more effective, where she hesitated, and where she excelled. They emphasized that leadership wasn't about being perfect; it was about being adaptable, about learning from mistakes and growing stronger because of them. Allaria took their words to heart. She knew she wasn't perfect, but she was determined to be better, to be the kind of leader her crew could rely on in the heat of battle.

Another aspect of leadership training that Allaria found particularly challenging was the focus on interpersonal relationships. She was naturally introverted, and the idea of having to connect with and understand the diverse personalities of her future crew was daunting. The academy pushed her out of her comfort zone, forcing her into situations where she had to communicate effectively, mediate conflicts, and build trust. There were classes on emotional intelligence, on

understanding the motivations of others, and on how to lead with empathy. At first, Allaria struggled with these concepts, but over time, she began to see the value in them. She realized that leadership wasn't just about giving orders; it was about earning respect, about being someone others wanted to follow.

Karega often challenged her during these exercises. He had a natural charisma that made people want to follow him, and Allaria sometimes felt overshadowed by his presence. During one group exercise, Karega questioned her approach. "*Are you sure that's the best way, Allaria? I think there might be a more efficient route.*" She felt her frustration rising but took a deep breath. Instead of snapping back, she considered his suggestion. "*Alright, Karega, let's hear it,*" she said, her voice steady. He outlined his idea, and as she listened, she realized that he might be right. "*Good call,*" she admitted, and they adjusted their plan. It was a small moment, but it taught her the importance of being open to feedback, even when it came from someone she sometimes saw as a rival.

Allaria also participated in an exercise where she had been paired with Utekli, someone who approached problems very differently than she did. Their task was to work together to solve a complex logistical problem, and they had only a few hours to do it. At first, the tension between them made it almost impossible to make progress. They argued, their egos clashing as they each tried to take control. Utekli's stubbornness matched her own, and for a while, it felt like they were getting nowhere. But as the clock ticked down, Allaria remembered what her instructors had said about empathy and understanding. She forced herself to listen, to really hear Utekli's perspective, and slowly, they began to work together. By the end of the exercise, they had not only completed the task but had also gained a newfound respect for each other. It was a powerful lesson for Allaria, one that stayed with her throughout her training.

Another training program Allaria participated in was one where she had been paired with Utekli, someone who approached problems very differently than she did. Their task was to work together to solve a complex logistical problem involving the distribution of limited supplies to multiple space stations. Each station had different needs, and some of the supply routes were at risk due to simulated pirate activity. They had only a few hours to come up with an optimal solution that ensured every station received what it needed while minimizing the risk of losing supplies to potential threats.

At first, the tension between them made it almost impossible to make progress. Allaria favored a risk-heavy approach that involved pushing supplies through the most direct routes, while Utekli preferred a more cautious method, utilizing detours to avoid potential pirate encounters. They argued, their egos clashing as they each tried to take control. Allaria's stubbornness matched his own, and for a while, it felt like they were getting nowhere. But as the clock ticked down, Allaria remembered what her instructors had said about empathy and understanding. She forced herself to listen, to really hear Utekli's perspective. She began to understand that his approach, though cautious, was grounded in a desire to minimize risks and protect the supplies to ensure they reached their destinations safely.

Recognizing the validity of her concerns, Utekli proposed a compromise—using her direct routes for the most urgent supplies while employing his cautious detours for the rest. Allaria agreed, and they began to work together with renewed focus. They mapped out the supply routes, prioritized the cargo, and reallocated resources to account for potential losses. By the end of the exercise, they had not only completed the task but had also created a detailed contingency plan for any unexpected issues along the way. The instructors praised their solution for its balance of speed and safety, and both Allaria and Utekli felt a sense of accomplishment. They had gained a newfound respect for each other, realizing that their differing approaches could complement one another when combined effectively. It was a powerful lesson for Allaria, one that stayed with her throughout her training.

The leadership theories she studied were varied—transformational leadership, servant leadership, situational leadership. Each theory offered a different perspective on what it meant to be an effective leader. Allaria found herself drawn to the idea of servant leadership, the notion that a leader's primary role was to serve their team, to ensure they had what they needed to succeed. It resonated with her, and she began to incorporate those principles into her approach during training exercises. She made a conscious effort to support her squad, to listen to their concerns, and to put their needs ahead of her own. It wasn't always easy, especially when the pressure was on, but it felt right to her.

During a late-night study session, Allaria sat with Arturo, Karega, and Utekli in the academy's common room. The table was covered with datapads and half-empty cups of coffee. Arturo yawned, stretching his arms above his head. "I don't know about you all, but servant leadership is making more and more sense to me," he said, his eyes meeting Allaria's. She shook her head slightly, her expression thoughtful. "I don't know, I think transformational leadership resonates

more with me," she replied. "It's about inspiring others to see beyond just their tasks and motivating them to achieve something greater. I think it could make all the difference out there." Karega leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful look on his face. "It's definitely a powerful approach. Getting people to buy into a vision is no small feat." Utekli, who had been quietly listening, finally spoke up. "It requires a lot of passion and energy, but if done right, it can really change things." Allaria felt a sense of camaraderie with them in that moment, a shared understanding of the journey they were on together.

Late at night, when she lay in her bunk, Allaria often thought about her parents. She hadn't seen them in three years, and the ache of their absence was a constant undercurrent in her life. She wondered if they would be proud of the person she was becoming, if they would understand why she chose this path. She imagined her mother's smile, her father's reassuring voice, and it gave her strength to keep going, to push through the challenges that came her way.

Another grueling session took place in the hand-to-hand combat training room. Allaria faced off against another trainee, a tall and muscular cadet named Renko. The combat was fierce from the start—Renko came at her with powerful strikes, each one aimed to put her on the defensive. Allaria dodged, her movements quick and calculated, feeling the adrenaline course through her. She knew she couldn't match Renko's strength, but she could outthink him. She used her agility to her advantage, ducking under his wide swings and countering with sharp, precise blows. Renko growled in frustration, trying to land a hit, but Allaria stayed one step ahead. She anticipated his moves, using his own momentum against him. With a swift pivot, she swept his legs out from under him, sending him crashing to the mat. She moved in quickly, pinning him down before he could recover. The instructor called the match, and Allaria stood up, breathing heavily but victorious. Renko gave her a grudging nod of respect, and she extended her hand to help him up. It wasn't just about strength—it was about intelligence, speed, and the will to win. Allaria knew that, and today, she had proven it. She reminded herself *Strength and Knowledge is Power*. A mantra that she had repeated to herself every day for the past three years.

In the first and second years of combat training, it wasn't uncommon for trainees to become upset with each other after a sparring match. The tension would often lead to grudges, with some cadets even attempting to retaliate in later sessions. The intensity of competition, combined with the frustration of losing, made for an emotionally charged environment. But now, as third-year trainees, they had matured past that. They understood that each match was an opportunity to grow, to learn from mistakes, and to hone their skills. There was a respect that

had formed between them—a recognition that they were all in this together, striving toward the same goal. Winning or losing was no longer personal; it was part of the process of becoming better. This change in attitude had fostered a stronger sense of camaraderie, and Allaria appreciated the difference. Now, after every match, there were nods of respect, even smiles, as they acknowledged each other's growth.

Allaria was glad to be a third-year trainee. One of the perks of making it this far was the upgraded barracks. Unlike the cramped quarters of the first and second years, the third-year barracks were more spacious and had windows that overlooked Earth below. It was a breathtaking view—watching the planet spin slowly beneath her, the blues of the oceans, the swirling clouds. It gave her a sense of perspective, a reminder of what she was training to protect. At night, she would sometimes just sit by the window, her thoughts drifting as she gazed at the distant world that she hadn't set foot on in three years. The sight of Earth filled her with a mix of longing and determination—it was both home and the reason she was here, pushing herself every day to become the best leader she could be.

By the end of her third year, Allaria had grown in ways she never could have imagined when she first entered the academy. She was still learning, still making mistakes, but she was no longer the uncertain cadet who second-guessed herself at every turn. She was becoming a leader, one who understood the importance of both strength and compassion. And as she stood on the Atticus, watching Dr. Rohith and the analysts working below, she knew that everything she had learned during these years of training was preparing her for this moment—for the challenges she faced now, and for the unknown trials that lay ahead.

Advanced weapons training was one of the most challenging courses Allaria had faced yet. This class was designed to prepare trainees for combat in the confined, unpredictable environment of a spaceship. The instructors, grizzled veterans with years of experience in space combat, took the cadets through the rigorous drills of mastering rifles and pistols in close quarters. They began by learning the basic mechanics of using energy rifles and kinetic pistols, but quickly moved on to mastering their use in the tight confines of narrow hallways, small cargo bays, and the labyrinthine layouts of ships. It wasn't just about marksmanship—it was about learning to move, to use cover effectively, and to think quickly under pressure when there was no room to maneuver.

The training also included simulated hull breach scenarios, which presented entirely different challenges. Allaria found herself taking on both offensive and defensive roles. As an attacker, her team would have to infiltrate a damaged section of a ship, their suits sealed against the vacuum, their visibility limited by the flickering emergency lights. The sound of her own breathing filled her ears as they breached the hull, moving quickly to secure the area. There were no comforting assurances of gravity here—the low-G environment made everything more difficult, and any mistake could send her spinning out of control. The defenders, meanwhile, had the benefit of prepared positions and superior knowledge of the ship's layout, forcing the attackers to think creatively and work as a unit to outmaneuver them.

Allaria's team faced a particularly tough challenge during one of these exercises. Playing the role of defenders, they were tasked with holding off an attacking squad in a section that had simulated hull breaches, meaning parts of the area were entirely without air. They had to seal bulkheads, move through zero-gravity passages, and secure their positions while conserving oxygen. Working with Arturo, Utekli, and Karega, she led her team in setting up defensive choke points, covering all possible entrances, and staying in constant communication. It was a brutal, exhausting test of their endurance and tactical skills, but under her leadership, they managed to fend off the attackers, adapting as the enemy found new routes into their position.

The instructors didn't go easy on them. The trainees practiced weapon drills until their hands were sore, and then they kept practicing. They ran through combat scenarios over and over until their actions became instinctual, until they knew every inch of the practice decks as if they had been born on them. The goal was to create soldiers who could react without hesitation, who could make split-second decisions with absolute confidence. Allaria loved it. The physicality, the rush of adrenaline, the sense of achievement when she successfully cleared a room or outmaneuvered an opponent—it all reminded her why she had chosen this path.

There was one day that particularly stood out to her. They were tasked with clearing a simulated pirate ship that had docked with their own. The ship's interior was a warren of narrow, dimly lit corridors, and the pirates were entrenched. The instructors watched from above as Allaria led her squad, moving in calculated bursts, covering each other as they advanced. She could hear Arturo's voice through the comms, calm and precise, calling out enemy positions. Karega took point, his rifle sweeping each intersection before signaling the all-clear. Utekli was behind her, watching their backs. The pirates were well-prepared, but Allaria's squad was relentless, systematically pushing forward until they had driven the defenders back to the bridge.

The final push was the most intense. They had to breach the bridge door, and time was running out. Allaria ordered Karega to plant the breaching charge while Arturo and Utekli covered their rear. The explosion was deafening, even through her helmet, and they rushed in amidst the smoke and chaos. Allaria led the charge, her pistol ready, her focus razor-sharp. They neutralized the defenders quickly, securing the bridge and completing the mission with seconds to spare. As the lights flickered back to normal and the scenario ended, the adrenaline rush slowly ebbed away, leaving her exhausted but exhilarated. The instructors commended their teamwork and praised Allaria's decisive leadership, a compliment she held onto, knowing how hard-earned it was.

Training for combat in a zero-gravity environment was an entirely different challenge, one that pushed Allaria to her limits. The academy had an entire module dedicated to zero-G combat, with simulations that took place in a specially designed chamber where gravity could be turned off completely. In zero gravity, every movement had to be carefully calculated; even the smallest force could send her spinning uncontrollably. The first few sessions were chaotic—Allaria and her squadmates struggled to adjust, their bodies flailing as they tried to navigate without the familiar pull of gravity. Learning how to use their environment to their advantage was crucial. They were taught to push off walls and use handholds to move with precision, to maintain a low profile while floating, and to conserve momentum when firing their weapons.

In one scenario, Allaria and her team were tasked with boarding a derelict ship and clearing out simulated hostiles—all in zero gravity. As soon as they entered the weightless environment, she felt her body drift, her limbs struggling to find stability. Arturo and Utekli moved beside her, using gentle pushes to glide through the air. Their suits were equipped with small thrusters, but the instructors insisted that they use them sparingly. The team needed to rely on their coordination, using the environment to move efficiently. Communication was key; they called out their movements, ensuring no one lost their way in the disorienting darkness of the ship.

As they moved through the corridors, Allaria quickly realized how vulnerable they were. Every time she raised her rifle, the recoil sent her backward, and she had to brace herself against a wall to maintain control. It was slow and methodical work—unlike the rapid, dynamic combat they were used to in gravity. The hostiles, represented by floating drone targets, moved unpredictably, forcing Allaria's team to constantly readjust. Karega used a combination of small bursts from his suit thrusters and controlled pushes to position himself, providing cover fire as

Allaria led the team forward. Her focus was on conserving momentum, making each movement count, and maintaining her aim despite the challenges of the weightless environment.

Defensive scenarios in zero-G were equally challenging. In one exercise, Allaria's squad had to defend a vital piece of infrastructure from an enemy boarding party. They set up their positions in a large cargo bay, using crates and floating debris as makeshift cover. The attackers moved in from multiple entry points, and the lack of gravity made it difficult to stay hidden. Allaria found herself floating above the battlefield, using her vantage point to call out enemy movements while Arturo and Utekli engaged the attackers below. The chaos of the zero-G environment made everything more unpredictable; debris floated between them, sometimes blocking shots, sometimes providing an unexpected shield.

The instructors emphasized adaptability—learning how to use the lack of gravity to create opportunities. Allaria practiced firing from different positions—upside down, sideways, bracing against walls—all while coordinating with her squad to maintain a cohesive defense. The exercise ended with Allaria successfully leading her team in repelling the attackers, their ability to work together and adapt to the zero-G environment proving to be the key to their success.

These zero-gravity training sessions were some of the toughest Allaria had faced. The disorientation, the difficulty in controlling her movements, and the ever-present threat of losing her sense of direction tested her patience and determination. But each time, she got a little better, learned a little more. By the end of the module, she could navigate through a weightless environment with confidence, using her surroundings to her advantage, and trusting her squad to do the same. The experience taught her that in space combat, nothing could be taken for granted—not even the ground beneath her feet. It was a lesson she knew she would carry with her into every future mission.

The weapons training wasn't just about offense. They also focused heavily on defensive maneuvers—how to retreat strategically, how to protect a damaged area, and how to extract injured comrades under fire. Allaria found these drills particularly difficult; her instinct was always to press forward, to keep attacking. But she learned the value of falling back, of holding the line just long enough for reinforcements or evacuation. In one scenario, she had to lead her team in a controlled retreat through a damaged corridor, their path blocked by debris, with simulated enemy fire forcing them to use every scrap of cover. It took all her focus to move her squad in careful, deliberate steps, ensuring no one was left behind.



There was also a strong emphasis on versatility. Allaria and her squadmates trained with a variety of weapons—standard issue energy rifles and pistols, shotguns for close quarters, and even specialized plasma cutters for when more conventional means wouldn't suffice. The plasma cutter was heavy and unwieldy, but it was designed to breach reinforced doors and barriers, a tool as much as a weapon. She practiced using it in scenarios where speed was critical, learning to cut through obstacles under enemy fire. It wasn't glamorous work, but it was vital. She knew that in a real battle, the ability to cut through an obstacle could mean the difference between life and death for her team.

The most challenging part of advanced weapons training, however, was the final live simulation. The instructors had set up an elaborate scenario involving multiple teams, each with competing objectives—some were tasked with defending a critical piece of ship infrastructure, while others, like Allaria's, were designated as attackers. The simulation lasted for hours, and the ship's compartments were filled with simulated hazards—flashing lights, smoke, and the constant blare of alarms. Allaria's squad had to fight their way through several defensive checkpoints, neutralize automated turrets, and overcome both environmental hazards and enemy teams. The scenario was brutal and unrelenting, but it was also the culmination of everything they had learned.

Allaria's team fought tirelessly, adapting as the situation changed, leveraging their training in confined space tactics, using their knowledge of hull breaches to move through depressurized sections, and trusting in each other to push forward. They faced tough opposition from the defending squads, and there were moments when it felt like they were on the verge of failure. But Allaria kept her cool, reassessing their approach, shifting their tactics when needed. When they finally reached their objective—a critical control node—they had only minutes left on the clock. Allaria led the final assault, coordinating her team's fire to take out the last defenders and secure the target.

When the simulation finally ended, and the lights returned to normal, Allaria could hardly believe it was over. She looked at her squad—Arturo, breathing heavily but giving her a thumbs-up; Karega, wiping sweat from his brow; Utekli, exhausted but grinning. They had done it. They had faced one of the toughest challenges the academy had to offer, and they had succeeded. The instructors gathered them for the debrief, their expressions uncharacteristically approving. They praised Allaria's leadership, her ability to adapt, and the way her squad had come together as a unit.

It was in these moments, surrounded by her fellow trainees, that Allaria truly understood what it meant to be a leader in space combat. It wasn't just about tactics or shooting straight—it was about adapting to whatever was thrown at you, about keeping your team together no matter the odds, and about never losing sight of the mission. As they left the training area, Allaria felt a sense of fulfillment. The path she had chosen was far from easy, but it was moments like this that made all the sacrifices worthwhile. She was ready for whatever came next.

## CHAPTER 9

*"Please make your way to your designated emergency assembly area for an important announcement. The announcement will begin in five minutes,"* the AI voice on the Atticus interrupted the work Nightmare squad was doing. Allaria was still impressed with how the AI voice seemed so crisp and new after the refurbishments. It echoed through the corridors of the Atticus, reverberating off the metallic walls and stirring a wave of curiosity among the crew.

The squad exchanged puzzled glances. Allaria looked up from her datapad, where she had been reviewing the day's assignments. She and her squad quickly did as instructed, along with the other hundreds of crew members, each with their own designated assembly area to meet at.

*"What's this about?"* Karega asked, his brows furrowed.

*"No idea,"* Allaria replied, slipping the datapad into her pocket. *"But we better get moving."*

The squad quickly assembled, falling into step as they navigated the labyrinthine passageways of the Atticus. The ship hummed with activity as crew members hurried to their designated areas, the air thick with anticipation and a hint of unease. The temperature in the corridors seemed to rise as more bodies crowded the narrow spaces, the heat of hurried movement palpable. As they moved, Allaria could hear the soft clank of boots on the gridded metal floors and the gentle whirr of machinery behind the bulkheads. Crew members jostled past one another, some bumping shoulders in their haste, their faces flushed from the rising warmth. The Atticus had always felt alive, but today there was something different—a tension that gnawed at the edges of her senses.

They wound their way through a series of narrow hallways, past intersections that seemed to blend together in an endless web of steel and circuitry. Karega, beside her, kept his eyes sharp, scanning each turn. Allaria noticed the other squads converging in their own directions, each one marked by the colored insignia on their shoulders. There was a stillness in the eyes of the passing crew, a kind of subdued wariness that reflected the uncertainty gripping them all. Whatever this was, it wasn't part of the standard drill routine. Even the Atticus, with its predictable schedules, had a way of throwing in the unexpected.

As they reached the assembly area—a large storage room lined with rows of fold-down seating around the bulkheads, dominated by a massive projection screen at the front—Allaria noticed

the atmosphere was charged. Conversations buzzed around her, a blend of cautious optimism and nervous speculation. Rumors flitted through the air like ghosts, difficult to grasp but impossible to ignore.

*"I heard it's about an intercepted transmission,"* someone muttered behind her.

*"No, no, it's probably just another drill,"* someone else countered, though their voice lacked conviction.

Karega shot Allaria a skeptical look, but she just shrugged. *"Who knows? Whatever it is, I just hope it doesn't involve more training simulations,"* she whispered, her voice laced with a bit of humor, though her eyes betrayed her concern. Simulations were exhausting, but at least they were predictable—this sudden summons was not.

The squad settled into a row of seats near the middle, giving them a clear view of the screen. Allaria watched as the last stragglers trickled in, the chatter beginning to die down as more eyes turned to the front. The lights overhead dimmed, casting the room into a muted half-light, and the hum of the ship seemed to grow quieter, as if the Atticus itself was waiting for what was to come.

Allaria let her gaze drift over her squad. Karega, always watchful, was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. To his left, Arturo, sat quietly, his expression unreadable as he stared at the front of the room. Utekli was next to Arturo, his eyes darting nervously as he shifted in his seat. On Allaria's right, Simmons, the only female in the squad, appeared outwardly calm, though her foot tapped subtly against the floor, betraying her tension. They were all on edge, but none of them would admit it aloud—not yet.

The large screen at the front of the room flickered, and the UDF (United Defense Fleet) insignia appeared. A hush fell over the crew, and Allaria felt a chill run down her spine. This was different. This was serious. She could feel it in the way the silence pressed against her ears, how the usual hum of machinery seemed to almost vanish, leaving them in a hollow anticipation.

Suddenly, a figure appeared on the screen—Commander Esser, his expression as stern as ever. His face was lined with years of service, his eyes sharp and commanding. He glanced down briefly, perhaps at a note, then looked directly into the camera. His voice, when he spoke, was clear and unyielding.

*"Attention, crew of the Atticus. I know many of you have questions, and I assure you, they will be answered in time. We have just received information that changes our current mission parameters. Effective immediately, all scheduled duties are suspended. We are moving to Condition Yellow."*

A ripple of murmurs passed through the room—Condition Yellow wasn't something invoked lightly. It meant heightened alert, preparation for potential confrontation. Allaria exchanged a glance with Karega, whose jaw had tightened. Whatever this was, it wasn't good.

Commander Revik continued, *"I need everyone to remain calm and follow the directives that will be distributed shortly. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill. Further instructions will be given by your squad leaders. Stay vigilant. Revik out."*

The screen blinked off, leaving the room in an uneasy darkness for a moment before the lights slowly brightened. Conversations erupted instantly, voices rising in anxious clusters. Allaria took a deep breath, steadying herself. She could feel the weight of the crew's unease, their collective uncertainty bearing down like a storm cloud.

*"Condition Yellow..."* Karega muttered, his eyes still on the now-blank screen. *"What the hell are we dealing with, Allaria?"*

Allaria shook her head. *"I don't know. But we need to be ready for anything. Whatever this is, it's bigger than just us."*

*"Do you think it's about the Gao-de?"* Utekli whispered, his voice barely audible, the tension in the room forcing conversations into hushed tones.

*"Maybe,"* Simmons replied softly, her eyes narrowing slightly. *"But wouldn't that come through the usual channels?"*

The screen once again flickered to life. *"A new religious and terroristic cult has been identified. There are known infiltrations within the fleet,"* Commander Esser began, his tone measured but edged with concern. *"Intelligence has provided us with limited information up to this point. There is much we don't know, but what we do know is that they are dangerous. They call themselves the Confessors."* The video was obviously a recording from earlier in the day.

A ripple of unease passed through the crowd. The silence was broken by scattered, almost inaudible gasps and the rustle of people shifting on their feet. Allaria felt a chill run down her spine, a cold that spread from her core and seemed to settle in her bones. Simmons glanced at her, her eyes wide, but neither of them spoke. The gravity of the word "terroristic" was enough to silence any response.

*"They recently released a recording, hijacking broadcasts on Earth,"* Esser continued. His voice carried a note of urgency, the kind that came from someone who knew the importance of every second. *"What you are about to see is that recording."*

The screen flickered, and a new image appeared—a man standing at a podium draped in dark robes, a prominent necklace hanging against his chest: a seven-pointed star encircled with two rings of silver. His eyes held a fervent intensity, and his voice resonated with a charismatic authority. The room seemed to hold its collective breath, every eye locked on the screen, every muscle tensed as the image filled the projection.

Allaria's breath caught in her throat. The man on the screen—there was something disturbingly familiar about him. She scrutinized his features, her mind racing. *"It can't be,"* she whispered under her breath. *"Did you say something?"* Arturo murmured beside her. She shook her head slightly, unable to tear her eyes away from the projection. Memories flooded back—the anthropologist who had boarded the Atticus before the Gao-de attack, Dr. Tulek Rohith.

His dark robes, the enigmatic demeanor, the way he had seemed out of place yet commanded attention. As the broadcast continued, Formosus spoke passionately about a new era for humanity, denouncing existing institutions and promising salvation through confession and unity under his guidance.

His voice was calm, yet it carried an edge—a fanaticism that sent a shiver through Allaria. The man's eyes seemed to pierce through the screen, his gaze unwavering and filled with a terrifying conviction. The crew stood frozen, the tension in the room now almost unbearable. No one moved, no one dared breathe too loudly. Whatever was coming, it was clear that it was unlike anything they had faced before.

The rhetoric was laced with ominous undertones. Allaria's heart pounded. Was Dr. Rohith and Constantine Formosus the same person? Or were they connected in some way?

The broadcast ended abruptly, and Commander Esser reappeared on the screen. "*Effective immediately, all crew members are to be vigilant for any signs of infiltration or subversion by this group,*" he ordered. "*Report any suspicious activities to your superiors. Dismissed.*"

The assembly broke into hushed conversations, the earlier buzz now replaced with tension.

"*That's unsettling,*" Simmons remarked as they made their way out of the chamber.

"*Yeah,*" Karega agreed. "*First the Gao-de, now this cult. What's next?*"

Allaria remained deep in thought. She needed answers.

"*Hey, you okay?*" Utekli asked, noticing her silence.

She forced a faint smile. "*I'm fine. Just... processing.*"

Back in their quarters, the squad members settled in, some discussing the announcement, others trying to distract themselves with routine tasks.

Allaria sat on her bunk, her mind churning. She needed to confirm her suspicions about Dr. Rohith. If he was connected to the Confessors, it could explain the unsettling events that had transpired—the Gao-de attack, the mysterious data they retrieved from the Ottmar, who knows what else. She glanced around. The others were occupied, and this might be her best chance to investigate.

"*I'm going to take a walk,*" she announced casually.

Arturo looked up. "*At this hour?*"

"*Can't sleep,*" she replied with a shrug. "*Need to clear my head.*"

He nodded, accepting her explanation.

Slipping out of the quarters, Allaria navigated the dimly lit corridors, her footsteps echoing softly. She headed toward the ship's data center, a hub where crew members could access information and resources. However, for what she needed, the standard terminals wouldn't suffice.

She recalled a maintenance terminal in a lesser-used section of the ship—a place she had discovered during her earlier explorations. It was connected to the ship's mainframe but was seldom monitored due to its location.

Reaching the secluded alcove, she found the terminal nestled behind a bulkhead. The area was quiet, the ambient hum of the ship's systems the only sound. She activated the terminal, the screen glowing softly. Her standard credentials would only grant her limited access, but she had learned a few tricks during her academy days.

*"Let's see if I still remember how to do this,"* she murmured.

She initiated a command prompt, inputting a series of codes to bypass the basic security protocols. A message flashed: **Access Restricted. Authorization Required.**

She took a deep breath. *"Time for Plan B."*

Reaching into her pocket, she retrieved a small device—a security bypass tool she had acquired during her time at the academy. It was meant for training purposes, to teach cadets about ship systems and security vulnerabilities. Technically, she wasn't supposed to have it anymore, but she had held onto it, figuring it might come in handy someday.

She connected the device to the terminal, initiating the bypass. The screen flickered, and then she was in. *"Now, let's find out who you really are, Dr. Rohith,"* she said under her breath.

She navigated through the personnel files, searching for his name: **No records found.**

*"That's odd,"* she mused. *"He should be listed."*

She tried alternative spellings, cross-referencing with recent boarding logs. Still nothing. Frustrated, she expanded her search parameters, delving into restricted sections. Files labeled **Classified** and **Eyes Only** appeared, but she hesitated. Accessing them would be a serious breach of protocol. But the stakes were high, and her instincts told her that something was very wrong. Steeling herself, she proceeded. She opened a file titled **Operation Shadow Veil.**

Inside were reports on covert operations, intelligence briefings, and dossiers on persons of interest. Scanning through, she found a document labeled: **Tulek Rohith—Alias Activity.** Her eyes widened as she read.



**Subject Name:** Tulek Rohith

**Known Aliases:** Constantine Steven Formosus, Dr. Elias Kohn, Brother Valen

**Affiliations:** Unverified links to multiple clandestine organizations

**Current Status:** Person of Interest—High Priority

**Notes:** Subject is believed to be involved in subversive activities undermining Earth Defense Fleet operations. Possible connections to Gao-de incursions and recent cult formations.

Allaria's heart raced. It was him. Dr. Rohith and Constantine Formosus were the same person. She delved deeper, uncovering communications intercepted between Rohith and unknown recipients. References to "*Project Genesis*" and "*Phase Two*" piqued her curiosity.

Opening a file labeled **Gao-de Biological Analysis**, she found an autopsy report on a Gao-de specimen retrieved after the recent attack.

#### **Autopsy Report:**

**Subject:** Gao-de Warrior

**Age:** Indeterminate

**Physiology:** Hybridized DNA sequences incorporating human and non-human elements.

Presence of synthetic neural networks intertwined with organic tissue. Unusual regenerative capabilities observed.

#### **Notable Findings:**

- **Cardiovascular System:** The subject possesses a centralized heart-like organ, larger than a human heart, with increased efficiency in oxygen transport.
- **Neural Structure:** Enhanced neural pathways suggest heightened reflexes and cognitive functions.
- **Genetic Markers:** Traces of human DNA sequences interlaced with unknown genomes. Evidence of genetic engineering and manipulation.
- **Conclusion:** The Gao-de may not be a purely alien species but a result of hybridization experiments potentially involving human subjects.

Allaria felt a wave of nausea. The implications were staggering. If the Gao-de were hybrids, and Dr. Rohith was involved, it meant there was a connection between the Confessors and the Gao-de attacks. She scrolled further and found a classified memo:

**Directive 47-B:**

**From:** High Pontiff

**To:** Agents

**Subject:** Authorized Personnel Only - Project Genesis Implementation

*"Due to the increasing threat posed by the Gao-de and internal subversive elements, Project Genesis is to be accelerated. Agents embedded within the fleet are to facilitate the necessary conditions for Phase Two. All operations are under strict confidentiality. Compromise will result in immediate termination."*

Allaria's hands trembled. Embedded agents? Subversive elements within the fleet? She thought of the recent changes aboard the Atticus—the new bunk arrangements, the reassignments, Sergeant Langford's abrupt appointment. Could he be involved? She needed to share this information, but with whom? Trust was now a precious commodity.

Her mind raced through the possibilities. Sergeant Langford was her immediate superior. Though she hadn't known him long, he seemed competent and professional. But was that enough? Could she really trust him with something this sensitive? She replayed every interaction she'd had with Langford, trying to gauge if there had ever been a hint of deception, anything that might suggest he wasn't who he claimed to be. She knew that if she was wrong, if Langford couldn't be trusted, it could spell disaster—not just for her, but for the entire crew. Yet, the stakes were too high to ignore. They were dealing with a threat that had infiltrated the fleet, and every instinct she had told her this was just the beginning of something much bigger.

The memory of Dr. Rohith's intense eyes flashed in her mind, his presence aboard the Atticus before everything began to fall apart. She had to know the truth—if there was even a chance that he was involved in something as dangerous as this cult, she couldn't stand idly by. A part of her hesitated, the rational voice in her mind warning her about the consequences. Unauthorized access to restricted files, copying classified information—it was more than just bending the rules, it was outright treason. If she got caught, she'd face a court-martial, at best. But what

other choice did she have? She needed answers, and she needed them now. There was no time to wait for official channels to make sense of the mess.

She decided to take a calculated risk. Exiting the files, she copied them to her datalink, then attempted to wipe any trace of her access from the terminal. Her hands were shaking slightly as she entered the commands, her eyes darting back and forth to ensure she didn't miss anything. She wasn't sure if any of her attempts to do so had any effect—the system was complex, and she was working with limited tools—but she had to try. The risk of leaving a trail was a chance she had to take. This information was too important to remain a secret, especially if what she suspected was true.

Disconnecting the bypass device, she slipped it back into her pocket and made her way out of the alcove, glancing around to ensure she wasn't observed. The corridors were quiet, the ship in its nighttime cycle. Soft lighting cast elongated shadows, and the distant hum of machinery provided a constant backdrop. Every step she took felt deliberate, as if she was walking on the edge of a knife. Her heart pounded in her ears, and she forced herself to keep her breathing steady. She couldn't afford to look suspicious, not now.

As she approached Langford's quarters, doubt gnawed at her. Was she making a mistake? What if he was one of them? What if she was about to walk into a trap? But the urgency of the situation propelled her forward. She couldn't let fear paralyze her—not when the lives of her squad, her friends, might be at stake. Whatever she found in those files hinted at something far greater, and the only way forward was to act. She had already crossed a line by accessing classified files; there was no turning back now.

Before pressing the chime on Langford's door, she looked down at her datalink, took a deep breath, and made a copy of the files to a separate folder. If things went wrong, if Langford turned out to be compromised, she would need a backup plan. She couldn't afford to put all her trust in anyone—not yet. Not until she had more answers. With that thought, she pressed the chime, her finger lingering on the button for a second longer than necessary, her breath held in suspense. After a moment, the door slid open, revealing Sergeant Langford. His brows rose slightly, an expression of mild surprise etched across his face.

*"Laskari? It's late... Is everything alright?"* His eyes narrowed, taking in her tense posture.

Allaria swallowed hard, her throat dry. *"Sergeant, I need to speak with you. It's important."*

Langford studied her face for a long moment, his gaze searching, weighing her words. She could almost feel him probing for cracks, for any sign of weakness. His silence stretched, amplifying her unease. Finally, he stepped aside, nodding. "*Come in.*"

She stepped inside, the door closing behind her with a soft but ominous hiss. The sound made her stomach tighten, as if sealing her fate. His quarters were modest—standard issue, with only a few personal touches. The air felt still, heavy, the small space almost suffocating. Langford gestured toward a chair. "*What's this about?*" he asked, his voice carefully neutral.

Allaria glanced at the chair but remained standing, her hands clenched at her sides. She saw the gesture but her mind was too preoccupied to process it fully. "*I have reason to believe there's a security breach within the ship,*" she said, her voice low. She hesitated, then added, "*Possibly involving high-level subversion.*"

Langford's eyebrow arched, his face betraying no emotion. "*That's a serious accusation.*" He paused, letting the silence draw out, the weight of his words pressing on her. "*What evidence do you have?*"

She hesitated, her heart pounding. The air seemed to thicken around her, the silence amplifying her doubts. What if he didn't believe her? What if this was a mistake? She took a deep breath, steeling herself. She had come this far—there was no turning back now. "*I accessed some restricted files,*" she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "*I know I shouldn't have, but I felt it was necessary.*"

For a heartbeat, Langford's expression remained blank, then his eyes hardened, his jaw setting. He took a step closer, his presence suddenly imposing in the small room. "*You realize that's a breach of protocol, Laskari. That could result in disciplinary action.*"

Allaria forced herself to hold his gaze, resisting the urge to look away. She could feel the sweat on her palms, her pulse thrumming in her ears. "*I understand, Sergeant. But please, hear me out.*" Her voice was steady, though the anxiety coiled tightly in her chest.

Langford regarded her for a long, agonizing moment, his gaze flicking over her face, searching. Finally, he gave a slow nod. "*Go on.*"

Allaria swallowed, her throat dry. She began to recount her discovery—the connection between Dr. Rohith and Constantine Formosus, the autopsy report on the Gao-de, and the implications of

Project Genesis. As she spoke, she watched his face, trying to read his reaction, but his expression remained inscrutable. His eyes never left hers, but there was something in his gaze—something she couldn't quite place. Was it disbelief? Concern? Or something else entirely?

Her words seemed to hang in the air, the silence between them thick and oppressive. Langford leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest as he listened, his eyes narrowing slightly at certain points, his lips pressed into a thin line. When she finished, he remained silent, his gaze dropping to the floor as if deep in thought. The seconds ticked by, each one stretching into eternity.

Finally, he spoke, his voice measured. "*That's quite a story,*" he said, his tone giving nothing away.

Allaria felt a pang of frustration. She needed him to believe her. "It's the truth," she insisted, her voice more forceful now. "*I wouldn't risk coming to you if I wasn't certain.*"

Langford stood up, his movements slow, deliberate. He began to pace, his eyes distant, as if weighing her words. "*Assuming what you've found is accurate... this is beyond us,*" he said at last, his tone reluctant. "*It needs to be reported to higher command.*"

Allaria's heart sank. She took a step forward, her voice urgent. "*But what if they're compromised too? The directives came from high up, Sergeant. We can't be sure who to trust.*"

He stopped pacing, turning to face her. His eyes met hers, and for a moment, she thought she saw a flicker of uncertainty there. He was silent, considering her words, the tension between them almost unbearable. Finally, he gave a slow nod. "*You have a point.*"

A glimmer of hope sparked in her chest. "*Sergeant, we need to act quickly. If the Atticus is being used as part of some larger plan...*"

He held up a hand, stopping her mid-sentence. "*Alright, Laskari.*" He paused, his gaze lingering on her, as if trying to gauge her resolve. "*Here's what we'll do. I'll contact a trusted officer I know—Lieutenant Commander Perez. He's as by-the-book as they come and has connections within Intelligence. We'll present the information to him and proceed from there.*" His voice was calm, but there was an edge to it, something that made Allaria unsure if he fully trusted her—or if he was testing her.

Langford gave a faint smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. *"You did the right thing bringing this to me. And for what it's worth, I admire your initiative, even if it was a bit... unorthodox."* He paused, his gaze still fixed on her, as if searching for something. *"Send me the files you have, and we'll get this sorted out."*

Allaria allowed herself a small smile, a flicker of relief. She quickly accessed her datalink and sent one of the copies to him, her fingers trembling slightly.

*"Get some rest,"* he advised, his tone softening. *"I'll set up a meeting with Perez tomorrow. And Laskari?"*

She looked up, meeting his gaze. *"Yes, Sergeant?"*

His eyes held hers, the tension between them still palpable. *"Until we get to the bottom of this, keep this between us. Understood?"*

*"Understood,"* she replied, her voice firm.

As she left his quarters, the door closing behind her with a quiet hiss, a mix of relief and lingering anxiety settled over her. The air in the corridor felt cooler, but her heart still pounded, the uncertainty gnawing at her. She had taken a leap of faith, but doubt still lingered. Had she done the right thing? Was Langford truly on her side? Or had she just put herself in even greater danger?

Returning to her bunk, she lay awake for hours, her mind spinning with possibilities. The revelations had opened a Pandora's box of questions. Who else was involved? How deep did the conspiracy go? The oppressive silence of the ship seemed to close in around her, the darkness of her quarters a reflection of her own fears.

Eventually, exhaustion overtook her, and she drifted into a fitful sleep, her dreams haunted by images of dark-robed figures and the piercing gaze of the Gao-de, their eyes filled with a cold, terrifying conviction.

The following morning, Allaria awoke early, her resolve tempered by a lingering sense of unease. She tried to shake off the doubt gnawing at her, but it clung stubbornly. She had no choice but to see this through. She arrived at the secure briefing room, her stomach twisting into knots as she saw Sergeant Langford waiting with Lieutenant Commander Perez.

Perez, a stern man with sharp eyes that seemed to pierce through her, remained silent as they entered. He gestured for her and Langford to sit, his gaze flicking between them. Allaria took a seat, her back rigid, her hands clenched in her lap. She glanced at Langford, who gave her a faint nod, though his expression revealed nothing.

As she and Langford presented their findings, Perez's face remained inscrutable. He listened, his eyes narrowing as he processed each detail, his silence stretching into an uncomfortable eternity. Allaria tried to read him, but his expression gave nothing away. The secure briefing room felt smaller by the second, the walls pressing in as if trying to squeeze the truth out of them.

Perez finally leaned back, folding his hands deliberately, his fingers steepled beneath his chin. He let the silence hang for a moment longer, his eyes locking onto Allaria's. She fought the urge to squirm under his gaze, her heart pounding in her chest. *"This is... highly disturbing,"* he said at last, his tone devoid of any emotion. He paused, his eyes lingering on her face as if weighing whether or not to trust her. *"If even a fraction of this is true, we're dealing with a significant threat."*

Allaria swallowed, glancing at Langford, who remained stoic, his eyes focused ahead. She wondered if he truly believed her or if he was simply going through the motions. Her thoughts were interrupted by Langford's question. *"What are our next steps?"* he asked, his voice calm, almost detached.

Perez's gaze shifted to Langford, his expression still unreadable. He folded his hands slowly, the gesture deliberate. *"We need to verify this information through official channels,"* he said. *"I'll contact Fleet Intelligence and initiate a discreet investigation."* He spoke with authority, but there was something about the way he said it—something that made Allaria's skin crawl. Was he genuinely concerned, or was he just trying to contain the situation?

*"But sir,"* she interjected, her voice coming out more hesitant than she intended. Her hands tightened into fists, her knuckles white. *"Time may not be on our side. If the Confessors or their agents are planning something imminent..."*

Perez's gaze turned back to her, and he studied her intently, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. He let the silence drag on, the room feeling colder, the hum of the ship outside barely audible. *"I*

*appreciate your concern, Lance Corporal,"* he said, his tone measured, almost patronizing. *"Rest assured, we will treat this with the utmost urgency."*

Allaria nodded, though a knot of anxiety tightened in her stomach. She wanted to believe him, but a part of her couldn't shake the feeling that there was more beneath the surface—something Perez wasn't saying. She stole a glance at Langford, but his expression remained impassive. Did he share her unease, or was she alone in this?

Perez cleared his throat, the sound sharp in the oppressive quiet. *"Until further notice,"* he continued, his voice dropping, *"this information is classified at the highest level. Do not discuss it with anyone else. Is that clear?"* His gaze bore into her, as if daring her to defy him.

*"Yes, sir,"* she and Langford replied in unison. Allaria forced her voice to remain steady, but inside, a wave of unease swept over her.

As they left the briefing room, the tension between them felt almost tangible. Langford placed a hand on her shoulder, the weight of it both reassuring and unsettling. *"You did well, Laskari. We'll get to the bottom of this,"* he said, his voice low.

She offered a tentative smile, though it felt forced. *"I hope so, Sergeant."* She searched his eyes, trying to find a hint of his true thoughts, but they remained guarded.

Over the next few days, an undercurrent of tension pervaded the Atticus. The once-familiar routine felt warped, twisted by the sense of something lurking just out of sight. Unusual orders were issued without explanation, and entire areas of the ship were suddenly off-limits, security personnel stationed at key checkpoints. The once-bustling corridors felt eerily quiet, the sense of unease palpable in the air. Allaria kept her head down, focusing on her duties, her eyes and ears always on alert.

She couldn't help but notice the changes in the behavior of some crew members—whispered conversations that stopped abruptly when she approached, guarded expressions, and sideways glances that made her skin prickle. The tension hung over them like a storm cloud, ready to burst at any moment.

One evening, as she made her way back to her quarters, she caught sight of a familiar figure ahead. Dr. Rohith. Her steps faltered, her heart skipping a beat. He was standing in the middle



of the corridor, as if waiting for her, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his lips. The lighting overhead flickered slightly, casting his shadow long against the metal floor.

"*Good evening, Lance Corporal,*" he greeted smoothly, his voice carrying a warmth that felt out of place amidst the tension aboard the ship.

"*Doctor,*" she replied cautiously, her voice tight. She tried to keep her expression neutral, but she couldn't ignore the sense of dread that settled in her stomach.

Rohith's smile widened, his eyes glinting with something she couldn't quite place. "*How are you finding the Atticus after its... refurbishments?*" he asked, his tone casual, but the slight pause in his words sent a shiver down her spine.

"*Fine,*" she answered tersely, her eyes narrowing. The way he spoke felt off, as if there was a hidden meaning she couldn't grasp. She purposefully kept her responses short while trying to leave the conversation.

Rohith tilted his head, his gaze never wavering from hers, his eyes gleaming with amusement. He took a step closer, his voice dropping slightly. "*You seem troubled, Lance Corporal. Is everything alright?*" The words were innocent enough, but the way he said them made her blood run cold. It felt like a challenge, as if he knew more than he was letting on.

"*Just tired,*" she lied, her jaw tightening. She could feel her pulse quickening, a bead of sweat forming at her temple.

"*Of course,*" Rohith said lightly, his smile never fading. "*These are trying times.*" His gaze held hers for a beat longer, his eyes almost daring her to look away.

Allaria met his stare, a flicker of defiance in her eyes. "*Yes, they are,*" she replied, her voice firmer this time.

Rohith chuckled softly, the sound echoing down the empty corridor, sending another shiver down her spine. "*Rest well, then,*" he said, his tone almost mocking. "*I'm sure we'll be seeing more of each other.*" He turned and walked away, his footsteps echoing, each one a reminder of the threat that lingered just beneath the surface.

As he disappeared from sight, Allaria exhaled slowly, her muscles finally relaxing. The encounter left her shaken, her determination hardening. Whatever game Rohith was playing, she was not going to let herself be outmatched.

Returning to her quarters, she found a message waiting on her datapad—a summons to meet with Sergeant Langford and Lieutenant Commander Perez the next morning. Her heart pounded as she read it, uncertainty settling over her. What was waiting for her now? She couldn't help but wonder if the walls were closing in faster than she could escape.

## CHAPTER 10 - SIX MONTHS AGO

Nice job. Let's work on one section at a time. Analyze the following section and provide feedback to make the story more emotional. Pride should be felt.

Allaria stood in the simulated spaceship, her pulse steady, her focus razor-sharp. This was it—the final training mission before graduation. A lifetime of effort, sleepless nights, and relentless drills had led her to this moment. The room hummed with artificial sounds of machinery, the simulation projected through holographic displays, making the space feel like a genuine starship under threat. Alarms blared, and warning lights flashed, bathing the dim interior in red. She could feel the pressure mounting, but she stayed calm. This was her test, the culmination of everything she had learned in the Academy, and she knew her squad was counting on her. This was more than just a simulation—it was proof of her resilience, her growth, and her journey from being a novice cadet to becoming a leader.

*"Allaria, we've got incoming fire from port side!"* Arturo called out, his voice tight but controlled. He was at his station, managing shield deployment. She nodded, quickly processing the situation. Her heart swelled with pride as she listened to the urgency in his voice—an urgency tempered by the discipline they had all cultivated together.

*"Karega, adjust the auxiliary power to shields. Raul, I need a firing solution on those incoming hostiles,"* Allaria commanded. Her voice was clear and strong, a testament to her training, to her evolution as a leader. Each of her squad members snapped to their duties, their movements fluid and confident. It wasn't just about her—it was about all of them, working as a unit. The bond they shared, built through shared struggle and triumphs, made them more than just a team. They were her family.

Outside the simulation, the observation deck was filled with parents and other family members, their faces illuminated by the blue glow of the holographic screens. They watched with pride as their sons and daughters faced the challenges thrown at them by the instructors. Allaria caught a glimpse of the observation window, the seats filled with proud mothers and fathers. Her heart sank for a moment, a dull ache settling in her chest as she scanned the faces. There was no familiar face watching her from up there—her parents were not in attendance. She had known they wouldn't be here, had prepared herself for that absence, but seeing it—seeing the empty space where they should have been—still stung.

But rather than falter, that emptiness became fuel. Allaria clenched her jaw, her resolve hardening. She was on her own, and that was okay. She would prove herself—not just to her squad, not to her instructors, and certainly not to anyone who had doubted her—but to herself. This was her moment, the final puzzle piece that marked her transition from cadet to leader, from student to soldier. The absence of her parents was just another reminder that she had carved this path for herself, that she stood here now because of her own strength and determination. And for her squad—for the ones who stood beside her—she would be the best leader they could ask for.

*"Port shields holding at seventy percent!"* Karega reported, a hint of strain in his voice. Allaria nodded, her eyes narrowing as she scanned the tactical readout. The enemy ships were moving into a flanking position—she needed to counter that, and quickly.

*"Raul, fire a spread of EMP torpedoes. We need to disable their maneuvering thrusters. Utekli, get ready to redirect power once the torpedoes hit,"* Allaria ordered. There was no hesitation, no uncertainty. Her squad trusted her, and she trusted them. She could feel the weight of that trust, and it fueled her actions, her decisions. They were depending on her, and she would not let them down.

*"Firing now,"* Raul confirmed, his hands moving deftly over her console. A moment later, the simulation screen showed the torpedoes launching, streaking towards their targets. The squad watched as the enemy ships shuddered, their thrusters sparking and then going dark.

*"Direct hit! They're slowing down!"* Raul called out, a note of triumph in his voice.

*"Good work! Utekli, reroute power to forward weapons. Karega, focus all fire on their lead ship,"* Allaria commanded, her heart pounding but her voice steady. This was it—the final push.

The simulated ship rocked slightly as the enemy fired back, but Allaria barely noticed. Her focus was complete, her senses heightened as the pieces of the scenario clicked into place. She could see the endgame now, the victory within their grasp. The squad moved like a well-oiled machine, each member anticipating the next step, each command flowing seamlessly into the next. Pride surged within her—this was what they had worked for, every long hour, every struggle. They were more than ready; they were unstoppable.

And then, just like that, it was over. The enemy ships disintegrated on the screen, the holographic display flashing "MISSION SUCCESS" in bold letters. The alarms ceased, the red lights

dimmed, replaced by the cool blue of standby mode. Allaria let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, a smile breaking across her face. A rush of emotion washed over her—relief, pride, and a sense of fulfillment that was almost overwhelming.

The observation deck erupted in applause, parents cheering for their children. Allaria allowed herself a moment to take it all in, to feel the pride that came from knowing she had led her team to success. Her eyes flicked up to the observation deck again, to the spot where her parents might have been. There was still no one there for her, but that was alright. A lump formed in her throat, and her eyes stung for a brief second, but she swallowed it down. She had her squad, her team, and that was enough. She was ready for whatever came next, ready to face the unknown, not as a cadet, but as a leader. And in this moment, she knew she had made herself proud.

Graduation day arrived with an air of ceremony and anticipation. Allaria stood alongside her fellow cadets, now soon-to-be graduates, each of them dressed in their best uniforms. The fabric was crisp, the insignias near the podium polished to a shine. There was a sense of finality to the occasion—a transition from the structured, predictable life of the Academy to the vast unknown of the fleet. The parade grounds were filled with officers, instructors, and families, all gathered to witness the next generation of the Earth Defense Fleet take their first official step into service. Allaria's eyes scanned the crowd once again, and though the familiar faces she longed for weren't there, she stood tall. Today was about her—about what she had achieved, and the future she was ready to embrace.

Allaria took a deep breath as her name was called. She stepped forward, her heart pounding with a mix of pride and nerves. Her instructor stood before her, the hint of a smile on his usually stern face. He held the insignia of Private First Class in his hand, and as Allaria approached, he pinned it onto her uniform. The weight of the small metal emblem seemed to spread across her entire chest, a symbol of everything she had worked for. The insignia glimmered under the sunlight, and Allaria felt her throat tighten, a swell of emotion rising as she fought to keep her composure. This was it—this was the moment she had dreamed of for so long.

"*Congratulations, Laskari,*" the instructor said, his voice low but carrying a warmth that Allaria hadn't heard often. "*You're no longer a trainee. You're in the fleet now, officially. Make us proud.*"

Allaria nodded, her throat tight with emotion. She managed to get out a "*Thank you, Sergeant!*" before stepping back into formation. As she stood there, the insignia freshly pinned to her chest,

she couldn't help but glance at the crowd. The sea of faces, the cheering families—still, her parents weren't among them, but it didn't matter. She had made it here on her own merit, and that was enough. A wave of pride surged through her, and she let herself savor it—every long hour, every challenge, every setback had led her to this. She had earned this, and she was ready for what lay ahead.

After the ranks were handed out, the graduates were given their first assignments. Allaria waited with bated breath, her hands clasped behind her back as the orders were read out. Her name came up, and she listened as the assignment was announced: **"Private First Class Allaria Laskari, Squad Leader, Drone Platform Battlecruiser: Atticus."**

Her heart skipped a beat. Squad Leader. The title echoed in her mind, and she felt a surge of both excitement and trepidation. The Atticus—a Drone Platform Battlecruiser—was known for its strategic importance in the fleet. It wasn't just any assignment; it was a significant responsibility. She would be leading her squad into a new chapter of their journey. She allowed herself to fully absorb the magnitude of it—she had gone from cadet and trainee to Squad Leader, and it was more than she had dared to hope for.

Her instructor caught her eye from across the stage and gave her a nod. It was subtle, but the pride in his eyes was unmistakable. Allaria returned the nod, a smile tugging at her lips. This was it. The Academy was behind her now. She was stepping into the real world of the fleet, with all its unknowns and challenges. But she wasn't afraid. She was ready.

As the ceremony concluded, Allaria found herself surrounded by her squad. Karega clapped her on the back, grinning ear to ear. *"Squad Leader, huh? Looks like we're in good hands,"* he said, his voice full of confidence.

*"You better believe it,"* Allaria replied, her eyes shining with determination. She looked at each of them—Karega, Arturo, Utekli. They were her family now, and she would do everything in her power to lead them well. Her heart swelled with pride as she saw the trust and admiration in their eyes. This was her purpose, her path, and she would walk it with her squad beside her, come what may.

## CHAPTER 11

Allaria stood outside the briefing room, her mind a whirlwind of anxiety and determination. The metallic walls of the Atticus seemed to close in around her, the dim overhead lights barely illuminating the narrow corridor. The shadows seemed to shift with every breath she took, as if the ship itself was alive, pressing in on her. She clutched her datapad tightly, the weight of the copied files feeling heavier than ever. It wasn't just the data—it was the responsibility, the risk she was taking, and the knowledge that she might be alone in this fight. The air was thick, and every breath felt like a struggle against the unseen tension pressing down on her.

Taking a deep breath, she activated the door panel. It slid open with a soft hiss, revealing Langford and Perez seated at a rectangular table in the center of the dimly lit room. The atmosphere was tense, shadows cast by the overhead lighting accentuating the stern expressions on their faces. The light flickered slightly, making the shadows seem almost alive, stretching across the walls like dark tendrils.

"*Come in, Lance Corporal Laskari,*" Perez beckoned, his voice measured, but there was something in his tone that made Allaria's stomach tighten—a hint of disinterest or perhaps something darker. "*Please, have a seat.*"

Allaria nodded, stepping inside and allowing the door to close behind her. The door's hiss seemed unnaturally loud, like the sealing of a vault, cutting her off from any escape. She took the chair opposite them, placing her datapad on the table. The silence hung thick in the air, the hum of the ship's machinery barely audible beneath the weight of the moment. Perez leaned forward, his piercing eyes studying her intently, his expression unreadable.

"*I've continued to review the files you provided,*" he began, his voice slow, deliberate. "*The implications are... significant.*" He paused, his gaze still locked on her, as though trying to see through her, to find something hidden beneath her words.

Allaria met his gaze, her heart pounding. She could feel the sweat on her palms, and she fought to keep her voice steady. "*Sir, with all due respect, we need to act quickly. Dr. Rohith—or rather, Constantine Formosus—is aboard this ship. If he's orchestrating a conspiracy involving the Gao-de and the Confessors, the entire fleet could be at risk.*"

Perez exchanged a glance with Langford, who remained impassive, his eyes giving nothing away. *"I understand your concern,"* Perez continued, his voice carefully controlled. *"However, we must proceed cautiously. An unfounded accusation against a respected scientist could cause panic and undermine morale."*

There it was again—that sense of being placated, of being brushed aside. Allaria felt her frustration rise, a heat that spread from her chest to her face. *"Unfounded?"* she pressed, her voice shaking slightly despite her attempt to stay calm. *"The evidence is right there in the files."*

Langford's gaze hardened, his voice cutting through the tension like a knife. *"Evidence obtained through unauthorized access of classified materials,"* he said firmly. *"Which, under normal circumstances, would result in disciplinary action."*

Allaria bristled, her hands balling into fists under the table. *"Are we really going to focus on protocol when the safety of the ship is at stake?"* She could feel the walls closing in again, the room shrinking, the air growing more oppressive.

Perez raised a hand, his eyes narrowing slightly, as if assessing how far she would go. *"We're not dismissing your findings, Lance Corporal. But we need to verify their authenticity through official channels. We're also not pushing protocol to the side. It exists for a reason."* His words were calm, almost too calm, and they did nothing to ease the unease twisting in her gut. It felt rehearsed, like he was reading from a script, not genuinely addressing the crisis she was laying before them.

She clenched her fists tighter, her nails digging into her palms. *"And how long will that take? What if by then, it's too late?"*

Perez sighed, leaning back in his chair, the shadows shifting with his movement. *"As you know, I've already sent a secure communication to Fleet Intelligence. They are assessing the situation and will advise us on the appropriate course of action. Until they respond, we don't know the status of any investigations."* His words were methodical, detached, and Allaria couldn't help but feel that he was hiding something—or at least, that he wasn't telling her everything. There was a hollowness to his reassurances, a sense that he was simply trying to keep her quiet.

Allaria felt a knot tighten in her stomach, a cold fear wrapping around her insides. *"Sir, with all due respect, I think we need to do more than wait for instructions."*



Langford's eyes narrowed slightly, his lips pressing into a thin line. *"Careful, Laskari. Remember your place."* His tone was sharp, a warning that cut through her frustration and left her feeling exposed, vulnerable. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm, her vision blurring slightly as she fought back the urge to lash out.

*"Apologies, Sergeant,"* she said, her voice barely above a whisper. *"It's just that I've noticed unusual activity on the ship. Areas being restricted, crew members acting strangely. I even had a peculiar encounter with Dr. Rohith last night."* She hadn't intended to bring it up, but the words slipped out, the memory of Rohith's unsettling gaze flashing in her mind. She felt a shiver run through her, the sensation of his eyes still lingering.

Perez arched an eyebrow, his expression shifting—curiosity or something else? *"Oh?"*

She recounted the conversation, emphasizing his odd demeanor, the cryptic remarks that had made her skin crawl. As she spoke, Perez tapped his fingers on the table, the rhythmic sound echoing in the small room, each tap feeling like a countdown to something inevitable. *"Noted,"* he finally said, his tone almost dismissive. *"I will ensure that security keeps a closer eye on him."*

*"Thank you, sir,"* Allaria replied, though a lingering doubt gnawed at her, growing stronger with every word Perez said, a suspicion that his promise was empty. Something about Perez's responses felt off—as if he were merely saying what she wanted to hear rather than committing to any real action.

Perez stood up, signaling the end of the meeting. *"In the meantime, I suggest you focus on your duties and leave this matter to us. We'll handle it appropriately."*

Allaria rose as well, her throat tight with frustration. *"Understood, sir."*

As she turned to leave, Langford's voice followed her, cold and sharp. *"Remember, Laskari—discretion is paramount. Do not discuss this with anyone else."*

*"Yes, Sergeant,"* she replied, her voice hollow as the door slid shut behind her, sealing her once more in the dimly lit corridor. The walls seemed closer now, the ceiling lower, as if the ship were conspiring to suffocate her. She walked down the corridor, her footsteps echoing, the sound too loud, too sharp against the silence that pressed in on her from all sides.

Walking down the corridor, Allaria replayed the conversation in her mind. The dismissive tone, the subtle warnings—it all felt wrong. Her instincts screamed that something was off, that Perez and possibly Langford were not taking the threat seriously. Or worse, that they were somehow involved. The thought made her stomach churn, the knot of fear tightening until it was almost unbearable. She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes scanning the empty hallway, half-expecting to see someone following her, lurking in the shadows.

She needed to confide in someone she could trust. Karega had always been a reliable friend and ally. He was one of the few people aboard the Atticus she felt she could truly rely on. Making her decision, she headed toward the mess hall, her eyes darting nervously to each intersection, each doorway she passed, her paranoia growing with every step. Was she being watched? Was someone tracking her movements? The thought made her heart race, her palms sweaty as she gripped her datapad even tighter.

The mess hall was bustling with activity, crew members chatting and enjoying their meals. The noise was almost overwhelming after the suffocating silence of the briefing room, but Allaria found little comfort in it. Spotting Karega at a corner table, she weaved through the crowd to reach him, her eyes scanning the room for any sign of trouble.

"Hey," she greeted, sliding into the seat across from him, her voice strained. The greeting was out of place. She never greeted him this way.

He looked up from his tray, a smile forming that quickly faded when he saw her expression. "*Allaria. How'd the meeting go?*"

She glanced around to ensure no one was listening, her eyes lingering on a group of crew members nearby who seemed to be watching her a little too closely. "*Not here,*" she whispered. "*Can we talk somewhere private?*"

His expression turned serious, his eyes narrowing slightly. "*Sure. Let's head to the observation deck.*"

They made their way to the observation deck, a quiet space with large viewports offering a panoramic view of the stars. It was mostly empty at this hour, the dim lighting casting long shadows across the floor, providing them the privacy they needed. But even here, Allaria couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched, that eyes were following them from the darkness.

"*What's going on?*" Karega asked once they were alone, his voice low, cautious.

Allaria took a moment to gather her thoughts, her heart pounding as she tried to find the right words. "*I don't think we can trust Langford or Perez,*" she finally said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He frowned, his brows knitting together in concern. "*Why? Weren't they the ones helping you with the investigation?*"

She explained the details of the meeting—their reluctance to take immediate action, the subtle warnings, and her uneasy feeling that they might be compromised. As she spoke, she could see the concern growing in Karega's eyes, the way his expression darkened, his jaw tightening.

Karega listened attentively, his eyes reflecting the worry she felt. "*That doesn't sound good,*" he said finally, his voice heavy with unease.

"*No, it doesn't,*" she agreed, her throat tight. "*I think we need to take matters into our own hands.*"

He crossed his arms, suspicion flashing in his eyes. "*What do you have in mind?*"

"*First, we need to secure the evidence I've gathered. I have copies of the files, but if they suspect I don't trust them, they might try to confiscate them.*"

"*Agreed,*" he nodded. "*We should back them up in a secure location.*"

"*Also,*" she continued, her voice dropping even lower, "*we need to find out more about Dr. Rohith's activities on the ship. If we can catch him in the act or gather additional evidence, we might be able to expose him.*" Just saying Rohith's name made her skin crawl, a shiver running down her spine as she remembered his unsettling smile.

Karega nodded slowly, his eyes thoughtful. "*I can help with that. Simmons and Utekli might be able to tap into the ship's internal sensors and surveillance systems.*"

"Good idea. The more eyes we have, the better." But even as she said it, a part of her couldn't shake the fear that they were already too late, that Rohith already knew what they were planning.

He hesitated, his eyes searching hers. *"Are you sure you want to involve them? The more people who know, the greater the risk."*

She considered this, her mind racing. *"I trust them. And we can't do this alone."*

*"Alright,"* Karega said, his voice steady. *"Let's gather the team discreetly."*

Later that evening, Allaria, Karega, Simmons, Utekli, and Arturo gathered in a storage room far from the main corridors. The air was thick with anticipation, a nervous energy crackling between them as Allaria laid out everything she had discovered.

Simmons let out a low whistle. *"Heavy stuff."*

Utekli adjusted his glasses, his expression serious. *"Human-alien hybrids? Project Genesis? It sounds like a bad conspiracy movie."*

Arturo shook his head, his voice flat. *"If even half of this is true, we're in deep trouble."*

Allaria met each of their eyes, her voice firm. *"I know it's a lot to take in, but we need to act. Langford and Perez might be compromised. We can't rely on them."*

Karega stepped forward, the weight of their mission settling between them. *"We need a plan. First, secure the evidence. Then, we track Dr. Rohith's movements. Simmons, can you hack into the internal surveillance systems without being detected?"*

Simmons gave a confident nod, a glint of determination in her eyes. *"Piece of cake. I've been dying for a challenge."*

*"Good."* Allaria turned to Utekli. *"Help me encrypt the data and set up secure backups."*

*"Consider it done,"* he replied without hesitation.

Karega turned to Arturo, his expression sharp. *"Arturo, we need eyes on security. If they start moving, if they even hint they're onto us, we need to know immediately."*

*"Understood,"* Arturo said, his jaw tightening.

Allaria took a deep breath, feeling the weight of their mission. *"This is risky, but we're the only ones who can stop whatever is happening."*

Simmons placed a hand on Allaria's shoulder, her voice unwavering. *"We're with you."*

Over the next few days, they worked like shadows, moving unnoticed through the Atticus. Simmons infiltrated the surveillance systems using Allaria's key card, creating loops, blind spots—places where they could operate unseen. Utekli encrypted the data, backing it up in secure, hidden locations throughout the ship's network. They moved quickly, purposefully, their tension manifesting in sharp looks and curt nods. Every moment counted, and they knew it.

Allaria tracked Dr. Rohith's movements using the surveillance feeds. The unease never left her—seeing him drift through restricted areas, his face an impassive mask, always with a select group of recently reassigned crew members. It was like watching a serpent slide through tall grass—dangerous, deliberate, and always hiding its true intent.

Finally, after weeks of watching Dr. Rohith, one evening, the team gathered again in the storage room. The atmosphere was tight, humming with focus as they watched a live feed of Dr. Rohith entering a secure lab. Simmons pointed to the screen, her brow furrowed.

*"He spends a lot of time in there,"* she said. *"Access is Level Five clearance and above."*

*"What's in that lab?"* Arturo asked.

Utekli leaned in, his eyes narrowing. *"I did some digging. Officially, it's for propulsion research, but the logs don't add up—missing equipment, energy spikes at odd hours."*

Allaria's eyes narrowed. *"He's using it for something else."*

Karega leaned forward, urgency in his voice. *"We need to get inside."*

Simmons shook her head, her face grim. *"Biometric scanners, encrypted access, armed guards. It's a fortress."*

Arturo spoke up, his voice quick, assured. *"We need a distraction. Draw the guards away, create a window."*

Allaria nodded, her heart pounding. *"It's risky, but it might be our only shot."*

Karega's lips twitched into a confident smile. *"I'll handle the distraction. Simmons, Utekli—support remotely. Allaria, you're the best one to go in."*

Allaria straightened, the weight of leadership settling on her shoulders. *"Agreed. We sync our movements—no mistakes."*

They planned meticulously, every detail timed down to the second. Each member had a role, and failure wasn't an option. They practiced in their bunkroom, whispering in the dark, rehearsing hand signals, syncing their movements with a countdown timer. The window for action would be during the next maintenance cycle—systems diagnostics, perfect for masking their activities.

Two weeks later, the day of the operation arrived. Tension hung thick in the air as the team prepared, their faces serious, expressions set. There was no turning back now.

Karega positioned himself near the power conduit leading to the restricted lab. He checked his comms, his heartbeat loud in his ears. At the appointed time, he initiated the overload sequence. Lights flickered, alarms blared, and his heart raced.

*"Power fluctuation in Sector 12,"* the AI's crisp voice announced over the ship's intercom. *"Security team 2C, investigate immediately."*

Karega watched as guards rushed towards the power conduit. He exhaled slowly, his eyes tracking their movements, waiting for the moment when Allaria would slip through.

Allaria, clad in a dirty maintenance uniform, approached the lab's entrance, toolkit in hand, cap pulled low over her eyes. She moved with purpose, her eyes darting to the now-unguarded door. Just as she was nearing, a guard appeared, blocking her path.

*"Hey, you!"* he barked, his face twisted in suspicion. *"This area's off-limits."*

She feigned irritation, her voice clipped. *"Yeah, I know, but Command sent me to check the systems. Power fluctuations, you know how it goes. They want me to make sure everything's stable."*

The guard hesitated, his eyes narrowing. *"I didn't get any orders about that."*

Allaria sighed heavily, tapping at her datapad with a frown. She pulled up a forged work order, the document glowing in the dim corridor. *"Look, I'm just following orders. You want Chief Engineer Marlowe breathing down your neck? Fine by me."*

The guard hesitated for a long moment, then stepped aside, his expression grudging. "*Fine. Make it quick.*"

"*Thanks,*" she muttered, slipping past him, her pulse racing.

Inside the lab, the air was cold, sterile. The lights above flickered as she took in the advanced equipment, the containment units lining the walls. Strange, organic forms floated in viscous fluid, their outlines twisted and inhuman. She swallowed hard, the realization sinking in. This wasn't about propulsion—this was a genetic engineering facility, and the forms in those tanks bore an eerie resemblance to the Gao-de. *This must have been set up during the refurbishments that took place. When else could they sneak these items onto the ship?* Allara thought to herself.

No time to waste. Allara moved quickly to the central console, her fingers flying over the controls. The download started, the progress bar inching forward at a painful pace. Every second felt like an hour, the low hum of the equipment surrounding her, the ticking of her own heartbeat.

The sterile glow of the lab's overhead lights cast sharp shadows across the maze of equipment and consoles. Allara moved swiftly between the holographic displays, her heart pounding in her chest. The data transfer bar on her datapad edged slowly toward completion, each percentage point feeling like an eternity.

"*Come on, come on,*" she whispered, eyes darting to the entrance. She knew time was not on her side.

Behind her, the containment units hummed softly, their contents obscured by frosted glass. Faint silhouettes hinted at the grotesque forms within—evidence of the horrific experiments being conducted under Dr. Rohith's direction.

A soft chime signaled the completion of the download. Relief washed over her, but it was short-lived. Footsteps echoed in the corridor outside, growing louder with each passing second. She quickly disconnected her datapad and slipped it into her satchel. Just as she turned to leave, the lab door hissed open.

A voice cut through the hum, smooth and dripping with malice.

"*Well, well, what do we have here?*" Dr. Rohith's voice slithered through the cold air, chilling her to the bone.

She spun around, her heart leaping into her throat, her hand instinctively reaching for the concealed weapon at her side. His eyes met hers—cold, calculating, a twisted smile tugging at his lips.

"*Dr. Rohith*," she managed, her voice barely concealing her dread.

The smile didn't reach his eyes. He took a step forward, his presence looming, and the room seemed to shrink around her. "*I had a feeling someone might try to poke around where they don't belong.*"

The air felt like it had been sucked out of the lab, every breath a struggle. Allaria tightened her grip on her weapon, her mind racing. She couldn't fail—not now, not when they were so close. The seconds ticked by, her eyes locked on Rohith's as she prepared for whatever came next.

"*Leaving so soon, Allaria?*" Dr. Rohith's voice sliced through the silence.

She froze, hand instinctively reaching for her sidearm. "*Dr. Rohith*," she said evenly, turning to face him.

He stood in the doorway, his dark robes flowing around him like shadows. His eyes gleamed with a knowing intensity. "*I had a feeling you'd find your way here*," he mused. "*Curiosity can be such a .... dangerous trait.*"

Her grip tightened on her weapon. "*The real danger is what you're doing here. This can't continue*"

He chuckled softly. "*Can't continue? My dear, it's only .... just beginning.*"

Without warning, Allaria drew her pistol and fired. The shot hit him square in the chest, the force knocking him back a step. But instead of collapsing, he merely staggered, a look of mild surprise crossing his face.

"*Impressive reflexes*," he remarked, straightening himself. A small scorch mark marred his robe, but there was no sign of injury.

Allaria's eyes widened. "*How...?*"



He opened his robe slightly to reveal a thin layer of what looked like biotechnological armor fused to his skin. *"A marvel of Gao-de bioengineering,"* he explained. *"It appears their DNA offers some remarkable enhancements."*

Her mind raced. *"You've altered yourself?"*

He smiled. *"Adapted, improved—embraced the next stage of evolution."*

She took a cautious step back. *"You're insane."*

*"On the contrary,"* he replied calmly. *"I see with greater clarity than ever .... before."*

He advanced toward her, and she fired again, aiming for his head. He moved with inhuman speed, the bullet grazing his cheek.

*"Enough games,"* he said, his tone sharpening.

Allaria quipped back, *"Fuck you."*

Realizing she was outmatched, Allaria bolted toward the emergency exit at the back of the lab. She slammed her hand onto the override panel, and the door slid open just enough for her to squeeze through.

*"You're only delaying the inevitable!"* Dr. Rohith called after her.

She didn't look back, sprinting down the dimly lit corridor. The sound of alarms began to blare, likely triggered by the lab's breach. She tapped her earpiece.

*"Karega, come in!"*

Static crackled before his voice came through. *"Allaria? What's happening?"*

*"Rohith found me. He's... enhanced. I shot him, but it barely slowed him down."*

*"You shot him? Where are you now?"*

*"Heading toward rendezvous point Bravo. I have the data."*

*"Understood. We're en route."*

She navigated the maze of passageways, her footsteps echoing off the metal floors. Behind her, she could hear the distant sounds of pursuit—guards, or perhaps worse. As she rounded a corner, she slipped into a maintenance shaft, pulling the hatch closed behind her. The confined space forced her to move carefully, but it provided cover. Her thoughts raced. Dr. Rohith had modified himself using Gao-de DNA. If he could do that to himself, what else was he capable of? And what did that mean for the rest of the crew? She reached the end of the shaft and exited into a storage bay where Karega, Simmons, Utekli, and Arturo were waiting.

"*Thank God,*" Simmons exclaimed, relief evident on her face.

Allaria caught her breath. "*We need to move. Rohith knows we're onto him, and he's not human anymore—at least, not entirely.*"

Karega frowned. "*What do you mean?*"

"*He's used Gao-de DNA to enhance himself. I shot him twice, and he barely flinched.*"

Utekli's eyes widened. "*That's... alarming.*"

Allaria pulled out her datapad. "*I got the data. It's all here—experiments, genetic codes, everything.*"

Simmons nodded. "*Let's get somewhere secure and see what we've got.*"

They moved to a hidden alcove behind one of the bulkheads—a makeshift safe room they'd prepared in advance. Once inside, Allaria connected her datapad to a portable holo-emitter. Streams of data and complex genetic sequences filled the air around them.

"*Look at this,*" Utekli said, scrolling through lines of code. "*They're mapping the Gao-de genome and integrating it with human DNA.*"

Arturo pointed to a file labeled "*Subject Trials.*" "*They've already begun human experimentation.*"

Allaria felt a chill. "*How many subjects?*"

Simmons scanned the file. "*Dozens, maybe more. Some of the subjects are listed as crew members from various ships.*"

"Wait," Karega interjected. "Look at this entry." He highlighted a file marked **"Subject A-001: Allaria Laskari."**

Her blood ran cold. "*W-w-what?*" She managed to stumble the single word out. Her legs felt like they would give out at any moment.

They all turned to her, concern etched on their faces.

"According to this," Utekli read aloud, **"Subject A-001 exhibits unique genetic markers suitable for advanced integration. Preliminary alterations initiated by primary donor."**

"Primary donor?" Allaria echoed, confusion turning to dread. "*Who's the donor?*"

Simmons accessed the metadata. **"Donor ID: Dr. Elias Laskari."**

"*My father,*" Allaria whispered, her mind reeling. Memories flooded back—the strange medical tests during her childhood, her father's secretive work.

Karega placed a hand on her shoulder. "*Are you okay?*"

She shook her head. "*I don't know. I had no idea...*"

Arturo stepped forward. "*There's more. It seems Dr. Rohith was aware of this and has been monitoring you.*"

"*That explains his interest. It's explains so much,*" Utekli added.

Allaria's thoughts were a whirlwind. "*My father experimented on me?*"

Simmons hesitated, her face pale. "*It looks like he initiated genetic modifications. Maybe to protect you, or... prepare you for something.*"

Allaria barely had a moment to process before an alert blared across the holo-display.

**"Unauthorized access detected. Data purge initiated."**

"*They're wiping the files!*" Utekli shouted, panic in his eyes.

"*Copy everything you can!*" Allaria barked.

They scrambled, fingers flying across datapads, the keys clicking feverishly. But it was like trying to hold water in their hands—file after file vanished before their eyes.

"*Damn it!*" Simmons cursed, her frustration boiling over. "*They're erasing everything!*"

Allaria's hands shook as she disconnected her datapad. Sweat dripped from her temples. "*We have enough. We need to get this to someone we can trust.*"

"*Who?*" Arturo asked, his voice sharp with fear. "*Perez and Langford are compromised. We can't trust anyone on board.*"

Allaria took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "*Then we go higher—Fleet Command. We bypass everyone else.*"

Karega nodded, his jaw set. "*Agreed. But first, we need to secure ourselves. Rohith wants you, Allaria. He won't stop.*"

"*He's right,*" Simmons said urgently. "*We need to keep moving.*"

The lights flickered, a low hum vibrating through the walls. Allaria's eyes darted around, her heart pounding.

"*What's that noise?*" Utekli asked, his voice trembling.

"*Power fluctuations,*" Simmons said, her expression hard. "*He's trying to isolate us.*"

"*Then we act now,*" Allaria said, her voice steady despite the fear tightening her chest.

They slipped out of the alcove, moving quickly through the narrow, dim corridors. The ship felt alive around them—darker, more oppressive, the hum of its systems like a distant growl. Allaria kept her head down, her senses screaming that danger was everywhere. Crew members moved past them, avoiding eye contact or giving them strange, lingering glances.

"*Something's off,*" Karega muttered, his eyes scanning the hall.

As they approached a junction, a figure stepped out from a side passage, blocking their way—Dr. Rohith. His presence filled the corridor, his expression coldly amused.

"*Going somewhere?*" he asked smoothly, his eyes locking onto Allaria.

They halted, weapons drawn in a heartbeat.

"*Stay back*," Allaria warned, her voice low and dangerous.

Rohith smiled, his lips curling without warmth. "*Allaria, no need for hostility. We share more than you realize.*"

"*Like hell we do*," she shot back, her finger tightening on the trigger.

He tilted his head, a condescending look in his eyes. "*Your father was brilliant. His work laid the foundation for everything we've accomplished.*"

"*Don't talk about him*," she snapped, her voice breaking, emotions swirling.

"*Why deny the truth?*" Rohith took a step closer, his eyes gleaming. "*You carry the key to humanity's evolution, Allaria.*"

"*What are you talking about?*" she demanded, her voice trembling with a mix of anger and fear.

Rohith took another step forward, his tone almost reverent. "*The genetic enhancements—your father's modifications—they made you unique. Exceptional.*"

Karega moved between them, his body tense, weapon raised. "*That's close enough.*"

Without warning, Rohith lunged—his movement almost a blur. A taser glinted in his hand. Before anyone could react, he jabbed it into Allaria's side. Pain exploded through her, blinding, electric, and she collapsed to her knees. Her vision flared, everything a haze of agony—and then light. Her eyes burned brilliant blue, the glow piercing through the dim corridor, illuminating the space.

"*Allaria!*" Simmons screamed.

Rohith stepped back, observing her with fascination. "*Remarkable.*"

Karega fired his weapon, but Rohith dodged effortlessly, taking the opportunity to retreat into the shadows.

"*We'll meet again*," he called out before disappearing.

Karega rushed to Allaria's side. *"Are you okay?"*

She gasped for air, the glow in her eyes fading. *"I... I think so."*

Simmons scanned her with a portable medical device. "Your vitals are stabilizing, but that was intense."

*"What happened to your eyes?"* Utekli asked, awestruck.

*"I don't know,"* Allaria replied, struggling to stand. *"It felt like the taser triggered something inside me. For a brief moment, I could see... I could see... something else."*

*"Your enhancements,"* Arturo suggested. *"They might be more extensive than we realized. What did they do to you?."*

Allaria steadied herself. *"I don't know, but we can't worry about that now. We need to get off this ship."*

Karega nodded. *"Agreed. We should head to the hangar bay and secure a shuttle."*

As they moved, the lingering sensation from the taser stayed with Allaria. It was as if something dormant had awakened. The hangar bay was in sight, but it was heavily guarded.

*"Rohith knew we'd be here,"* Simmons said, her eyes darting nervously.

*"We need a diversion,"* Karega said quickly, his gaze sweeping the area.

Utekli didn't hesitate. *"I can overload a system. Cause a chain reaction in the secondary engines. It'll force an evacuation—no damage, just noise."*

*"Do it,"* Allaria snapped, urgency sharp in her voice.

Utekli ran to the nearest terminal, his fingers blurring across the screen. No hesitation. Seconds felt like hours, the silence deafening. Then—alarms blared.

**"Warning: Engine malfunction detected. Evacuate immediately."**

The guards scattered, leaving their posts. One of them shot a glance their way, suspicion flaring in his eyes before he moved off. Allaria swallowed hard.

"Now!" Arturo urged, and they broke into a sprint, rushing toward the nearest shuttle. Allaria's heart hammered as they sealed the hatch behind them.

"*Launching in ten seconds*," Simmons said, her voice tight as she began the startup sequence. The hum of the engines reverberated through the shuttle, matching the pounding of Allaria's pulse.

Allaria activated the comm system. "Shuttle 004 requesting emergency departure clearance." She didn't expect an answer, but there was hope—a sliver.

Silence.

"*I think they're jamming us*," Karega said, his voice grim.

"*We'll have to launch manually*," Simmons replied, her knuckles white on the controls. "*Brace yourselves*."

The shuttle lifted off, engines roaring. Allaria's gaze locked on the hangar bay doors—they were closing. Fast. Simmons gritted her teeth, taking manual control, her hands a blur over the console. The shuttle banked hard, narrowly squeezing through into open space.

"*Coordinates set for the nearest fleet outpost*," Simmons confirmed, her voice taut.

They accelerated away from the Atticus, the ship shrinking behind them. Relief flickered—but then Arturo's voice cut in, tension thick. "*Incoming vessel. It's the Einhorn*."

"*The flagship?*" Karega's eyes widened. "*What are they doing here?*"

Allaria felt a knot of dread tighten in her stomach. "*It's not a coincidence*."

The comm crackled to life. "*Unidentified shuttle, this is Captain Marcus of the Einhorn. Power down and prepare to be boarded*."

Simmons glanced at Allaria. "*Suggestions?*"

Allaria's mind raced. Running was impossible. Their only option was to make them listen. She opened the channel, her voice steady. "*Captain Marcus, this is Lance Corporal Allaria Laskari of the Atticus. We have urgent information—Rohith's conspiracy involves the entire fleet*."

She opened the channel. *"Captain Marcus, this is Lance Corporal Allaria Laskari of the Atticus. We have urgent information regarding a conspiracy involving Dr. Tulek Rohith."*

There was a pause before he replied. *"Laskari, your vessel is unauthorized, and you're considered AWOL. Surrender immediately."*

*"Sir, please listen,"* she implored. *"The Atticus has been compromised. We have evidence of genetic experiments and infiltration by the Confessors."*

Another silence which seemed to last ages.

Silence. Each second dragged on, heavy, pressing on Allaria's chest.

*"Laskari,"* Marcus's voice was clipped. *"You are AWOL. Surrender immediately."*

Karega hit the console with his fist, frustration spilling out. *"They're not going to help us."*

Allaria closed her eyes for a brief moment, then nodded. *"We can't run. We have to make them listen."*

Simmons sighed, her hands moving to power down the engines. *"Engines off."*

The shuttle slowed, the Einhorn looming large in the viewport, its docking clamps extending, locking onto their airlock. Allaria's breath caught as the door cycled open. Two soldiers stepped in, rifles raised, barrels glinting in the harsh light.

*"Hands where we can see them!"* the lead soldier barked.

They complied, tension crackling in the air as their hands were restrained.

*"The captain wants to see you,"* the soldier said, nodding toward Allaria.

She met his gaze, steadying herself. *"Take me to him."*

On the bridge of the Einhorn, Allaria faced Captain Marcus, her datapad in his hands. The air was thick, the hum of the engines a constant backdrop, each second adding weight to the silence. Only one other figure was present, shrouded in shadows—unmoving, watching.



Marcus finally looked up from the datapad, his gaze sharp. *"These are serious allegations, Lance Corporal. You're accusing high-ranking officers and a respected scientist of conspiracy."*

"Yes, sir." Allaria stood firm. *"Rohith has been conducting illegal experiments—combining Gao-de DNA with humans. Langford and Perez are compromised. This is bigger than I thought."*

The shadow moved, and Allaria turned, her breath catching. Admiral Lars stepped into the light, his gaze appraising. He took the datapad, reading with an inscrutable expression.

*"The data has discrepancies,"* Lars said, his voice low. *"Resources, personnel—something doesn't add up."*

Allaria had her confirmation. If the Admiral hadn't seen the data, Perez hadn't sent it. *"Sir, Rohith is dangerous,"* Allaria pressed. Her voice held an edge of desperation. *"He's enhanced himself. We can't afford to ignore this."*

The silence stretched, every breath feeling too loud. Then Marcus nodded. "Very well. We'll investigate. Covert operations will accompany you back to the Atticus. You'll have our support."

Relief washed over her, her shoulders sagging. "Thank you, sir."

Marcus gestured to his executive officer who stood on the other side of the doors to the ship's bridge. *"Prepare a boarding party. Equip them with non-conventional weapons—plasma rifles, sonic disruptors. Be ready for anything."*

"Aye, Captain," the officer said, moving swiftly.

Marcus turned back to Allaria. *"You have two hours to prepare, then you depart."*

Allaria nodded, determination hardening her gaze. *"Understood."*

As they turned to leave, Marcus called after her. *"Lance Corporal?"*

She paused. "Yes, sir?"

*"Bring my crew back."*

Allaria gave a firm nod. *"We'll do everything we can."*

The admiral watched them go, silent. Allaria didn't feel judged, though. For the first time in a long time, she felt powerful—ready to take on whatever came next.

## CHAPTER 12

Allaria moved to the briefing room with her Atticus team and the ten covert ops members. The atmosphere was tense, each face focused, each movement deliberate. This was it—no more planning, no more simulations. Now, their lives were in her hands. She could feel the weight of that reality pressing down on her like an immense, invisible force. These people were looking to her for leadership, for answers, and she couldn't afford to let them down. Each of them had family, friends, lives outside this ship, and it was up to her to make sure they came back to them. The fear of failure gnawed at her, but she pushed it aside. There was no room for hesitation, no room for doubt.

*"Listen up," she began, her voice strong despite the weight of what was ahead. "Captain Marcus has given the order. We're going back to the Atticus, and we're taking the covert ops team with us. The mission is to enter a compromised vessel—assess the status of the crew, secure any survivors, and neutralize all threats. Assume resistance. This won't be easy, but it is our duty."*

She took a deep breath, fighting the rush of doubt. She could hardly believe the position she was in—leading a mission back to the Atticus, potentially facing enhanced hybrids and a traitor. But there was no time to dwell on her fears. She had a team depending on her. She could see it in their eyes—trust, anxiety, determination. They believed in her, and she had to be worthy of that belief.

Simmons inspected her plasma rifle, her eyes narrowing. The weight of the mission was evident on her face. *"Do we have a plan for dealing with the creatures?"*

Allaria met her gaze. *"We're equipped with advanced weaponry. Plasma rifles are designed for this. Remember, these hybrids are strong, fast, and resilient. Aim for vital points. And never engage alone."*

Karega adjusted his tactical vest, his expression serious. *"And Rohith? What if he resists?"*

Allaria's jaw tightened. *"Apprehending him is the priority. But make no mistake—he's enhanced with Gao-de DNA. He won't hesitate, and neither can we. If he poses a threat, take him down."*

Utekli looked up, his face pale in the dim light. *"I've managed to analyze some of the data we pulled. There were twelve primary hybrid subjects. We have to assume they're all loose."*

A heavy silence fell over the room. Arturo broke it, his voice grim. *"We'll need to be on high alert. No mistakes."*

Allaria let her gaze sweep across each of them. *"This mission is dangerous. But I trust all of you. We watch each other's backs, we move together, and we complete the objective. Understood?"*

They nodded, the tension in the room thick, every breath deliberate. She could see the determination in their eyes, but also the fear—a fear she shared. She had to make sure they all made it back. She had to.

After the briefing, Allaria waited on the bridge of the Einhorn during their approach. She stood next to Captain Marcus. The Atticus hung before them, a dim silhouette against the darkness of space. The ship's exterior lights flickered weakly, barely piercing the void. It looked like a wounded beast, drifting aimlessly, its lifeblood ebbing away. The flickering lights gave it a ghostly, almost sentient quality—as if the ship itself was aware of its impending fate.

*"Scanning for life signs," the sensor officer reported. "Minimal readings detected. The ship appears to be on emergency power."*

Allaria frowned, her voice barely above a whisper. *"What the hell happened? It's only been two hours."* She knew no one could answer. The ship looked dead, and yet there was an unsettling sense that something still lingered within its shadows—something waiting.

Captain Marcus stood silently, his gaze fixed on the unsettling image of the Atticus. *"It's a dead ship. Prepare for anything."*

Allaria's eyes narrowed, her gut telling her something was terribly wrong. *"Be ready for hostiles. Trust nothing."*

Marcus nodded, his jaw set. *"Boarding team—proceed immediately. Assume hostile conditions. Bring any survivors back if you can."*

The shuttle ride from the Einhorn to the Atticus was filled with a heavy silence. The hum of the shuttle's engines was the only sound, vibrating through the metal floor beneath their feet. Allaria sat at the front, her weapon resting across her knees, her eyes fixed ahead. The covert ops members were seated around her, their faces obscured by the visors of their helmets, each one focused, each one bracing for what lay ahead. She could see the tension in the way they gripped their weapons, the way their eyes darted towards the viewport, watching as the dark shape of the Atticus grew closer.

Karega sat beside her, his jaw clenched, a bead of sweat rolling down his temple. Simmons kept checking the readout on her plasma rifle, her fingers moving in a steady, repetitive motion as if trying to calm herself through the familiar action. Utekli was hunched over his datapad, eyes flicking from one display to another, his brow furrowed. They were all scared, and she could feel it—an almost tangible force that filled the small shuttle.

*"Approaching shuttle bay entry point,"* the pilot announced, his voice strained. Allaria took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. This was it. There was no turning back now.

The shuttle's approach was eerily quiet, the clang of the docking clamps echoing through the silence like a death knell. Allaria's grip tightened around her weapon, her pulse echoing in her ears. Each second of silence felt like a taunt, daring them to step into the darkness. She

exchanged a glance with Karega, his eyes meeting hers with a mixture of determination and fear. She nodded to him—a silent promise that she would do everything in her power to bring them all back.

The shuttle entered the bay, revealing the dim interior of the Atticus. The bay was shrouded in shadows, the flickering emergency lights casting strange, shifting patterns that made everything seem alive. The shuttle bay floor was unnervingly clean, an almost mirror-like black surface that reflected the flickering lights above, giving an eerie sense of depth below their feet. The metallic scent of the air was unmistakable—rust or blood, Allaria couldn't tell. Every breath was heavy, a reminder of the grim fate that could await them.

Allaria was reminded of the Gao-de attack—the same shuttle bay she and her squad had once defended, the chaos, the screams, the relentless struggle to hold their ground. The memory sent a shiver through her, the stark contrast of the current silence making her uneasy.

The silence was oppressive, the kind that seemed to press down on her from all sides. It was like stepping into a tomb, the walls closing in, the darkness threatening to swallow them whole. The ship felt alive in a way that sent chills down her spine—as if it was watching them, waiting for them to make a mistake. She led the way, her weapon raised, each step echoing through the empty corridors. The flickering lights played tricks on her eyes, shadows moving where they shouldn't, shapes forming and then disappearing just as quickly.

It felt like the Ottmar all over again—an empty ship filled with horrors lurking in the shadows. The memory of that mission, the faces they had lost, gnawed at her. This time, though, the stakes were higher. And Allaria wasn't sure if they'd make it out. She could only hope that she was ready, that they were all ready—because whatever waited for them in the depths of the Atticus was not going to let them leave without a fight.

They departed the shuttle, Allaria leading the group, followed by the covert ops team, each member ready and checking every corner as if they had done this a thousand times. Allaria thought they probably had done it a thousand times. The shuttle bay echoed with their footsteps, each sound swallowed by the oppressive silence that filled the Atticus. The air was thick with a rancid stench—a mixture of decay and something metallic, almost chemical, that clung to the back of her throat, making each breath feel heavy.

"Night vision engaged," Simmons whispered, tapping her visor. The dim green glow illuminated their path, but it did little to soften the oppressive sense of foreboding. They moved cautiously, the only sounds their soft footsteps and the distant hum of the ship's failing systems, which seemed to resonate through the walls like a low, unsettling growl.

*"Keep an eye on your motion trackers," Allaria advised quietly. "We don't know where Dr. Rohith might be."*

Every corridor seemed infected. Thick, mucus-like substance clung to the bulkheads, dripping from the ceiling in long, sticky tendrils. The mucus seemed to pulse subtly, almost as if it were alive, its shimmering, unnatural iridescence reflecting the flickering emergency lights. It caught

the corners of their vision, tricking their minds into seeing movement where there was none. None of them wanted to touch it; the very sight of it filled them with revulsion, and the smell made it worse—like rotting vegetation mixed with something acrid and chemical.

As they advanced, signs of struggle became more evident—scorch marks scorched across the walls, twisted metal crumpled under an unknown force, and unsettling stains splattered across the floor, some still dark and wet. The silence only amplified the horror of what had happened here. Every shadow seemed deeper, every corner more threatening, as if something was lurking just beyond their sight.

"*Looks like a fight took place here,*" Karega observed, his voice low, almost swallowed by the ship's ambiance.

"*Stay sharp,*" Allaria responded. She felt her nerves tightening, her heart pounding a little faster. The darkness around them felt alive, as if something was watching, waiting for them to slip up.

They approached the main atrium, a central hub connecting several key sections of the ship. The area was in disarray—equipment lay scattered haphazardly, and the overhead lights dangled from exposed wiring, swaying slightly as if recently disturbed. The flickering lights cast grotesque shadows that seemed to twist and reach for them, their forms exaggerated and sinister.

"*Wait,*" Utekli hissed, holding up a hand. His eyes darted around, his head tilting as he strained to listen. "*Do you hear that?*"

A faint groan echoed from nearby, barely discernible over the background hum. Following the sound, they moved cautiously, every step deliberate, until they discovered Sergeant Langford slumped against a bulkhead, clutching a wound on his side. The sight of him made Allaria's stomach twist—his uniform was torn, soaked with blood, and his face was pale and drawn.

"*Sergeant Langford!*" Allaria exclaimed, rushing to his side. She knelt down, her eyes scanning the wound, taking in the severity of his condition. It looked bad—too much blood.

He looked up weakly, relief flickering in his eyes as they met hers. "*Laskari... you came back.*" His voice was barely a whisper, each word seeming to cost him.

"*You're hurt,*" she said, assessing his injury. "*We need to get you medical attention.*"

He grimaced, his face contorted in pain. "*The creatures... they got loose. Rohith... he released them. They've killed so many...*" His voice wavered, the horror of what he had seen etched into his expression.

"*Do you know where Rohith is now?*" she asked urgently, her heart pounding.

Langford shook his head, his movements slow and weak. "*He... he left. Said something about 'unleashing the future.' I tried to stop him... I didn't know.*" His voice cracked, and his eyes

welled with tears. *"I didn't know. I trusted him. I trusted Perez."* He looked broken, his body trembling as he spoke. The betrayal was more painful than the physical wounds he bore, and Allaria could see it in his eyes—the realization that everything he believed in had crumbled.

Allaria didn't know how to comfort him. She hesitated, her hand hovering over his shoulder before she pulled it back. *"It's alright,"* she assured him, though her words felt hollow. *"We're here now."*

She activated her comm unit, her voice tight. *"This is Allaria to Einhorn. We have a wounded crew member—requesting immediate medical evacuation."*

Static was the only response, a cold emptiness that filled her ear. The line crackled, but no voice came through.

*"Comms are down,"* Simmons confirmed, frustration lining her voice as she checked her equipment.

*"Fuck. Again?"* Arturo muttered, his voice barely concealing his frustration. He kicked at a piece of loose debris, the sound echoing down the corridor. *"Every mission we go on, the comms go down. We're on our own."* He glanced around nervously, his eyes darting to every shadow, every dark corner that seemed to shift and move as if something lurked just out of sight.

The oppressive silence returned, and with it, the feeling that they were not alone. Allaria's eyes scanned the dark corridors, every instinct screaming at her to stay alert. The ship felt like it was watching them, the darkness waiting to swallow them whole. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. They had to keep moving—there was no other choice.

A chilling screech pierced the silence, an inhuman, soul-rattling wail that reverberated through the corridors, echoing endlessly, making it impossible to tell where it was coming from. It was a sound that seemed to crawl under their skin, freezing them for an instant with primal fear.

*"Um, what was that?"* Utekli whispered, his voice trembling, fear evident in his eyes.

Allaria's expression hardened, the urgency clear. *"They're coming. We need to move, now."*

Karega and Arturo quickly moved to lift Langford between them, each bracing one of his arms over their shoulders. *"We've got him,"* Karega said, his voice tense. *"Lead the way."*

They hurried down the corridor, hyper-aware of every second slipping away. The screeches echoed again, louder this time, accompanied by the scraping of claws on metal, guttural growls, and the heavy thud of approaching footsteps. The oppressive air felt thick, weighed down by the rancid smell of decay and the foul stench of mucus coating the walls.

Simmons glanced over her shoulder repeatedly, her eyes wide, expecting to see a hybrid lunging at them at any moment. *"Which way to the shuttle bay?"* she asked, her voice shaky, her eyes darting through the flickering shadows.

"*Access corridor is just ahead,*" Allaria replied, pushing them onward. The ship itself seemed alive, shifting shadows cast by flickering lights made it difficult to see, the narrow hallways feeling like they were closing in on them. The air was damp, thick, and suffocating, and debris strewn across the corridor caused them to stumble, forcing them to slow when they could least afford it.

They rounded a corner, and suddenly came face-to-face with one of the hybrids. It loomed over them—its distorted, grotesque human features warped with unnatural Gao-de traits. The creature's glowing eyes flickered with a sickly blue hue, its elongated limbs moving in a disturbingly fluid yet jerky manner, as if it was constantly struggling against its own monstrous transformation. Razor-sharp claws, glistening with a foul white tar-like substance, flexed as it prepared to strike.

"*Open fire!*" Allaria commanded, her voice cutting through the rising panic.

They unleashed a barrage of plasma bolts, the dark corridor illuminated by each brilliant flash. The hybrid recoiled, its skin sizzling and bubbling grotesquely, but it refused to fall.

"*These things are tough!*" Arturo shouted, his voice laced with desperation.

"*Keep shooting!*" Karega yelled, his face grim as he fired repeatedly.

The creature lunged forward with astonishing speed, its claws raking across the walls, sending sparks flying. Allaria barely dodged the swipe, the sound of metal being torn apart ringing in her ears. It struck again, and she twisted out of the way, feeling the rush of air as the claws sliced past her. The team held their fire, their eyes wide with tension, unwilling to risk hitting her. Another attack, and Allaria rolled to the side, her heart pounding in her chest as she narrowly evaded the creature's reach. She could hear Simmons cursing under her breath, her plasma rifle aimed but unable to fire without risking Allaria's life.

"*Fall back!*" she ordered, her heart pounding as they pulled Langford away from the hybrid. The creature pursued, its movements unsettlingly fluid, almost as if it flowed after them rather than ran.

"*Split up!*" Allaria directed, her mind racing. "*Draw it away from Langford!*"

She and Simmons veered left, firing to catch the hybrid's attention. The creature snarled, its glowing eyes locking onto them as it charged.

"*Come on, ugly!*" Simmons taunted, her voice shaky as she fired over her shoulder, trying to keep her fear at bay.

They led the creature into a narrow passageway. "*If we can trap it, we might be able to take it down,*" Allaria suggested, her eyes darting to the nearby panels.

Simmons nodded, her jaw set in determination. "*On it.*"



As the hybrid lunged at them, they dove aside. Simmons slammed her hand against a control panel, activating a containment field. The energy cage sprang to life around the hybrid, crackling as it struggled against the force field.

*"That won't hold it for long,"* Simmons warned, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

*"Let's keep moving,"* Allaria urged, her mind already on Langford and the others.

They regrouped with the rest of the team in a storage bay, only to find Langford's condition rapidly deteriorating. His breathing was shallow, each exhale rattling painfully in his chest. His skin was ashen, his eyes unfocused as he stared at nothing.

*"We need to get him to the med bay,"* Utekli said urgently, glancing at the others, his fear evident.

Allaria hesitated, glancing around the darkened, claustrophobic bay. The ship was shaking now, the lights flickering on and off, making it feel like they were standing in the belly of some vast, dying beast. *"It's risky, but we can't leave him like this,"* she finally said.

Another bone-chilling screech echoed through the ship, this one even closer—an inhuman wail that seemed to pierce through their very souls.

*"Time's running out,"* Karega said grimly, his gaze flicking towards the dark corridor they had come from, his grip on his rifle tightening.

*"Alright,"* Allaria decided, her heart pounding in her chest. *"Med bay is two decks up. We can use the maintenance shafts to avoid the main corridors."*

They found an access panel, forcing it open before carefully maneuvering Langford into the tight maintenance shafts. The ascent was slow and arduous, every creak of the metal around them heightening the sense of imminent danger. Allaria could hear faint, echoing noises—the skittering of unseen creatures somewhere below them, growing louder and then suddenly falling silent, leaving them guessing where the threat would emerge next.

As they finally emerged onto the med bay deck, the ship shuddered violently, the lights flickering ominously as if threatening to plunge them into darkness at any moment.

*"Something's wrong with the power systems,"* Utekli observed, his voice barely above a whisper, eyes wide with unease.

*"Let's hope they hold out,"* Simmons replied, glancing over her shoulder, her fear barely hidden beneath her focused demeanor.

They entered the med bay, the doors sliding open with a hollow, mechanical hiss. The space was eerily empty, the overhead lights casting long, grotesque shadows that seemed to stretch endlessly across the walls. Medical beds were overturned, their frames bent and twisted. Blood

smears streaked across the floor, and broken instruments lay scattered, as if a desperate struggle had taken place here. The air was thick with the metallic tang of blood and antiseptic, but it felt too quiet—too still, like the room itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

Allaria helped Langford onto one of the intact medical beds, her movements hurried but careful. Utekli rushed to the nearby cabinets, rummaging through the supplies with trembling hands.

"*Come on, come on,*" he muttered, his voice cracking under the pressure.

Allaria cast a glance around the darkened med bay, her gut telling her they were running out of time. Every shadow seemed to shift, every flicker of light a reminder of the horror lurking just beyond their sight. They had to be fast—Langford's life depended on it, and so did theirs.

"*We need to stabilize him, now,*" she said, her voice firm despite the fear gnawing at her insides. They were alone, surrounded by darkness and the unseen, and the hybrids were closing in. They had to make it—failure wasn't an option. The covert ops team stood in the doorways covering the squad as they tended to Langford.

"*Hang in there, Sergeant,*" Allaria encouraged, her voice steady but laced with urgency.

Langford's hand shot out, grasping her arm weakly, his body trembling from the effort. His eyes were wide with desperation, the pain etched deeply across his features. "Allaria... there's something you need to know," he managed, his voice hoarse, barely a whisper.

"*Save your strength,*" she insisted, her heart pounding.

He shook his head weakly, his breath ragged. "*In the chaos of the everything, after .... After you left the ship ... I*" He struggled to find the air needed to form words. "*I found the files in the database... Perez.. He hid them.... Your father... what he did to you... he did it to protect you. Gave you.... abilities.*"

Allaria's heart skipped a beat, her mind racing. "*What do you mean?*"

Langford's breathing grew more labored, his eyes unfocused as he struggled to stay conscious. "*You're... different. Rohith wants you because... you're the key,*" he rasped, each word costing him, his face twisted in pain. His eyes rolled back, and his grip on her arm slackened.

"*Sergeant!*" she cried, her voice breaking, but he had lost consciousness.

"*We need to stabilize him,*" Utekli said, injecting a stimulant into Langford's arm, his hands shaking.

Suddenly, the med bay doors slammed shut with a deafening clang, and an alarm blared, the red emergency lights flashing in warning.

**"Containment protocol activated,"** an automated voice announced, cold and devoid of emotion.

*"What's going on?"* Arturo demanded, his eyes wide with panic.

Allaria's eyes widened in realization, her stomach dropping. *"It's a trap!"*

Vents in the ceiling opened with a hiss, and gas began to pour into the room, an acrid, sickly-sweet scent filling the air.

*"Gas masks on!"* one of the covert ops members ordered, quickly tossing masks to each of them.

They scrambled to don the masks, their movements frantic. As they adjusted the seals, the sound of metal tearing echoed behind them. They turned just in time to see a panel burst open, torn apart by sheer brute force. A grotesque creature emerged, its claws bending and twisting the metal as if it were paper. Its eyes glowed malevolently in the dim light, saliva dripping from its gaping maw, making it look monstrous—almost as if the darkness itself had birthed it.

*"Get ready!"* Allaria shouted, raising her weapon, her pulse racing.

They fired, plasma bolts illuminating the room in bursts of light, but the creature seemed unfazed, advancing with lethal intent, its glowing eyes fixed on them, hungry and relentless.

*"Switch to sonic disruptors!"* Karega suggested, his voice edged with desperation.

They adjusted their weapons, unleashing sonic waves that tore through the room. The creature reeled back, its eyes bleeding, letting out a chilling, tortured shriek that made them instinctively recoil. The lights flickered violently, casting chaotic shadows that only added to the growing sense of madness.

*"It's working!"* Utekli exclaimed, his voice barely audible over the chaos.

But before they could capitalize on the advantage, the sound of metal tearing echoed through the corridor. Two more creatures emerged—one crawling out from the shadows, its elongated body contorting unnaturally, while the other tore through a weakened panel with grotesque, jerky movements. The screech of bending metal reverberated through the tight space, and their glowing eyes shone with an eerie, malevolent light.

The hybrids flanked them, their elongated claws tapping on the metal floor, leaving scratch marks as they closed in. Their twisted forms twitched and pulsed, as if the monstrous merging of human and Gao-de DNA was a constant struggle within them. Saliva dripped from their snarling maws, and their eyes burned with a mixture of hunger and malice.

*"We're surrounded!"* Simmons yelled, her voice cracking with panic.

Allaria's mind raced, her heart pounding in her chest. She could feel the walls closing in, the air thick with the stench of decay and the oppressive weight of their impending doom. "*We need to create an opening,*" she said, her voice trembling slightly. "*On my signal, focus all fire on the one to the left.*" Her fear was evident—she knew this was a desperate, almost suicidal gamble, but they had no choice.

The team complied, directing a concentrated assault on the creature to the left. Plasma bolts lit up the med bay, the creature's skin sizzling and bubbling grotesquely as it staggered back. The deafening screeches of the hybrid echoed endlessly, disorienting them, making it feel like the sound was coming from everywhere at once.

"*Now! Move!*" Allaria commanded, her voice filled with determination, though fear still lurked beneath.

They dashed through the gap, dragging Langford with them. The creatures roared in fury, their voices a chilling mix of guttural growls and ear-piercing wails. The sound reverberated through the corridor, creating a disorienting effect, as if the entire ship was alive and screaming at them. The hybrids gave chase, their heavy footsteps thudding against the metal floor, their claws scraping against the walls as they pursued, enraged and relentless.

Langford was slipping in and out of consciousness, his head lolling forward, his weight sagging heavily between Karega and Arturo. Each step was a struggle, the two men gritting their teeth as they fought to keep him upright, their muscles straining with the effort. The flickering lights and the chaos around them made it feel like the world was collapsing, every second feeling like an eternity.

"*Where the fuck are we going?*" Arturo panted, his voice strained, as they passed various doors along the corridor, each one offering no refuge.

"*Engineering deck,*" Allaria replied, her voice cracking with desperation. "*We can access the ship's core systems there.*" She knew it was a dangerous move, a last-ditch option, but they were out of choices. Her fear seeped into her words, her determination barely masking the terror underneath.

"*Then what?*" Karega asked, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Allaria hesitated for a split second, then spoke, her eyes filled with a grim resolve. "*We might be able to initiate self-destruct—destroy the ship and the creatures with it.*"

The words hung heavily in the air, the weight of them almost tangible. Utekli's face blanched, his eyes widening in shock. His hands trembled as he gripped his weapon, the thought of what she was suggesting hitting him like a physical blow. Simmons looked at her, disbelief etched across her face, her eyes wide as she processed the severity of Allaria's suggestion.

"*That's a fucking last resort if I ever heard one,*" Utekli cautioned, his voice barely more than a whisper, the fear evident.

"*We don't have many options,*" she countered, her gaze unwavering. The fear in her eyes was matched by a fierce determination—if it came down to it, she would do what needed to be done. The ship was a nightmare, and they had to stop it from spreading, even if it meant sacrificing everything.

The team moved forward, their surroundings a blur of flickering lights and shifting shadows. The adrenaline coursed through their veins, their senses heightened, every step filled with urgency. The creatures' enraged roars echoed endlessly in the narrow corridors, the sound pressing in on them, making it feel like they were being hunted by something far larger and more monstrous than they could comprehend.

The hybrids were close behind, their elongated limbs moving with a terrifying fluidity, their glowing eyes fixed on their prey. Allaria glanced over her shoulder, her heart pounding as she caught sight of the creatures—grotesque, distorted forms that seemed to embody the very essence of nightmare. Their claws scraped against the floor, leaving deep gouges in the metal, and their snarls filled the air with an oppressive sense of doom.

"Keep moving!" Allaria urged, her voice filled with both fear and determination. They had to make it to the engineering deck—there was no other choice.

They descended into the bowels of the ship, the creatures relentless in their pursuit. Each step deeper into the engineering deck felt like a step into the heart of a tomb. The confined spaces grew more oppressive, the walls seemingly pressing in around them. The echoes of their hurried breaths mingled with the metallic creaks of the ship, creating a dissonant symphony that seemed to taunt them, reminding them of how far from safety they were venturing. The air was thick, laden with the acrid scent of burnt wiring and decay, the dim emergency lights casting flickering shadows that played tricks on their eyes.

Behind them, the scraping of claws along the metal walls never let up—an ever-present reminder that they were being hunted, that they were only moments away from being caught. The relentless pursuit echoed through the narrow corridors, the guttural growls reverberating like a haunting chorus.

They reached the engineering deck, and without wasting a second, they barricaded the doors. The sense of urgency was palpable. Their hands shook as they threw heavy objects against the door—metal crates, broken panels, anything they could find. The loud clang of metal reverberated through the space, and almost immediately, the pounding began—a relentless, ominous thudding that reminded them time was slipping away, that the barricade was only a temporary reprieve.

Allaria hurried to the main console, her fingers flying over the controls, her heart pounding in her chest. She drew a deep breath, her voice steady but with an undercurrent of fear and resolve. "*Initiating the self-destruct sequence,*" she announced, her tone carrying the weight of their decision. "*Ten minutes until it's too late to leave.*"

A heavy silence fell over the group, the enormity of what she had just done hanging in the air. Simmons's eyes widened, disbelief etched across her face. "*Are you sure about this?*" she asked, her voice almost a whisper. Utekli's face turned pale, his hands trembling at the thought, as if he could hardly believe they had reached this point.

"*We can't let these creatures reach the fleet,*" Allaria affirmed, her voice resolute but tinged with a fear she tried to bury deep down. This wasn't just a mission anymore—this was an act of sacrifice, a last-ditch effort born out of sheer desperation.

An ominous pounding rattled the doors, the creatures attempting to break through. The metal groaned under pressure, bolts popping free with ear-splitting cracks. The barricade wouldn't hold for long.

"*Get ready,*" Karega warned, taking position, his knuckles white as he gripped his weapon.

The doors buckled, then burst open, the sound like a dam shattering under the force of a flood. The hybrids forced their way in, crawling through the gap with grotesque, jerky movements. Their glowing eyes scanned the room hungrily, their snarls echoing through the engineering deck. The creatures' elongated claws tapped against the metal floor, leaving deep scratch marks as they advanced, their bodies twitching and pulsing unnaturally—a grotesque testament to the merging of human and Gao-de DNA.

"Hold them off!" Allaria shouted, her focus on the console as the team engaged the creatures. Their advanced weapons roared, but the hybrids seemed almost impervious, advancing with relentless intent. The air filled with the acrid smell of plasma discharges, the flashes of gunfire illuminating the nightmare before them.

One creature broke through the line, charging directly at Allaria. She turned to face it, her eyes flashing with determination. As it leaped toward her, time seemed to slow. Her vision sharpened, every detail becoming painfully clear—the twitch of the creature's muscles, the gleam of its claws, the malice in its eyes. Her eyes began to glow, matching the intensity of the creature, and again, that strange surge of energy coursed through her veins. It felt alien, like something ancient and powerful had awakened within her—her muscles moving as if guided by an unseen force, tapping into something primal and barely understood.

She met the creature head-on, catching it mid-air. The force of the impact sent a shockwave through the room, rattling the consoles, scattering loose debris, and almost knocking her teammates off their feet. The creature's snarling expression flickered with something like shock, as if it realized, too late, what it was up against.

Allaria wrestled with the creature, her strength matching its own. Her blows were calculated and precise, guided by something instinctual—something beyond her training. She wasn't just matching the creature's strength; she was predicting its moves, staying one step ahead in a deadly dance. With a powerful twist, she threw the hybrid across the room, where it collided with a generator, sparks flying, smoke billowing as the creature snarled in frustration.

The creature recovered swiftly, its glowing eyes narrowing with renewed rage. It lunged again, but she was ready. Utilizing a combination of agility and sheer force, she evaded its strikes, her movements fluid and deliberate. She delivered hit after hit to its vital points, her focus unwavering, her body reacting faster than her conscious mind could keep up.

*"She's matching it blow for blow,"* Arturo marveled, his eyes wide as he watched in awe.

The creature roared in frustration, but Allaria pressed her advantage. She could feel the energy pulsing through her, guiding her every move. With a final, decisive strike, she clamped her hand around the creature's neck. It thrashed violently, its monstrous strength slowly faltering as her grip tightened. The hybrid's eyes flickered erratically, its snarls turning into desperate gasps. Finally, with a guttural, choking sound, the creature collapsed at her feet, the heavy thud echoing through the room.

Allaria stood over the fallen creature, breathing heavily. The glow in her eyes began to fade, replaced by a look of disbelief. She stared down at her hands, her fingers trembling slightly. She wasn't entirely sure how she had done that—how she had matched the creature's monstrous strength, how she had survived. She felt powerful, but there was fear there too—a fear of the unknown, of whatever was awakening inside her. It was as if she were standing on the edge of something vast and unknowable, something that both terrified and exhilarated her.

*"Allaria, behind you!"* Karega shouted.

Another creature advanced, its claws raised, glowing eyes locked on Allaria. Before it could reach her, Simmons fired a well-aimed sonic blast, the screech of the creature echoing through the hallway as it staggered back.

*"Thanks,"* Allaria acknowledged, her breath ragged.

*"Don't mention it,"* Simmons replied, quickly reloading her weapon, her hands trembling from the adrenaline rush.

**"Seven minutes until self-destruction,"** the automated voice announced, cutting into the chaos like a blade. The words seemed to freeze everyone in place for a fraction of a second. The team's eyes widened, and they exchanged hurried, anxious glances. Allaria felt her heart hammer in her chest, the pressure mounting. They had no time.

*"We need to get to the shuttle now!"* Allaria ordered, her voice cracking slightly with desperation. The blue glow in her eyes had now faded. Whatever had happened was gone for the time being.

Langford groaned, his body slipping in and out of consciousness. Allaria tightened her grip around him, and they sprinted down the corridor, their hurried breaths mixing with the metallic creaks of the ship. The entire structure seemed to groan in protest as the countdown ticked closer to its inevitable end. **"Six minutes until self-destruction!"** the voice echoed again, relentlessly reminding them that death was just around the corner.

The creatures' guttural roars echoed through the narrowing halls, their pounding footsteps growing closer with every passing second. Flickering lights provided only brief, fragmented glimpses of the hybrids, their twisted silhouettes appearing and disappearing like a nightmare that refused to end. It felt as though the walls were closing in, trapping them in a metal labyrinth that promised nothing but death.

Reaching the hangar bay, they found their shuttle intact but the massive bay doors sealed tight.

*"I can override the controls,"* Utekli said, rushing to a nearby terminal. His fingers flew across the keypad, sweat trickling down his forehead. The console beeped in protest, the system resisting his efforts. He cursed under his breath, his voice trembling with frustration as he heard the guttural snarls of the hybrids drawing nearer. *"Come on... come on!"*

*"Hurry!"* Karega urged, his voice laced with desperation. He knew everyone understood the pressure they were under, but he still had to say it. The sounds of the approaching creatures echoed louder, the metal clanging as they closed in. The fear in the team was palpable, adrenaline mixed with the harsh reality of their dwindling options and time.

Allaria and the others formed a defensive perimeter around Utekli, frantically setting up makeshift barriers using crates and loose equipment to block the entrance. The hybrids began clawing at the edges, their grotesque, disfigured faces glimpsed through the gaps as they snarled and snapped, their hunger and malice almost tangible.

**"Five minutes until self-destruction,"** the automated voice cut in again, heightening the tension.

*"Doors opening!"* Utekli finally announced, his relief audible.

*"Everyone on board!"* Allaria commanded, her voice barely audible over the chaos.

The team piled into the shuttle, each movement frantic. Langford's body slipped from Karega's grasp for a moment, and Arturo lunged forward, grabbing him just in time, his heart pounding in his ears. *"Got you!"* he grunted, hauling Langford inside. The shuttle's engines sputtered momentarily, a terrifying pause that made Allaria's stomach twist in fear.

*"Engines online,"* Simmons reported, her fingers dancing across the controls, the engines roaring to life beneath them. There was a sequence of tasks that must be completed to operate the shuttle. They were baked into the hardware. Unavoidable. Everyone sat in anticipation as the minutes passed.

*"Get us out of here!"* Allaria shouted, her voice filled with urgency.

The shuttle lifted off, maneuvering toward the slowly opening bay doors. The walls of the bay trembled, explosions rippling through the ship, the light blinding them as the structure began to collapse. *"Structural integrity failing,"* the shuttle's AI warned. *"Recommend immediate departure."*



Simmons accelerated, guiding the shuttle through the narrowing gap as debris fell all around them. Panels and shards of metal rained down, scraping the hull, each impact sending a shiver through the shuttle. "Brace for impact!" she yelled, her knuckles white as she gripped the controls, teeth clenched as they blasted out of the hangar.

As they cleared the Atticus, the ship behind them was engulfed in flames, sparks, and uncontrolled energy discharges. The blinding flash of the explosion lit up the dark void of space, followed by a massive shockwave that rattled the shuttle, throwing everyone inside against their restraints. Allaria grabbed onto the seat in front of her, her vision blurring from the force.

*"Fucking punch this thing!"* Allaria yelled, her voice strained, urging Simmons to push the shuttle harder, faster.

Simmons engaged full thrust, the engines roaring as the shuttle surged forward. Behind them, the Atticus was consumed in a brilliant, blinding flash, the shockwave chasing them, the violent shaking rattling the very bones of the crew. The force of the acceleration slammed them back into their seats, the pressure almost crushing their chests as they fought for breath. The shuttle's old frame shuddered violently under the strain, vibrating as though it was about to break apart at any moment, every bolt and seam threatening to come undone.

Finally, they were clear. Allaria exhaled slowly, her entire body trembling as the tension began to ease. She leaned back in her seat, closing her eyes for a moment, her chest rising and falling with deep, shaky breaths. Simmons let out a shaky laugh, a mix of relief and disbelief, her fingers still gripping the controls. "We actually made it," she muttered, her voice cracking.

Arturo let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding, his eyes wide, a stunned expression on his face. *"Holy shit,"* he whispered. *"We're alive."*

Captain Marcus's voice crackled over the comm, breaking the silence. *"Shuttle, this is the Einhorn. Do you copy?"*

Allaria opened her eyes, taking a steadying breath. *"This is Allaria,"* she replied, her voice tired but resolute. *"We're alive, but we have one crew member in critical condition."*

*"Understood. Prepare for docking. Medical team is standing by."*

Aboard the Einhorn, Langford was rushed to the medical bay. Allaria and her team were debriefed by Captain Marcus in a secure conference room. The tension in the room was thick, the weight of what they had done hanging over them like a storm cloud.

Captain Marcus sat silently for a moment, his gaze distant as he processed the report. Finally, he looked at Allaria, his expression grave. *"You made a difficult decision,"* he acknowledged, his voice heavy. *"Destroying the Atticus was not taken lightly I presume."*

Allaria nodded solemnly, her eyes downcast. *"It was the only way to ensure the creatures didn't reach the fleet,"* she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The captain nodded slowly, his face lined with exhaustion. *"Your actions likely saved countless lives,"* he said. *"The data you retrieved will be invaluable in understanding what Rohith was planning."*

Karega cleared his throat, speaking up. "Speaking of Rohith, we believe he escaped," he added, his tone grim. *"He could still be a threat."*

Captain Marcus's expression darkened, his jaw tightening. *"We'll initiate a sector-wide alert. All ships will be on the lookout,"* he promised.

Allaria hesitated, her hands rubbing together nervously, her gaze shifting to the floor. Her unease was clear, her heart pounding as she gathered the courage to speak. *"Sir, there's something else,"* she said, her voice shaky. She knew she had to tell him before someone else did. *"During the mission, I... exhibited abilities beyond normal human capacity."* The words spilled out carelessly.

Captain Marcus's brow furrowed, his eyes narrowing. "Explain," he said, his tone curious but cautious.

She recounted the events, describing her enhanced strength, her heightened reflexes, and the strange glowing of her eyes. As she spoke, she felt the fear bubbling beneath her words—the fear of what she was becoming, of what had been done to her without her knowledge. The fear of how her team would think of her from now on. Was she the nightmare of her Nightmare squad?

*"Intriguing,"* Marcus mused, his expression thoughtful as he considered her words. He could see the anxiety in her eyes, the uncertainty of what this meant for her future. He paused, his gaze softening slightly. *"It appears your father's work had unforeseen consequences,"* he finally said, his voice measured.

Allaria looked up, her eyes filled with a mix of fear and determination. *"With respect, sir, I need to understand what's been done to me,"* she said earnestly, her voice trembling slightly.

He regarded her for a long moment before nodding. *"Agreed. We'll arrange for comprehensive medical evaluations,"* he assured her. *"In the meantime, consider your team on standby."*

*"Thank you, sir,"* she replied, her voice steadying, though the fear still lingered. Whatever lay ahead, she knew she couldn't face it alone. And that, at least, was some comfort.

## CHAPTER 13

The sterile white walls of the Einhorn's medical bay contrasted sharply with the chaos Allaria had just escaped. The stark brightness was almost too much, like it was trying to bleach away the horrors she had witnessed but failing to reach beneath her skin. As she lay on the examination table, she couldn't shake the image of her glowing eyes reflected in the shattered visor of her helmet. It had been her, but also something else—something that terrified her. The memory of overpowering the creature replayed in her mind, filling her with a mix of awe and creeping dread. The power had felt intoxicating, but wrong, as if her body no longer entirely belonged to her.

"*Try to relax,*" Dr. Morgan instructed, adjusting the scanning equipment hovering above her. He was the ship's chief medical officer—renowned for his expertise but known for his emotional distance. His calmness seemed at odds with the storm brewing inside her, and Allaria wished, just for a moment, that he would show some sign of understanding what she was going through.

Allaria took a deep breath, though it did little to ease her mounting anxiety. Her senses felt sharper than ever, overwhelming her with detail. The soft hum of the machinery seemed to drill into her skull, each footstep in the distant corridor pounded in her ears like a drumbeat, and the whisper of air through the vents grated on her nerves. It was too much. She closed her eyes, trying to focus, but the sounds kept building, piling on top of each other like an unstoppable wave.

"*Doctor,*" she began hesitantly, her voice barely above a whisper, "*is it normal to... perceive so much?*"

Dr. Morgan glanced at her over his glasses, his eyes cold and analytical. "*Given what you've described, heightened senses are to be expected. But we'll know more once the scans are complete.*"

Captain Marcus stood nearby, arms crossed, his gaze fixed on her. There was no warmth in his eyes—only assessment. He was watching her not just as his crew member but as something potentially dangerous. His presence, instead of calming her, made her feel like she was under a microscope, each flaw, each anomaly magnified. She felt exposed.

"*We'll get to the bottom of this, Allaria. You're not alone,*" he said, his voice flat, as if rehearsed.

She offered a faint, shaky smile. *"Thank you, sir."* But the truth was, she felt utterly alone.

The scanner emitted a soft beep, and Dr. Morgan's brows knitted together as he studied the holographic display. He hesitated, the pause stretching on, the tension in the room thickening. Allaria's stomach twisted into knots as she watched his expression darken.

*"What is it?"* she asked, her voice trembling, and she forced herself to sit up despite the fear clutching at her chest.

Dr. Morgan finally spoke, each word careful and deliberate. *"Your genetic makeup shows anomalies—sequences that don't correspond to standard human DNA. They're... intertwined with patterns similar to the Gao-de genome. We expected that based on the data you provided, but there's more."*

*"More?"* Captain Marcus prompted, his voice dropping, a grim undertone of suspicion creeping in.

Dr. Morgan adjusted the display, highlighting specific sequences with a wave of his hand. He seemed to hesitate again, as if considering how best to phrase what he was about to say. *"There are markers here that suggest an interaction with unknown elements—possibly interdimensional in nature."*

Allaria's heart skipped a beat, her breath catching in her throat. *"Interdimensional?"* The word seemed to hang in the air, heavy, almost impossible. It was as if the ground beneath her had shifted. What had been done to her?

Dr. Morgan nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing at the data. *"It's theoretical, but given the anomalies... it's plausible that your enhancements allow you to perceive or even interact with dimensions beyond our own."*

Captain Marcus exchanged a glance with her, his expression unreadable. *"That could explain your experiences—the dreams, the visions."*

Allaria swallowed hard, the lump in her throat refusing to budge. *"I've been having nightmares for months, maybe even years,"* she admitted, her voice shaky. The words felt dangerous, like admitting them out loud could make them more real. *"Shadows, whispers... words I can't make out. But lately, they've become more vivid."* She felt her chest tighten as the memories rushed

back—faceless shapes, voices that felt as though they were trying to drag her somewhere she could never escape from.

"*Tell me about them,*" Dr. Morgan encouraged, his voice gentler, though the cold, clinical detachment remained.

Allaria hesitated, her gaze flicking towards Captain Marcus. His eyes met hers, filled not with comfort but with concern. She felt like a specimen, something to be examined and understood. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself, before beginning. As she spoke, her heart pounded with fear—not just of what she was becoming, but of the darkness that seemed to be reaching for her, a darkness she didn't know how to fight.

She took a moment to collect her thoughts, her hands trembling slightly as she pressed them against her legs, seeking some stability. "*I see... forms. Indescribable shapes that defy logic,*" she began, her voice almost a whisper. "*They're not like anything I've seen before. It's like they exist outside the boundaries of our world, twisting and shifting in ways that make no sense. They're both terrifying and mesmerizing. I feel like they're reaching out to me, calling me... pulling me toward something I don't understand.*"

As she spoke, her gaze grew distant, her heart rate quickening as she remembered the dreams. A chill ran down her spine, and her skin prickled, the sense of something brushing against her lingering like an unwelcome touch.

Dr. Morgan watched her closely, his expression unreadable, though a tightening around his eyes betrayed his unease. "*It's possible that your enhancements have opened a pathway—a connection to another dimension,*" he said, his voice measured, though Allaria could sense a weight behind his words—an acknowledgment of the danger she might be in.

Captain Marcus stepped forward, a rare flicker of concern crossing his normally stoic features. "*Is she in any danger?*" His voice was low, but there was an urgency to it, a desperation to protect his crew member from this unknown threat.

"*Physically, she's stable,*" Dr. Morgan assured, though his gaze dropped to the scanner, his brow furrowing in thought. "*But the psychological impact of such experiences can't be underestimated. We could be dealing with something... unprecedented.*"

Allaria met the captain's gaze, her heart pounding in her chest. The weight of the unknown pressed down on her, but she refused to back down. *"Sir, I need to understand what's happening to me. If there's any chance that these... entities are connected to the Confessors or Rohith's plans, we have to find out."*

*"You deserve to know the full picture, Allaria," he began, his voice low. "Our intelligence division has been working tirelessly to unravel what we can about the Confessors and their connection to Dr. Rohith. What we've found is disturbing, to say the least. The Confessors are indeed tied to Rohith, though the extent of their collaboration is still unclear. What we do know is that they share a common goal—one that involves the Gao-De as well. Keep in mind that all of this information is fairly new to us. You really haven't missed anything."*

Allaria's brows furrowed, her unease growing. *"How are the Gao-De involved?"*

*"We aren't entirely sure yet," Marcus admitted, his tone tinged with frustration. "The Gao-De are elusive. They operate in shadows, and their motives are difficult to pin down. But it appears they have some kind of symbiotic relationship with the Confessors. Perhaps they supply resources or knowledge in exchange for something. We just don't know enough yet."*

He paused, then reached into his uniform pocket and pulled out a small datalink, pressing it into Allaria's hand. She looked down at it, her fingers curling around the cool metal.

*"This," Marcus said, "contains everything we have on the Confessors. It's not much, but it's the best intelligence we've managed to gather. They call themselves devotees of an entity known as 'Xal'athoth, The Devourer of Dreams.'"*

Marcus nodded gravely. *"According to the Confessors, it exists in the spaces between reality and the subconscious, thriving on the dreams and knowledge of sentient beings. With the limited information we've gathered, some of this is speculation, but it seems to draw power from the unspoken thoughts and hidden wisdom that lie within the human mind. Its presence is felt in the whispers of forgotten languages, the shadows of half-remembered dreams."*

Allaria shivered involuntarily. The description struck a chord deep within her, resonating with the inexplicable dreams that had haunted her for months. The strange forms, the whispers—could they have been Xal'athoth reaching out to her?

*"The Confessors worship this... Devourer," Marcus continued, his eyes dark. "They believe that by serving it, they can gain forbidden knowledge, power beyond comprehension. And somehow, Rohith is entangled in this madness. His experiments, the hybrids, even your enhancements—it's all unclear how it's connected."*

Allaria felt a chill settle over her, a mix of fear and determination swirling within her. She tightened her grip on the datalink, her knuckles whitening. *"Sir, if this Xal'athoth is involved, then we have to stop the Confessors. Whatever it takes."*

Marcus placed a hand on her shoulder, his expression softening. *"I know, Allaria. And you won't have to do it alone. The Einhorn and its crew are at your side. We'll be assessing the overall composition of our fleet to identify possible cult members or followers. We'll be making adjustments, but hopefully we have a solid amount of people on our side when this all shakes out."*

Allaria swallowed, the captain's words a small beacon of hope amidst the dark uncertainty that lay ahead. *"Thank you, sir,"* she said, her voice steady, though her heart still raced. The fear was there, yes, but it was tempered by resolve. She had a mission, and she had a team—she wasn't alone.

*"Take the rest of the day to process all of this,"* Marcus said, releasing her shoulder. *"We'll have more updates soon, but for now, you need to rest and regroup. We'll face whatever comes next together."*

Allaria nodded, slipping the datalink into her pocket. As she left the medical bay, she couldn't help but feel the weight of the new knowledge pressing down on her, but for the first time, she also felt a spark of hope. She had allies, and together they would face the darkness—whatever it took.

The Captain offered a rare smile. *"I've also spoken with the Admiralty. They've authorized me to offer you and your team positions aboard the Einhorn. We'd be honored to have you."*

Allaria's eyes widened in surprise, her heart suddenly pounding in her chest. Was she ready for this? The enormity of what she had just been through, the fear, the uncertainty—it all rushed back in a single moment. She hesitated, her gaze dropping as she considered the weight of the decision. Could she really commit to something like this, after everything? She felt the

weariness of the last few days pressing on her shoulders, but then she looked back up at Marcus. His smile was reassuring, a steady anchor amidst the tumultuous storm inside her.

She took a breath, allowing herself to nod slowly. *"I accept, sir,"* she said, her voice steadying as she spoke. *"And I'm sure my team will as well."*

Marcus's smile widened, a warmth in his eyes. *"Excellent. We'll formalize the arrangements later. For now, you and your team, get some rest."*

Back in her assigned quarters, Allaria found it difficult to relax. The room was quiet, the soft lighting creating a calming ambiance, but her mind was anything but tranquil. She sat on the edge of the bunk, staring out the viewport at the stars drifting by. The silence felt almost foreign—too much after the chaos she had just endured. It was like the universe had suddenly decided to give her a moment of calm, but she wasn't sure how to accept it. The quiet felt heavy, reminding her of everything she had faced, and everything that lay ahead. She was safe now, but for how long? Could she truly belong here, on a new ship, with new people, a new crew, with new responsibilities?

A chime at the door broke her reverie, snapping her back to the present. She turned, a sense of relief washing over her at the familiar sound. *"Come in,"* she called.

The door slid open to reveal Karega, Simmons, Utekli, and Arturo. Their faces reflected a mix of concern and curiosity, and as they entered, the room felt a little less empty, the silence replaced by the comfort of familiar faces. It was like the warmth of their presence pushed back against the uncertainty that had filled her moments before.

*"Mind if we join you?"* Karega asked, his voice gentle.

She smiled warmly, genuinely. *"Please."*

They settled into the room, finding seats or leaning against the walls. The energy shifted immediately—Karega's steady presence, Simmons's soft smile, Arturo's protective stance, and Utekli's intellectual curiosity—it all made the small, sterile space feel alive again, more like home.

*"How are you holding up?"* Simmons inquired gently, moving closer and placing a hand on Allaria's arm.



Allaria sighed, her shoulders dropping slightly. *"It's a lot to process,"* she admitted. *"Apparently, I can see into other dimensions now."*

Utekli's eyes lit up, his excitement palpable. *"Fascinating! The implications of that are—"*

Arturo nudged him lightly, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. *"Not the time, Utekli."*

Utekli blinked, his excitement dampened. *"Sorry,"* he mumbled, but there was a spark of intrigue in his eyes that didn't fade.

Allaria chuckled softly, a small but real laugh that broke through the tension. *"It's okay. Honestly, I don't fully understand it myself,"* she said, the weight of her uncertainty tempered by their presence.

Karega leaned forward, his eyes steady on hers. *"We're here for you, whatever you need,"* he said, his voice full of sincerity.

Allaria hesitated, glancing down for a moment before looking up again. *"Actually,"* she began, her voice a little shaky, *"I wanted to talk to you all about that. Captain Marcus has offered us positions on the Einhorn."*

Their expressions shifted to surprise, eyes widening in response.

*"Seriously?"* Simmons exclaimed, her hand still resting lightly on Allaria's arm.

Allaria nodded. *"Yes. I accepted on my behalf but wanted to see how you all felt."*

They exchanged glances—surprise turning into reflection. There was a moment where each of them seemed to weigh the possibilities, assessing what this new step would mean for them. The gravity of what Allaria was offering hung in the air—an unknown future, but one they would face together.

Arturo was the first to break the silence, a grin spreading across his face. *"Are you kidding? Serving on the flagship? Count me in."*

Simmons nodded, her eyes lighting up with excitement. *"Absolutely."*

Utekli adjusted his glasses, his voice practically brimming with enthusiasm. *"Think of the research opportunities! The chance to study all of this firsthand... I'm definitely in."*

Karega placed a firm hand on Allaria's shoulder, his eyes meeting hers. "*We're with you, all the way,*" he said, his tone resolute.

A wave of gratitude swelled within her, unexpected and overwhelming. She felt a lump rise in her throat, her voice catching for a moment. "*Thank you,*" she managed, her words tinged with emotion. "*I couldn't ask for a better team.*" Deep down, she had been afraid—afraid that they might choose another path, that she might have to face this alone. But seeing their unwavering support filled her with a warmth she hadn't realized she needed. For the first time in a long time, she felt like she truly belonged—like she wasn't facing all of this alone.

The next hour passed in a blur of conversation and laughter. They spoke about what their new roles might entail, what it would mean to be on the Einhorn, and shared old stories of their past missions and training. The atmosphere lifted with each story told—memories of victories, narrow escapes, and all the moments that had bonded them together as a team. Allaria found herself smiling, genuinely, without forcing it. The room felt less like an assigned space and more like a place where she belonged—filled with her people. The fear from earlier, the uncertainty, felt just a bit smaller now, eclipsed by the bond they shared.

They laughed together, the sound filling the small quarters, drowning out the echoes of the nightmares and the uncertainty of the future. In that moment, it wasn't about the looming threats or the questions they still needed answers to. It was just about them—together, as they had always been, and as they would continue to be.

As the conversation lulled, Allaria stifled a yawn.

"*Looks like someone needs sleep,*" Simmons observed with a teasing smile.

"*Yeah,*" Allaria admitted. "*It's been a long day.*"

"*We'll let you rest,*" Karega said, standing up. "*See you tomorrow.*"

They filed out, leaving her alone once more. The silence of her quarters settled around her like a heavy blanket. She changed into more comfortable attire and slipped into her rack, hoping for a dreamless sleep. But sleep didn't come.

The quiet hum of the ship, the gentle vibrations, the darkness—all of it seemed to conspire to keep her mind racing. Allaria turned onto her side, then her back, her eyes tracing the ceiling,

but no amount of repositioning seemed to help. The events of the day played over and over in her mind, and the lingering feeling of the unknown gnawed at her.

With a sigh of frustration, she sat up, rubbing her eyes. It was no use. She reached for her data pad, knowing exactly what she needed to do. Maybe understanding more about the cult would provide some clarity, some semblance of control over what was happening to her.

Allaria opened the data pad, the soft glow illuminating her weary face as she navigated to the information Captain Marcus had provided. The file on the Confessors opened with a header that seemed almost ominous in its simplicity. The cult's name, "The Confessors of Xal'athoth," was displayed boldly at the top. She scrolled through the pages of intelligence reports, witness accounts, and what little they had managed to decipher about the Confessors' beliefs and practices.

The Confessors worshiped an entity they called "Xal'athoth, The Devourer of Dreams." The cult believes it exists in the interdimensional spaces between reality and the subconscious—a being that fed on the dreams, fears, and hidden knowledge of sentient beings. Allaria shuddered as she read the descriptions of its supposed influence, the whispers in forgotten languages, the glimpses of impossible shapes in the minds of those who had come into contact with it. Xal'athoth was a devourer, thriving on the things most people kept locked away in their minds, and somehow, she felt she had become part of this entity's gaze.

The intelligence gathered was fragmented at best—speculation from those who had defected from the cult, observations from distant encounters, and partial translations of the cult's texts. What they knew about the Confessors was pieced together from limited information, much of it uncertain. The Confessors believed that by serving Xal'athoth, they could gain knowledge beyond the scope of humanity, an understanding that transcended the boundaries of this dimension. They saw dreams not as something fleeting but as doorways—gateways that connected to the entity's realm, and through those doorways, they hoped to transcend. It was madness, Allaria thought, but it chilled her to the bone how it echoed her own experiences.

Her fingers trembled as she scrolled further, her eyes skimming over diagrams of symbols the cult used, symbols she had seen in her dreams. Shapes that twisted and morphed, never staying the same, as if they were alive. The whispers, the sensation of something reaching out from the dark—she had felt it all. Allaria took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. She knew she needed to understand this, to confront it, but the weight of the unknown was crushing.

Eventually, she set the data pad down, exhaustion finally beginning to tug at her. She lay back down, her mind still buzzing but her body too weary to keep up the fight. Slowly, she drifted off, succumbing to sleep.

Her dreams were immediate and overwhelming. There was no gentle drift into unconsciousness—only the sudden plunge into darkness. The shapes were there again, twisting, shifting, defying any logic or form that she could recognize. They moved with an unsettling fluidity, and the whispers returned, louder this time, echoing through her mind like a chorus of dread. The words were incomprehensible, yet filled with intent—an intent that seemed to reach inside her, grasping at the deepest parts of her consciousness.

Colors bled into each other, shapes collided and separated, and the voices grew more insistent, more demanding. She could feel them pressing in on her, suffocating her with their presence, and for a moment, she was certain she was being pulled somewhere—somewhere beyond the boundaries of what she knew as real. Her pulse pounded in her ears, and her vision seemed to blur, then sharpen, then blur again, as though the dream was trying to pull her apart, layer by layer.

She tried to scream, but no sound came out. The whispers grew louder, drowning out everything else, and in the midst of the chaos, a singular form emerged. It was indistinct, a silhouette against the chaos, but it radiated power, authority. It reached for her, and as its thousands of fingers brushed against her consciousness, a jolt of terror surged through her, snapping her awake.

Allaria sat up in her bed, drenched in sweat, her heart racing, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. The quiet of her quarters was jarring after the intensity of the dream, but she was grateful for it. She ran a trembling hand through her hair, trying to ground herself, her gaze drifting to the data pad on the table beside her.

Xal'athoth. The name echoed in her mind, and she realized that this was far from over. The cult, the entity, the dreams—they were all connected. And somehow, she was at the center of it.

## CHAPTER 14

The next month was a blur. The team settled into their new roles, each member taking on distinct responsibilities that contributed to the ship's operations.

Simmons had been assigned to weapons control, working closely with the railgun operators to ensure the massive artillery systems were running at peak efficiency. She spent hours familiarizing herself with the intricate controls and safety protocols of the Einhorn's weaponry—massive railguns capable of firing projectiles at unimaginable speeds, anti-missile defense systems that protected the ship from threats, and the smaller railguns lining the hull. Unlike the Atticus, there were no drones to command, and that made her job both simpler and more daunting. It was all about precision, power, and quick decisions.

Karega found his place in the ship's security team, helping coordinate the internal safety drills and tactical procedures. He worked with the security personnel, making sure they were always prepared for boarding scenarios or internal threats. The Einhorn's size meant a larger crew, and with that came the challenge of maintaining strict security protocols across a massive vessel. He was also responsible for training new recruits, instilling in them the discipline required to serve aboard the flagship.

Utekli, true to his nature, found himself in the data analysis department. He worked tirelessly with a team of analysts, deciphering transmissions, scanning for anomalies, and trying to piece together the movements of the Confessors and their connections to Xal'athoth. He was fascinated by the challenge, pouring over cryptic data streams and spending long hours in front of his console. His excitement was palpable, even if his work left him exhausted.

Arturo was assigned to engineering, assisting in the maintenance of the ship's core systems. The Einhorn was vastly different from the Atticus, and Arturo found himself impressed by the complexity of its systems. He worked closely with the engineering team to keep the ship running smoothly, maintaining the power distribution to the railguns and ensuring the ship's engines were operating at peak capacity. The sheer power of the ship's weapon systems meant that Arturo's job was crucial, and he took immense pride in ensuring that the Einhorn was always ready for action.

Each week, the Einhorn engaged in rigorous drills—combat simulations, emergency evacuations, and tactical maneuvers. The ship's drills were unlike anything the team had

experienced on the Atticus. The massive railguns would charge, their hum resonating through the ship, followed by the deafening blast as they fired at simulated targets. Anti-missile defense systems would engage, unleashing a flurry of projectiles to intercept incoming threats. Unlike the drone exercises of the Atticus, everything here was about brute force and precision, a show of the ship's firepower and the crew's coordination. The Einhorn was a war machine, and Captain Marcus ran it as such.

Captain Marcus's command style was strict, unyielding. He expected excellence from every member of the crew, and he made sure that expectation was known. The admiral's presence on the bridge was a constant reminder of the stakes—they were not just another ship in the fleet. The eyes of the highest command were always on them. Marcus had a reputation for his discipline, and the crew respected him for it. There was no room for mistakes, and that pressure was felt by everyone aboard. The drills were intense, the routines relentless, but it forged the crew into a cohesive unit, ready for whatever threat lay ahead.

Allaria spent her days entirely on the bridge, working with the officers directly. Some days she was fetching them coffee, running errands that felt trivial but gave her insight into the chain of command. Other days, she found herself helping analyze intelligence reports, learning the intricate details of tactical planning and fleet coordination. She soaked it all up, knowing she was on her way to becoming an officer herself. The bridge was a constant bustle of activity, and she relished the opportunity to learn.

But at night, when she finally returned to her quarters, Allaria faced a different challenge. Her sleep was often restless, plagued by flashes of horror that invaded her dreams. Entities that defied description—shadows twisting, shapes that moved with intent yet were impossible to define—haunted her mind. The whispers were always there, just at the edge of her perception, taunting her, calling to her from somewhere beyond. It felt as though her own mind was betraying her, dragging her into a place she couldn't escape. She would wake up in a cold sweat, her heart pounding, the fear lingering even after she realized she was safe.

Over time, the nightmares began to bleed into her waking hours. Quick flashes of the same incomprehensible figures, the sensation of being watched, or a whisper that seemed to come from nowhere. Allaria tried to ignore them, to convince herself that they were just remnants of her dreams, but it was becoming harder. She sometimes felt as if she was losing her grip on reality, her own mind conspiring against her. She hid it from the others, not wanting to burden

them or show weakness. She pushed forward, hoping that she could find a way to control whatever was happening to her, but the fear was always there—growing, gnawing at her resolve.

Allaria felt like she was going to break. Months of this torture, her mind playing tricks on her. What day was it? Where was she? Darkness. It enveloped her, pulling her down into its depths. She couldn't tell if her eyes were open or closed. There was no point of reference, no light, no sound. Just the endless, oppressive blackness. She felt the ground beneath her, or perhaps there wasn't any ground at all. Was she standing? Floating? Falling? It was impossible to tell. Her limbs felt heavy, unresponsive, as if weighed down by an unseen force. In the distance, she thought she heard a sound—a soft creak, like something moving—but it seemed too far away, almost disconnected from her surroundings.

"Hello?" she called out, but her voice was swallowed whole by the abyss. It was like shouting into water; the sound never made it far, distorted and drowned by the dark. She couldn't even hear her own words. The darkness was not still. It shifted, almost breathing, pressing against her skin, wrapping around her like a living entity. It constricted, making her breath hitch in her throat, muffling every sense.

Then, a whisper. It brushed against her consciousness, a chilling breeze on her ear, making her skin prickle. It was unintelligible, but it carried an unmistakable sense of familiarity, like something from the depths of a half-remembered nightmare. The words felt as if they bypassed her ears entirely, spoken directly into her mind. They were foreign, invasive, like a hand reaching inside her thoughts and twisting them.

"*Who's there?*" she demanded, her voice trembling, unsure if she even spoke aloud.

The darkness shifted again. Shapes began to form, first as fleeting glimpses in the void—flashes of something angular, bending, and twisting just out of focus. She tried to follow them, but they always moved away, as if they knew she was watching. Slowly, they became more defined, impossible geometries that seemed to defy logic. Towers spiraled into the sky—or what felt like the sky—bending at unnatural angles, their edges blurring as if they were half-solid, half-dream.

Then came the beings. Immense forms, grotesque and incomprehensible, emerged from the shifting dark. They were not entirely solid, their bodies writhing masses that seemed to be in

constant flux. Appendages stretched and morphed, eyes blinked in and out of existence at random places on their shifting forms. There were limbs, or something like limbs, covered in a viscous fluid that oozed and dripped. The sight of them evoked a primal revulsion in her, like the feeling of something crawling beneath her skin, scratching at the walls of her sanity. If she were in the right state of mind, she might remember the hybrids and the goey substance they spread around the corridors of the atticus, but the thought never entered her mind.

The air itself was wrong. It burned her skin one moment, and then froze her bones the next. It felt like the ground beneath her shifted with every heartbeat, tilting her off balance, while her legs felt paralyzed, refusing to move. Her heart pounded erratically, each beat struggling as if it were fighting against an unnatural force. Her head grew light, her thoughts scattered, slipping through her fingers like sand. The entities were moving closer, their presence pressing against her mind like a tidal wave, pushing her down, suffocating her, prying open the deepest parts of her consciousness to let the horror seep in.

One of the entities loomed closer, its grotesque form blocking out everything else. Uncountable eyes fixed upon her, and a voice echoed within her mind. It was not a single voice, but a cacophony—a mix of whispers, shouts, and indecipherable murmurs, occasionally merging into something coherent. It spoke, overlapping itself, creating an auditory dissonance that made her wince.

*"Child of two worlds,"* it intoned, the phrase repeating in different tones, some soft, others booming, as if multiple beings spoke in unison. The effect was dizzying, overwhelming.

She struggled to find her voice, her throat dry, her words barely a whisper. *"What are you?"*

The response came as a fragmented, maddening cacophony—pieces of sentences, broken thoughts, until suddenly it all coalesced into a single, chilling voice. *"We are the old, the forgotten, the eternal."*

*"Because you are a bridge,"* the voices answered, the words reverberating inside her skull, making her head throb.

*"A bridge? Between what?"* she managed, her confusion mounting, each question feeling like it was only adding to the chaos.



"*Worlds. Dimensions. Realities,*" they replied, their forms shifting, blurring together, becoming more indistinct, more grotesque. The overlapping voices rose and fell, a discordant symphony that made her want to cover her ears, but her hands refused to move.

"*I don't understand,*" she said, her voice barely audible, drowned out by the noise.

"*You will,*" the entity assured, its eyes blinking in and out of existence. "*The veil is thinning. The convergence approaches.*"

"*Convergence?*" she repeated, her mind grasping at the word. "*Is this what Rohith is after?*"

"*His actions accelerate the inevitable,*" the voices said, each word a different pitch, a different cadence. "*But he is a pawn, unaware of the true scope.*"

Fear and frustration welled within her, a scream building in her chest that she couldn't release. "*What am I supposed to do?*" she demanded.

"*Choose,*" they replied, the word echoing endlessly, reverberating through her very soul. No single entity answers. All entities answered.

"*Choose what?*" she cried, her voice breaking, her sanity fraying at the edges.

"*Your path. Your allegiance,*" they intoned, and before she could respond, the forms began to blur, fading back into the darkness. The void around her shifted, and suddenly, a deafening roar filled her ears—not just a sound, but a full-body experience. It felt like every nerve in her body was resonating, vibrating with the intensity of it, as if the very fabric of reality was tearing itself apart.

The void collapsed around her, but it didn't end. Allaria jolted awake, gasping for air, but everything still felt wrong. The edges of her vision shimmered, wavering as though reality itself wasn't sure if it was real. The darkness of her dream seemed to bleed into her waking world, making it impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. Was she awake? Her quarters refused to solidify around her, the walls shifting in her peripheral vision, twisting like they were breathing, alive. She tried to blink it away, but the shadows crept closer, moving as if they had intent.

She tried to push herself upright. What was up or down? Her hands were shaking uncontrollably. Her chest was tight, a clawing pressure that refused to release its grip. Each

breath was a struggle, her lungs feeling like they couldn't expand enough, like they were being crushed. The whisper was still there, faint but chilling—an echo of her nightmare that refused to let go, as if the entities still had their grasp on her mind. She felt their presence pressing against her skull, an invisible heaviness behind her eyes, a lingering reminder that she was not alone. She could feel them watching, and every shadow in her quarters seemed filled with a malicious intent, making her question whether she had truly escaped.

Allaria tried to steady herself, her muscles aching as if she'd been straining for hours. She stumbled, the ground beneath her feeling unsteady, her vision blurring again. The quiet of the room felt wrong—too quiet, too distant, as if she were separated from the world by a veil. Then, reality came crashing in all at once, violently and without warning.

She wasn't in her quarters. The clarity struck her like a punch to the gut, the surroundings snapping into place with a jarring vividness. The bridge. The bright lights were blinding, her eyes stinging as they struggled to adjust. Voices reached her ears, but they were distorted, alien, as though filtered through a layer of water. Her heart dropped as she became aware of the eyes on her—fifteen officers, and the Admiral himself, all staring. Their expressions were a mix of shock, fear, and something else she couldn't place.

Allaria's face burned with immediate embarrassment, a cold vulnerability washing over her. She had been exposed in front of everyone—unguarded, lost in some horrifying place that they could only witness but never understand. Her gaze moved across the room, catching sight of the officers, their faces pale, some visibly trembling, others trying to avert their eyes. One officer had stepped back unconsciously, his mouth slightly open, his eyes wide and unblinking. Another officer shook his head slowly, as if in disbelief, his face drained of color.

Captain Marcus stood at the center, frozen, his usual unflappable demeanor shattered. His mouth hung slightly open, his eyes wide, filled with something akin to wonder or fear. The Admiral, however, was the one giving orders, his voice the only thing tethering the bridge to normalcy. Marcus blinked, as if snapping out of a trance, and quickly regained his composure, barking commands with urgency, his tone clipped as he worked to reestablish control of the situation.

Medical staff were already on the way. Allaria wasn't sure how long she had been out, how long she had been... wherever she was. The situation had spiraled out of her control, and that helplessness gnawed at her. Seconds later, the medics were there, Dr. Morgan among them. He

approached her, his movements swift but controlled. His eyes met hers, searching, assessing, and his expression betrayed a deeper concern despite his outward calmness. He spoke in a soothing tone, but his hands moved quickly, his urgency palpable. The medics flanked him, their faces tense, their movements hesitant, as if unsure how to handle her after witnessing what had just transpired.

The entire bridge had an unnatural blue glow to it. Her eyes—she could still feel the energy in them, still feel the light pushing outward. It was cold, piercing, a light that did not illuminate but instead seemed to cut through everything. The officers shielded their eyes, some turning away, unable to comprehend the sight. Slowly, the glow began to fade, like dying embers reluctant to extinguish, leaving behind an unsettling sense that whatever force had taken hold of her wasn't entirely gone.

Someone had put a recording of the bridge on one of the displays. Allaria forced herself to look, her breath catching in her throat. She saw herself there, suspended in mid-air, her limbs hanging limply, her head tilted back, her eyes blazing with a blinding blue light. It looked like something out of a nightmare—a hollow shell of herself, glowing so brightly that people had to shield their faces, some covering their eyes with their arms, the horror evident in every line of their bodies.

She heard someone murmur in disbelief behind her. Another officer visibly shook his head, muttering, "*That shouldn't be possible.*" It was incomprehensible—something that shouldn't exist, yet had happened right there, in front of them all. Allaria's heart sank as she realized just how much had changed. She wasn't just different; she was something terrifying—something even her comrades struggled to understand.

As the medics led her away, Allaria's mind reeled, trying to process what had just happened. Fear twisted her thoughts, a gnawing fear of how the others would see her now. She had spent months trying to fit in, trying to prove herself as a reliable member of the crew, but now all of that felt shattered. She could see the horror in their eyes, the way they recoiled from her—even if it was unintentional. It was as if they had seen something they weren't meant to, something monstrous. And deep down, she feared they were right. What if she was losing herself? What if the power inside her wasn't something she could control, but something that would consume her, turning her into one of those horrors she saw in her dreams?

She tried to keep her expression neutral, tried to hide the turmoil churning inside her, but it was impossible to shake the feeling of exposure, of vulnerability. They had seen her at her weakest, her most dangerous. And now, they would always look at her differently. No longer just a crewmate, but as something other—something to be feared.

The fear of isolation gripped her. She had fought so hard to belong, to carve out a place for herself among the crew of the Einhorn. But now... now she wasn't sure if that was possible anymore. Would they still trust her? Would they still see her as one of their own, or would they always wonder if she was a threat waiting to unravel? The thought made her chest tighten, her heart pounding painfully against her ribs.

But then, amid the chaos of her thoughts, she remembered Karega's words, Simmons' concern, Arturo's steadfastness, and Utekli's curiosity. They had stood by her, even after witnessing the inexplicable. They had come to her quarters, reassured her, promised their support. Maybe, just maybe, they would stay by her side, even now. It was a fragile hope, but it was enough to keep her going. Enough to make her take one trembling step after another, even as the shadows of fear and doubt loomed large.

Dr. Morgan's voice broke through her spiraling thoughts, calm and grounding. "*You're safe now, Allaria. We're going to take care of you.*" She nodded, her gaze dropping to the floor as she focused on putting one foot in front of the other, trying to hold back tears. Safe. She wasn't sure if she believed it, but for now, she clung to the words, clung to the hope that she wasn't alone in this. That somehow, she could still find her place among the crew, despite the terror that now seemed to define her very existence.

Allaria picked up her head. She was back in the med bay. But this time, she was behind the protective glass wall used for quarantining sick crew members. The glass felt cold and impassable, an unyielding barrier between her and the rest of the world. It reflected her image—hollow eyes, pale face—a reminder of her separation, her isolation. It was as if she were on display, a specimen to be observed, yet unreachable. The feeling gnawed at her, deepening her vulnerability. She wanted to scream, to shatter the barrier, but even her own reflection seemed indifferent, distant, as if she were already lost to herself, or worse, to something else.

The med bay was silent—oppressively so. There was no comforting hum of machinery, no rhythmic beeping to remind her she was still tethered to life. It was an eerie, suffocating stillness

that seemed to absorb all hope, amplifying her sense of abandonment. She felt the silence pressing in on her, as if the very room were trying to swallow her whole.

*"No, no, I'm not sick,"* she thought. *"I don't belong here."* The words echoed in her mind, but the glass didn't care, and neither did the emptiness around her. The room seemed to close in on her, and her mind, desperate for an escape, raced back to a place she hadn't thought of in a decade or more. Her old room, back on Earth.

She could almost smell the antiseptic—sharp, sterile, invasive. The scent filled her nostrils, mingling with the cold metallic tang of the needle her father held. She remembered the way the metal glinted under the harsh light, the way her father's face looked—determined, emotionless. He had called it a vaccine, reassuring her that everyone gets one. But even then, she had known better. There was something in his eyes, something that betrayed the lie. She remembered the chill of the needle pressing against her skin, the way her heart pounded with a primal fear she couldn't articulate. He wasn't protecting her; he was changing her, twisting her into something else. He had made her into this—into a monster.

The memory merged with her present reality, the sense of betrayal intertwining with her isolation. Her father, the one person who should have protected her, had instead made her this way. And now, here she was, quarantined like some dangerous creature, separated from everyone else, as if she were no longer one of them.

She lifted her gaze, her eyes landing on the faces of her friends—Karega, Simmons, Arturo, and Utekli—standing on the other side of the protective glass. Their faces showed concern, their eyes searching for some sign that she was okay. They were there for her, but the glass made their presence feel distant, unreachable. It distorted their faces, making them seem further away, almost like ghosts. The concern in their eyes felt hollow, unable to penetrate the barrier that separated them. She tried to focus on them, to draw strength from their presence, but the glass seemed to stretch endlessly, an eternal expanse that made the distance between them insurmountable.

Allaria opened her mouth, her voice trembling as she tried to speak, but the words came out cracked and weak, swallowed by the soundproof barrier. She saw Karega lean closer, his brows furrowed, but he couldn't hear her. None of them could. She was alone, her voice trapped with her behind the glass. She watched as they spoke to each other, their words muffled and inaudible, their expressions shifting with worry. The realization struck her like a blow—they

couldn't help her. They were right there, but she was utterly alone, and the fear of losing them gripped her heart like a vice.

A pit formed in her stomach as she watched them. Their presence was supposed to comfort her, to remind her that she wasn't alone, but instead, it only highlighted the distance between them. She wondered, for a moment, if they saw her differently now—if they saw her as something dangerous, something that didn't belong among them anymore. Did they think of her as a threat? The thought made her chest tighten, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps. She was terrified that, even though they were standing right there, she had already lost them. Her eyes lingered on their faces, searching for reassurance, for some sign that they still saw her as one of them. But all she saw was worry, fear, and something she couldn't quite name—something that made her feel like she was slipping away from them.

Her breathing quickened, her chest tightening as panic began to take hold. She tried to push herself off the bed, her hands trembling, her muscles aching as if they were resisting her. The room seemed to close in on her, the walls inching closer, suffocating her. Her vision blurred, her heart pounding erratically, each beat struggling against the fear that consumed her. Please, she thought desperately, don't leave me here. Take me away from this place. The plea echoed in her mind, a silent cry that she couldn't voice. She wanted to reach out to them, to feel their hands, their warmth, but the glass was there, cold and unyielding, a reminder that she was alone in this sterile, terrifying place that felt more like a cage than a room meant to help her.

Her nerves were still frayed from what had transpired and her breathing was shallow and erratic, each inhale catching in her throat as if she couldn't quite draw enough air. Her heart hammered, and her hands trembled in her lap. Slowly, deliberately, she forced herself to count each breath—one, two, three, four—each number forming a fragile barrier against the rising tide of panic. She exhaled, letting her shoulders drop, trying to release the weight pressing down on her chest. Again—one, two, three, four. Her breaths deepened, her heartbeat steadying, the tension in her body slowly beginning to unwind.

She closed her eyes, clinging to the one thing she knew could ground her. "*Strength and Knowledge is Power*," she whispered, her voice barely audible, each word a lifeline she desperately needed. "*Strength and Knowledge is Power*." With every repetition, she felt herself inching back from the brink, like a climber pulling herself up from a steep ledge. She imagined the words forming a protective circle around her—each word a brick, each repetition adding to

the wall that would shield her from her fears. Gradually, the words took hold, her pulse slowing, the chaos in her mind quieting.

The med bay around her was cold, sterile—a stark reminder of her isolation. The scent of antiseptic lingered in the air, the sharp, clean smell almost painful in its intensity. The metal chair beneath her was cool, pressing against her skin, grounding her to this physical reality. Her voice echoed faintly as she continued her mantra, the sound swallowed by the stillness of the room. There were no comforting background noises—no beeping monitors, no steady hum of machinery—just an oppressive silence that made her feel as though she was already forgotten, sealed away.

Dr. Morgan came and went, his visits a brief reprieve from solitude. The sound of the door sliding open, the soft clinking of his medical equipment, the rustling of his coat—they broke through the silence, giving her something tangible to hold onto. His neutral expressions, his careful, practiced movements, all served to ground her. But as soon as he left, the silence returned, heavy and smothering, making her feel like she was floating in a void. The med bay was both a sanctuary and a cage—a place where she was supposed to heal but where she also felt like she was losing herself.

She made a choice then. Her eyes fell on the control panel beside the door, the mechanism that locked her away from the rest of the ship. She hesitated for a moment, her fingers hovering over the buttons. If she locked herself in, it would be a declaration—a choice to face whatever was happening within her alone. She had to understand this, had to control it, or it would control her. The beep of the locks engaging echoed through the empty med bay, the sound final, a shiver of uncertainty running through her. She closed her eyes, steeling herself. She was ready—ready to face whatever was inside her, ready to discover what she truly was.

Allaria moved to the center of the room, lowering herself into a meditative position on the cold floor. She closed her eyes, allowing the darkness behind her eyelids to take over. Her breathing slowed, becoming steady, rhythmic. She focused inward, her mind drifting from the sterile med bay to that otherworldly void she had felt before. It began as nothing but darkness—intangible, empty. But with each breath, it began to take shape. Her senses sharpened, the void becoming real, almost palpable. The cool air of the med bay faded away, replaced by something else—something electric, an oppressive energy that seemed to vibrate through her entire being. She felt weightless, her consciousness drifting free of her body.

The void engulfed her, and she let it. The smell was the first thing that reached her—a metallic tang, like ozone after a lightning strike. It was sharp, almost acrid, mixed with something older, something ancient and forgotten. Then came the sounds—muffled, distant, like echoes bouncing off the walls of an infinite space. The darkness pulsed around her, flashes of light appearing and disappearing without warning, disorienting her. It was overwhelming, alien, but she forced herself to remain calm. She had to remain calm.

Slowly, she began to explore. She pushed her consciousness outward, feeling it expand, reaching against unseen boundaries. She was searching, not just for the being that had spoken to her before, but for answers—answers about herself, about what she was becoming. The void felt endless yet confined, a paradox that made her head spin. There were moments when she felt she was on the verge of understanding something profound, something that lay just beyond her reach, but it slipped away before she could grasp it. Frustration bubbled within her, but she didn't let it consume her. She kept searching, kept pushing, her resolve deepening even as the void seemed to mock her efforts.

Suddenly, an alarm blared—a sharp, jarring noise that shattered the silence of the void. It felt like she was being ripped away, yanked violently back into her body. Her senses were overwhelmed—the noise, the brightness of the med bay lights, the cold air against her skin. Her head spun, her vision flickering between the darkness of the void and the harsh reality of the med bay, making it impossible to tell where she truly was. Her limbs felt heavy, her body refusing to respond as if resisting the return. Her heart pounded, her head throbbing with each beat, her thoughts scattered and incoherent. She felt like she was falling, even though she knew she was still on the ground.

Then she was in the corridor, the cold metal floor beneath her hands, her knees weak as she tried to push herself up. Panic surged through her—how had she gotten here? Her mind raced, fear clawing at her insides. Had she projected herself? Had she lost control again? The uncertainty was suffocating, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps. She glanced around, disoriented, her surroundings blurring and shifting as if they too were unsure of their place. The fear was visceral, but beneath it, there was something else—a spark of determination.

Allaria turned to look back towards the med bay, her heart pounding in her chest. Everything around her felt disjointed, blurred, as though reality had begun to unravel at the edges. Her surroundings wavered, and she blinked rapidly, trying to bring them into focus. Was this real, or



another trick of her fractured mind? She felt the cool metal of the corridor beneath her feet, but it only added to her confusion—hadn't she been in the void only moments before? The med bay seemed to shimmer, almost translucent, as if it might vanish at any moment, and she hesitated, unsure if what she was seeing was real or just another figment from the strange world she had just left.

Taking a deep breath, she moved towards the outer door. Her steps were slow, her legs feeling like lead as she struggled to push away the uncertainty. Each step echoed, the sound bouncing off the sterile walls, making her feel more exposed with each hesitant movement. She reached out to the door, her hand trembling as it hovered over the control panel. The door slid open, and she felt an involuntary shiver run down her spine. The med bay felt alien now—sterile and cold, a place she had trusted but now seemed distant and unwelcoming. She could feel a chill settle over her as she stepped inside, her eyes scanning the room for something familiar, something that made sense.

She moved towards the innermost secure room, her gaze shifting uneasily. When she saw the empty medical bed where she remembered being just moments ago, a feeling of stark realization hit her. The absence of her own presence in that secure space left her breathless, a hollowness settling deep in her stomach. Her hand reached out, brushing the edge of the bed, her fingers trembling as they made contact with the cold surface. This wasn't a dream. The memory of her time in the void still lingered, but the empty bed was undeniable proof—this was real.

The yellow alert lights flashed, the synchronized rhythm of the alarm cutting through her muddled thoughts. At first, it was just noise—an unwelcome intrusion, distant and disconnected from her dazed mind. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to focus on the steady blinking of the lights, the rhythm of the alarm. Each flash seemed to pulse through her, grounding her. She took a deep breath, then another, her chest expanding with deliberate effort. Slowly, the panic began to fade, replaced by a growing awareness that those alarms were for her—they were coming for her.

Allaria felt the fear rise again, threatening to pull her under, but she clenched her fists, feeling the cool metal of the med bay wall as she leaned back against it. She couldn't afford to lose herself again. Not now. Not when so much was at stake. She closed her eyes briefly, her jaw tightening as she willed herself to push the fear aside. This wasn't the time for uncertainty. She

needed to take control. Her thoughts began to shift, her inner dialogue changing from a confused "Why is this happening?" to a determined "What do I need to do next?" It was a conscious decision—a hardening of her resolve. She couldn't stay here, not if she wanted to find answers.

She moved towards the med bay door, her steps more deliberate now. Her back straightened, her posture no longer reflecting confusion but instead determination. She approached the door and instead of slumping down in exhaustion, she lowered herself deliberately, taking a slow, measured breath. She focused her gaze on a fixed point—the alarm light flashing above the door. She watched it, letting it center her thoughts, reminding herself that she had to be proactive. She had to act.

The alarms continued to pulse, but they were no longer overwhelming. She knew what she needed to do. Staying here would mean remaining trapped—physically and mentally. She needed to move forward, to find answers. Allaria took another deep breath, her eyes narrowing as her thoughts aligned. She needed to understand what had happened, why she was experiencing these things. The phrase "I need answers" echoed in her mind—not as a plea, but as a goal, a mission. She clenched her fists once more and pushed herself up, standing with renewed energy, her gaze sharpening with purpose.

Allaria approached the equipment locker, her steps deliberate and steady, each one echoing with the weight of her resolve. Her expression was hard, her eyes unwavering as she reached for her uniform. She moved with a purpose, her hands confident as she pulled on each piece, feeling the familiar fabric against her skin. The insignias felt heavy in her palms—symbols of her rank, her identity—and as she affixed them, they became more than just markers. They were armor, a declaration that she was ready to face whatever lay ahead.

After donning her uniform, she paused, catching sight of her reflection in the mirror. She studied herself in silence—the sharp lines of the uniform, the defiance in her eyes. This was who she was. This was the person she had fought to become. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, her lips forming silent words: "*Strength and Knowledge is Power.*" She reaffirmed her commitment. No one would take away her autonomy again. Not the Navy, not her past, not even the entities that haunted her.

Allaria turned away from the mirror, her head held high as she exited the room. Her stride was purposeful, each step ringing with determination as she made her way to the bridge. Her

presence was a statement, not just for the captain or the admiral, but for herself. She was reclaiming command of her destiny. Crew members she passed in the corridor instinctively stepped aside, their gazes following her with a mix of respect, curiosity, and perhaps a hint of fear. She didn't need to say a word—her confidence radiated from her, impossible to ignore.

As she entered the bridge, the atmosphere shifted. The usual hum of conversation and activity paused, the crew turning to look at her. She didn't hesitate, her gaze sweeping across the room, taking in the consoles and the officers at their posts. She respected the work done here, the focus and discipline it took to manage the ship. Her presence wasn't to undermine that—it was an acknowledgment. She respected the chain of command, but she would not be backing down today.

Captain Marcus looked up, surprise flashing across his features before his brow furrowed. "*I thought you were in the med bay,*" he said, puzzled.

Allaria met his gaze, her demeanor unwavering. "*I was, Sir,*" she said, her voice firm, clipped. "*I'm not now. I need two things: a shuttle and my team.*" Her eyes locked with his, her resolve evident. "*I'm going to find out who I am and why I was made to be this way.*" There was no doubt in her tone, no hesitation. She knew only one person held the answers to the questions he had—her father.

Marcus studied her for a moment, his puzzlement giving way to reluctant admiration. He understood that arguing would be futile—she had made up her mind. He nodded slightly, an acknowledgment that she was far more than just a subordinate. "*I understand,*" he said, his voice softer now, almost resigned.

Allaria could feel her heart pounding, adrenaline pumping through her veins, but she kept her composure steady. She stood her ground, her expression unwavering.

Marcus spoke again, his tone shifting to something more official. "*Officially, you haven't been in the fleet long enough to earn any vacation time,*" he said, a hint of a wry smile tugging at his lips. "*But as I told you, we'll support you on this, and the leadership of this fleet needs answers just as much as you do.*" He paused, his gaze steady on her. "*Will you allow us to follow your lead in this matter? To investigate what's happening, both to you and to us?*"

Allaria took a moment, her eyes narrowing in thought. She knew the best course of action was to allow them to help—they needed each other, and she couldn't do this alone. Finally, she

noded, her resolve firming even further. "*Fine*," she said, her voice steady, but with an edge of stubbornness. "*But I'm not going back to the med bay.*"

Marcus looked at her for a long moment, then nodded. "*Agreed*," he said simply, a note of concession in his voice.

As the conversation concluded, Allaria felt a renewed sense of control over her fate. Her heartbeat began to slow, the adrenaline ebbing as she realized she had taken the first step towards reclaiming her life. She had come here for answers, and nothing would stand in her way. Not her fears, not the fleet, and certainly not the ghosts of her past.

## CHAPTER 15

Allaria and her team met with Captain Marcus every other day for two weeks as the Einhorn made its slow journey back to Earth. Every meeting, every check-in, felt like a countdown, a steady march towards the one moment she wasn't sure she was ready for. The thought of confronting her father, the one person who had shaped her life in ways she was only beginning to comprehend, left her with a growing pit in her stomach—a twisting, nauseating knot that seemed to grow heavier with every passing day.

As she lay awake at night, staring blankly at the ceiling of her quarters, the memories would come flooding back. She could still feel the cold sting of the needle as it pricked her skin, her father leaning over her, his eyes distant but his voice gentle. *"It's for your own good, Allaria,"* he had said. He'd always said it that way—calm, almost rehearsed, as if trying to convince himself just as much as he was trying to convince her. She remembered the way he looked at her afterward, the guilt he tried to hide behind his mask of fatherly concern. She had trusted him then, taken his words as truth. But now, all she saw was betrayal. His lies had been a part of her life for so long that it was impossible to know where they ended and her true self began.

*"Was I ever just your daughter?"* she wondered aloud, her voice barely a whisper in the darkness. *"Or was I always an experiment?"*

The more she replayed those memories, the more questions surfaced. Was she ready to face him after all these years? What would she say when she finally saw him again? Would she have the strength to demand answers, or would she falter, her voice catching as the past caught up with her? She wanted to be strong, to confront him with the confidence she'd found within herself, but the closer they got to Earth, the more fragile that confidence felt. The more she feared what she might discover.

It wasn't just the confrontation that made her stomach twist—it was the unknown. What if he refused to tell her the truth? What if the truth was even worse than she imagined? These questions gnawed at her, an ever-present reminder that this mission was not just a quest for answers; it was a leap into the unknown, and she had no idea how far she might fall. She needed to know why he had done this to her, why he had made her a bridge between worlds, but the truth could change everything she thought she knew about herself. And that uncertainty, the idea that the foundation of her life might crumble, terrified her.

The two-week journey felt like a slow, inevitable march towards that confrontation. Every day brought them closer, and every day she felt the tension building, her chest growing tighter, her hands growing colder as her anxiety mounted. She found herself distracted during the team meetings with Captain Marcus—her focus splitting between the discussion at hand and the looming confrontation. She would nod in agreement, her mind elsewhere, barely registering what was being said. Occasionally, she'd feel a hand on her shoulder—Karega or Simmons, pulling her back, grounding her for just a moment. But as soon as the meeting ended, the anxiety would creep back, leaving her with nothing but her thoughts and the silent pressure of what lay ahead.

At night, she'd lie in her bunk, her eyes scanning the ceiling without seeing it. She tried to picture what her father looked like now. He'd be older, of course, but how much? Would his eyes still have that calculating look, the one that always made her feel like she was being measured, assessed? Would he have any regrets, or would he justify his actions like he always had—cold and distant, talking about "the greater good" or "necessary sacrifices"? Would he recognize her as the daughter he had once known, or just as a failed experiment returned to confront its maker?

Sometimes, she'd imagine the meeting—her heart pounding as she stood before him. She saw herself yelling at him, demanding answers, her voice echoing in her mind. She imagined the words spilling out, her anger bubbling to the surface. But just as often, she imagined herself speechless, standing there, unable to find the words. What if all the confidence she felt now shattered in that moment, leaving her vulnerable, a child facing a parent who never really saw her as anything but a project? The scenarios would play out in her mind until exhaustion finally took her, her body surrendering to sleep even though her mind refused to quiet.

During the journey, Allaria would find herself watching Earth grow larger in the viewport, her reflection superimposed over the planet. She'd look at her own face, trying to see strength there, trying to remind herself that she wasn't that frightened girl anymore. She was here to take back control of her own story, to reclaim her destiny. And yet, small moments of doubt would creep in, a whisper that asked if she really wanted to know the truth. What if it was too much to bear? What if, by finding out, she lost herself entirely?

Despite her fear, there was a stubborn determination that refused to let go. She couldn't let the past define her. She couldn't let her father's choices dictate who she was or what she would

become. As daunting as the unknown was, as frightening as the truths might be, she needed to confront them. She needed to face her father—not just for herself, but for her team, for everyone who had supported her along this journey.

Allaria regularly spent time meditating, her practice no longer a desperate attempt to understand but a deliberate journey inward. She approached each session with discipline, her body settling into a comfortable yet attentive posture, her breathing slow and controlled. Each breath felt like a step towards mastery—each exhale releasing the anxieties that had once held her back.

Her mind no longer drifted aimlessly; instead, she entered the void with intention, reaching out deliberately and allowing herself to cross into that other dimension. Over the past ten days, she had noticed her control improving. Every time she perceived the other dimension, she could feel herself delving deeper, experiencing it with greater clarity. The void no longer seemed like a vast, unknowable abyss—it had texture, a presence she was beginning to understand. She could feel the air around her, sense its electric hum, and smell an otherworldly scent—something metallic and ancient, yet no longer threatening.

The feelings of dread she once carried with her had dissipated. Where there was once fear, there was now curiosity, an eagerness to explore and understand. The darkness was no longer something to avoid; it had become a place where she could find quiet, a sanctuary where she could confront the unknown without losing herself. The once overwhelming abyss had become a place she navigated with growing confidence.

As she meditated, she felt the connection between her mind and her abilities strengthening. She was learning to tether herself to the void, her senses reaching out to touch its boundaries. The heavy, oppressive presence she once feared was now something she could push against, explore, and, slowly but surely, bend to her will. Each time she entered the void, she could feel her consciousness expanding, reaching into this strange dimension, and her heartbeat remained steady—no longer racing in panic. She was learning not only to coexist with the void but to shape her experience within it.

Physically, the practice brought her a newfound calm. Her muscles, once tense with the anticipation of fear, now relaxed into the meditative process. Emotionally, she felt grounded. She had embraced this otherworldly part of herself, no longer resisting it but accepting it as part of her identity. In doing so, she had found a sense of maturity and inner peace that had eluded her for so long.

The nightmares that used to haunt her nights had faded away. Where there were once chaotic dreams that left her waking in a cold sweat, there was now restful sleep. She no longer feared losing herself in the void. Instead, it felt like a part of her—a part she was willing to understand, and that understanding brought her peace. When she woke each morning, it was with a sense of readiness and purpose, no longer weighed down by the exhaustion of her fears. The void was no longer taking from her—it was becoming part of her journey forward.

Allaria knew she still had much to learn, but she was no longer afraid of what lay ahead. She was confident, stubborn in her determination to understand herself and the power within her. And for the first time in a long time, she felt like she was in control.



## CHAPTER 16

As the Einhorn received the final clearance to enter orbit, Allaria felt a wave of unease wash over her. The announcement echoed in her ears, her stomach twisting, anticipation turning into a suffocating sense of inevitability. Her palms grew clammy, and her heartbeat quickened, as though her body were trying to prepare her for the confrontation ahead.

The Einhorn found its place in orbit around Earth, looming just above the planet's surface. Allaria stared out at the slowly growing blue and green sphere, her chest tightening as the familiar sight filled her view. Special permission was required for the ship to even be here—a rare privilege—and the significance of it only added to the weight pressing down on her shoulders. Earth, with its defensive batteries and barriers, reinforced how out of place the Einhorn was here in orbit. Each passing moment reminded her that this mission was anything but ordinary.

Dr. Laskari was easy to find. He had left his old life behind to turn to politics, now a member of the Earth Senate—a public figure, no longer the private figure she remembered from her past. Allaria's anxiety grew at the thought of the man he had become. What if he had changed? What if he hadn't changed at all? The questions haunted her, gnawing at her thoughts.

Captain Marcus left the Einhorn in the command of Commander Fairfax—an officer with a reputation for discipline, a man who seemed to always have something to prove. Allaria couldn't help but feel a pang of unease at leaving the ship in his hands. Fairfax's strict demeanor only served to remind her that the coming confrontation was something beyond anyone's control. She felt detached from the security of the ship, the comforting sense of familiarity it usually provided. Instead, she faced uncertainty, a growing sense of vulnerability tightening around her.

Captain Marcus accompanied Allaria and her team to the Earth Senate landing pad, the journey feeling surreal, her heart pounding harder with each passing minute. His presence brought her some comfort, but she knew the real challenge lay ahead. When the shuttle touched down, she stepped out, the air on Earth feeling different—heavier, as if the sky itself were pressing down on her chest. She could feel the crispness of her uniform against her skin, the polished metal of

her boots beneath her feet, and each sensation reminded her just how exposed she felt. Here, in the midst of political power, she was utterly out of place. She appreciated the non-recycled air, however. The freshness of air on Earth was something she had nearly forgotten.

They waited for the daily Senate ceremony to end—a theater of rituals that seemed so meaningless in contrast to the urgency she felt. Each tick of the clock dragged on, each second making her anticipation worse. The more time passed, the more her heartbeat seemed to echo in her ears, her thoughts spiraling with every possible outcome of what was to come. Was she ready to face him after all these years? Would she be able to hold herself together, or would she crumble under the weight of her own memories?

"*Laskari, you okay?*" Captain Marcus asked quietly as they stood near the landing pad. His voice cut through her thoughts, grounding her for a moment.

She nodded but her eyes didn't meet his. "*I'm fine, Captain. Just... thinking.*" Her voice was tight, betraying the storm inside her.

"*You don't have to do this alone, you know,*" Marcus said, his gaze steady. "*No one's forcing you to confront him. We can go in with a different plan—one that doesn't put you directly in his path.*"

Allaria shook her head. "*I appreciate it, but I need to do this. I need answers, and I need to hear them from him.*"

Marcus sighed, his eyes softening as he studied her. "*I understand. Just know, if things go sideways, we're right here. We won't let you do this alone.*"

"*Thanks, Captain,*" she whispered, managing a small smile, though her stomach still churned with anxiety. She glanced over at her team, watching them exchange quiet words, their presence a mixture of comfort and tension.

"*Allaria, we're with you,*" Arturo said as he approached, giving her a reassuring nod. His usually playful demeanor was more subdued, his tone serious. "*We're not going to let anything happen to you. We've got your back.*"

"*Arturo's right,*" Karega added, stepping up beside them. He crossed his arms, his expression resolute. "*No matter what happens in there, you're not alone. We're your team, and we're here for you.*"

Allaria swallowed hard, her throat feeling tight. *"Thanks, guys. I know this isn't exactly what we signed up for."*

*"Are you kidding?"* Utekli said, adjusting his glasses, a small grin tugging at his lips. *"The chance to confront a high-ranking member of the Earth Senate? This is going to be interesting. And... let's be honest, I'm genuinely curious about what he knows."*

*"Maybe keep the enthusiasm in check until we know how this goes,"* Simmons said, elbowing Utekli lightly. She smiled at Allaria, her eyes kind. *"We're all in this together. Just say the word if you need anything—even if it's just a distraction."*

Allaria exhaled, a shaky breath escaping her lips. *"I appreciate all of you. Just... stay close, okay? I don't know how he's going to react."*

*"We'll be right behind you,"* Marcus affirmed. *"This isn't just your fight, Allaria. It's ours too. We all want to know the truth."*

The ceremonial rituals finally ended, and the crowd of politicians and aides began to move. Allaria tensed, her eyes scanning the faces, searching for one she hadn't seen in six long years. The sight of her father struck her like a physical blow. He looked older, his posture more assured, a faint air of authority about him that hadn't been there before. She barely recognized him, and for a fleeting moment, she wondered if she had made a mistake in coming.

Her memories surged forward—her father, holding the syringe, his voice calm and distant as he reassured her, telling her it was for her own good. The sting of betrayal, the growing sense of fear and confusion she had felt as a child, all came rushing back. She clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms as she tried to steady herself. She had to focus. She couldn't let her emotions control her now.

*"That's him,"* Allaria said quietly, her eyes fixed on her father. He was engaged in conversation with another senator, his expression composed, as if he had forgotten what he had done all those years ago.

*"You ready for this?"* Marcus asked, his voice low, filled with both concern and determination.

Allaria nodded, even though her heart was pounding so hard she thought it might burst. *"Yeah. I'm ready. I have to be."* She forced herself to take a deep breath, her gaze locked on her father.

She wouldn't let her fears hold her back. She was here for answers, and she would get them—no matter what it took.

As they stepped forward, her team moved with her, a silent but steady presence at her back. With every step, the anxiety twisted inside her, but alongside it, a growing determination began to take root.

The team approached Dr. Laskari, and Allaria opened her mouth to speak. Her heart pounded in her chest, her mind racing to figure out the right words—how would she address him after all these years? The memories she had pushed down now resurfaced, making it difficult to even know where to begin. She took a breath, preparing to speak.

But before any words could spill out, Captain Marcus's voice cut through the tension. "*Dr. Laskari, my name is Captain Marcus of the EDF Einhorn. No doubt you've heard of her.*"

Allaria blinked, startled, her intended words vanishing in an instant. She turned her head sharply towards Marcus, watching as he stepped forward, taking control of the moment. His voice was confident, unyielding, and he pointed upwards, his finger and head tilting towards the sky. Allaria followed his gesture, her eyes widening as she saw the Einhorn hovering above them, 300 kilometers directly overhead. The massive battleship loomed, a powerful presence making a statement all on its own. It hit her then—Marcus had orchestrated this entire meeting. Every detail, down to the positioning of the Einhorn, had been planned to intimidate.

She hadn't realized until that moment just how serious Marcus was about this. The pristine uniforms, the carefully chosen words, the symbolic display of power—it was all meant to ensure her father understood that this wasn't just a casual encounter. Marcus wasn't standing back; he was taking charge, and the realization left Allaria momentarily speechless.

Dr. Laskari's eyes narrowed as he looked up at the sky, the sarcasm dripping from his voice as he responded, "What's this about?" He then glanced at Allaria, and for a moment, his face paled. "*My goodness.*" He let out a small, mocking laugh. "*Look at you. A private in the fleet.*" His tone was cutting, his words laced with disdain.

Allaria's mouth tightened, her pulse quickening. The sarcasm hit her, reopening old wounds, but before she could respond, Marcus's voice interrupted once more. "*She's Lance Corporal Laskari. She was never a Private.*" Marcus's voice was firm, almost cold, as he corrected Dr. Laskari. His stance was unwavering, his gaze fixed, a silent warning to Allaria's father.

Allaria's eyes flickered to Marcus, surprised by his defense. She hadn't realized he even knew she had skipped the rank of Private due to her training. There was something unspoken in his expression—a message that he had her back, that he wouldn't let her be undermined, not here.

Dr. Laskari blinked, visibly taken aback, his eyes darting between Marcus and Allaria. For a moment, the sarcasm left him, replaced by something more hesitant. The confident smirk he wore faltered as he faced Marcus's unyielding gaze.

Marcus stepped forward slightly, his voice even firmer as he spoke. "*Your office, sir. Can you take us there?*" The request was anything but a request. His voice carried through the corridor, just loud enough for the other senators to hear, the edge of intimidation unmistakable, though not overtly confrontational.

Allaria watched as her father hesitated, his eyes narrowing. She could see the gears turning in his mind, the realization dawning that this was not a simple military visit. The power dynamics had shifted entirely, and he was no longer in control of the situation. The tension in the air was palpable, and Allaria's own anxiety simmered beneath the surface, her heart pounding.

"Yes, *of course.*" Dr. Laskari's voice was quieter now, almost surprised, as if he hadn't expected this level of intensity. He turned, gesturing for them to follow. The mocking edge had left his voice, replaced with something almost cautious.

Allaria fell into step behind her father, her gaze shifting briefly to Marcus. He gave her a nod, a silent message that they had this under control. She took a deep breath, her anxiety still there, but now tempered by a renewed sense of determination.

The team arrived at Dr. Laskari's office. It was opulent—gold-trimmed shelves, priceless artifacts, and heavy, ornate furniture—all symbols of power, wealth, and knowledge. But there was something unsettling about it. The dark wood paneling and the flickering light from the window caused by vehicles flying past the tower in which the office sat, it all felt obscene. Allaria felt an instinctive revulsion rise within her, like a sickness in her gut. It was too polished, too full of dark secrets hidden beneath a veneer of opulence. She swallowed down her disgust, her gaze moving across the lavish room.

Dr. Laskari sat behind an enormous mahogany desk, his eyes narrowing as he looked at them. "*What's this all about?*" he asked, his voice laced with irritation.

*"I think you know, Doctor,"* Captain Marcus replied, his tone cold, demanding.

Dr. Laskari shifted in his seat, his gaze turning to Allaria. Her eyes met his, and she took a slow breath, releasing her grip on the present. She let herself fade, just for a moment, touching the void with her mind. Her eyes began to glow—an otherworldly, bright blue, their piercing light illuminating her face. Her team watched, their expressions tense. Even though they had seen this before, it still unnerved them. The light in her eyes seemed to hold a power not meant for their world, an echo of the void she touched.

Dr. Laskari visibly stiffened, his composure slipping for a heartbeat. He cleared his throat and quickly looked away, his gaze shifting to the bookshelf behind him. He stood, walking slowly over to it. Karega and Arturo shifted, subtly moving to block any potential escape.

*"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere."* Dr. Laskari chuckled, though his voice lacked conviction. He reached up, pulling down a worn leather-bound notebook. It was clearly old—its edges frayed, and its spine cracked. Unlike the digital world they were used to, this was handwritten, leaving no trace to be searched in any digital library. Just ink on paper.

Dr. Laskari returned to his seat, opening the book with careful hands. Allaria leaned forward, trying to make sense of the script, but the symbols seemed to dance across the page, forming shapes that twisted out of her comprehension.

*"Yes,"* Laskari said, noticing her confusion. *"This is an ancient language. Cuneiform, to be exact."* He paused, a smile playing on his lips, a hint of pride in his voice. *"It tells of an ancient cult. The Cult of Confession. A group that has existed for thousands of years—since the time of the Sumerians."*

He began to read, his voice taking on a low, almost reverent tone as he translated the symbols.

*"The Cult of Confession worshipped an entity known as 'Xal'athoth, The Devourer of Dreams."* He paused, glancing up to gauge their reactions before continuing. *"Xal'athoth is not of our world. It exists in the spaces between—the interdimensional gaps where reality and the subconscious meet. A place of shadows, of forgotten languages and half-remembered dreams."*

Captain Marcus interjected, *"yes, we already know this."*

Dr. Laskari wasn't amused by the interruption, likely something he wasn't used to.

*"They believed that Xal'athoth thrived on the dreams and knowledge of sentient beings. It would descend upon a world, devour the essence of its people—their creativity, their hopes, their very souls—and then retreat back into the void, only to return again thousands of years later to repeat the cycle."*

The captain frowned, his eyes narrowing as he listened, but Dr. Laskari's focus remained on the book. He turned a page, his fingers lingering on a particular line of text.

*"And then there is the prophecy," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "A prophecy that speaks of Convergence. It foretells that one day, a bridge would be formed—a link between the human world and the dimension of Xal'athoth. This bridge would allow the entity to enter our dimension, to feed on our dreams and devour our hopes, just as it has done countless times before. The Convergence is inevitable., or so we thought"*

Dr. Laskari leaned forward, his eyes glinting with a mix of fear and reverence as he spoke. *"The bridge... it's not just a concept. It's a physical portal. One that has existed for countless ages—long before our civilization, long before humanity as we know it. Hidden away, untouched by time, it lies in the deepest shadows, in places that seem to reject the light. It's been used over and over, an unknown number of times—each time bringing with it the end of something great, leaving behind only ruins and forgotten bones."*

He paused, his voice lowering as if the next words were a confession. *"I believe I know where it is. And I know how it can be activated. My research...."* He paused and let the words hang in the air, their weight settling over the room. Allaria felt a chill crawl up her spine at his expression—an almost manic gleam in his eyes, as though he was both terrified and thrilled by what he knew. *"The process... it's not simple. There are rituals, ancient invocations—things that must be done that shouldn't be spoken of. Acts that touch the edges of the forbidden, that call out to something in the darkness between worlds."*

Allaria's gaze flickered towards her team. Karega's eyes were wide, the whites stark against his dark skin. Simmons shifted her weight, her jaw clenched, her fingers flexing at her side, as though she was ready to reach for her weapon. Utekli adjusted his glasses, his expression a mix of terror and intellectual curiosity. Arturo stood rigid, his eyes narrowed, his nostrils flaring with every controlled breath. They exchanged glances—silent, questioning, fearful. Allaria could feel the tension threading between them, the unspoken thoughts that perhaps this was bigger

than any of them had imagined. The oppressive weight of uncertainty pressed on each of their shoulders.

Dr. Laskari turned his gaze to Allaria, his voice growing even softer, more somber. *"But there is another prophecy. One that speaks of hope, if you can call it that. It speaks of someone who can see between dimensions, someone with the power to stop the Convergence. But it's not without sacrifice. They must make a choice—a choice so important, it's been etched into every ancient text. Yet the details are lost, fragmented."* He frowned, his eyes scanning the strange, shifting symbols on the page. *"The text... it's as if it's alive, moving beneath my gaze. The meaning keeps slipping, as though something—someone—does not want us to understand what that choice truly is."*

Allaria felt the weight of his gaze on her, and her stomach twisted. She forced herself to meet his eyes, her voice barely a whisper, *"What is this choice? What am I supposed to do?"*

Dr. Laskari regarded her carefully, almost sympathetically. *"I wish I knew, Allaria. The words are elusive, the meaning fragmented. But what I do know is that the choice involves more than just you. It's about who you are willing to save... and what you might have to sacrifice."*

Allaria's heart sank. Her mind flashed back to her team. To Karega's quiet strength, Simmons' fierce loyalty, Arturo's steady presence, and Utekli's boundless curiosity. The thought of having to choose, of having to sacrifice any of them—she couldn't bear it. She looked away, blinking against the sudden sting of tears.

Captain Marcus stepped forward, his voice cutting through the heavy silence. *"Enough of the riddles, Doctor. You said you know where the bridge is and how to activate it. Where? And what exactly do you mean by activation?"*

Dr. Laskari shifted, his gaze moving to Marcus. He hesitated, his fingers brushing over the worn cover of the notebook, as though gathering courage. *"The bridge lies within the ruins of an ancient temple. Hidden beneath layers of earth and stone, in a place forgotten by history. Activation... it requires a ritual. A dark one. One involving blood and sacrifice. It's not something to be taken lightly."*

Marcus' expression darkened, his eyes narrowing. *"And you're telling me you've known this all along? That you knew what we were dealing with and kept it to yourself?"*



Laskari straightened, meeting the captain's gaze. *"I had my suspicions. But I didn't know for certain until now. There's a difference between theory and proof, Captain. And now, with Allaria..."*

Allaria swallowed hard, her voice breaking as she interjected, *"Why me? Why did you make me this way? Did you know? Did you want this?"*

Dr. Laskari's eyes softened, for just a moment. "Me?... I wanted to protect you. I knew the world was dangerous. I believed that by giving you these abilities, I was giving you a way to survive. I didn't foresee this happening so soon."

Allaria's vision blurred with unshed tears, and she felt Simmons' gaze on her—fierce and unwavering. She turned slightly, meeting her friend's eyes, seeing the determination there. Simmons gave her a small nod, her lips pressed into a thin line. It was a silent promise—whatever happened, they would face it together.

Karega spoke up, his voice steady but laced with tension. *"So what's our next step? We can't just sit around and wait. If we know where the bridge is, we need to get there before the cult does, right?"*

Captain Marcus nodded. *"Agreed. But we need to be careful. We don't fully understand what we're up against."*

Dr. Laskari closed the notebook, his eyes distant. *"We may not have that luxury, Captain. The cult—the confessors—they are already moving. They have given themselves to Xal'athoth. They see it as salvation, a way to transcend the mortal coil. They gather in the dark, their rituals echoing through forgotten places—abandoned temples, decaying catacombs—offering sacrifices that blur the line between dream and nightmare. They give everything—their memories, their sanity, their very souls—to bring Xal'athoth into this world."*

The room grew colder, the weight of his words pressing down on them all. Allaria looked at her team, her chest tightening. The fear in their eyes mirrored her own, but beneath it, she saw something else—determination.

Allaria felt her stomach drop as she listened to her father. His words were a heavy, poisonous weight pressing down on her chest. For years, he had kept this secret—a secret that now

threatened to unravel everything. Her disappointment ran deep, not just for herself but for humanity as a whole. He had gambled with all their lives.

She tried to swallow, but her throat felt too tight, her hands trembling as they clenched into fists. Anger, sorrow, confusion—all warred within her, leaving her breathless.

*“Why, Father?”* she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. *“Why did you do this?”*

Dr. Laskari's gaze softened, his own voice faltering. *“Allaria, I... I thought I was doing what was best. I thought by giving you these abilities, you would be protected. I wanted to keep you safe from what was coming.”*

*“Safe?”* Allaria scoffed bitterly, her eyes filled with tears she refused to let fall. *“You’ve doomed us all. You kept secrets that weren’t yours to keep. You made me into this, and now everyone else has to pay the price for your decisions.”*

Laskari flinched, his shoulders sagging. *“I didn’t foresee this. None of us did.”*

*“That’s just it, isn’t it?”* she said, her voice breaking. *“You didn’t know. But you made me into something I never asked to be. I trusted you, and you turned me into a weapon. I was a child!”*

Captain Marcus took a step forward, his face a mask of contained fury. *“And you thought you could just make these decisions alone? Did you think you were the only one capable of protecting her, of protecting all of us?”*

Dr. Laskari looked away, unable to meet Marcus's gaze. *“I had my suspicions, but I didn’t know until now. Theory and proof, Captain. I thought I had more time...”*

Allaria let out a shaky breath, her vision blurred with the weight of everything she had just heard. She had once believed her father could do no wrong—that every action he took was out of love and wisdom. That belief was shattered many years ago, but now, she was left standing in the ruins of a trust that could never be rebuilt.

Captain Marcus's restrained fury made the small office feel stifling, the heat of his anger radiating like an inferno. He stared at Dr. Laskari, his voice low but simmering with tension. *“Doctor, as a Senator, we trusted you. We all did. You knew what this meant, and still, you kept it hidden. For what? Your own ego? Or was it fear?”*

Dr. Laskari shifted uncomfortably, his gaze falling to the floor before he looked up again, his eyes clouded with a mix of defensiveness and regret.

*"You must understand... the power we're dealing with... it's beyond comprehension."*

Captain Marcus's voice grew colder, his eyes narrowing. *"And look where that thinking has brought us. We are now dealing with a cult trying to bring forth an ancient horror. Your decision put us all at risk, and you didn't have the right to make that call."*

Dr. Laskari slumped slightly, his tone almost broken. *"I know. Believe me, I know. But I didn't think it would come to this."*

Captain Marcus grabbed the worn notebook from Dr. Laskari's hands, his eyes locked onto the doctor's. *"This time, Doctor, you won't get to hide behind uncertainty. This is no longer your responsibility—it's ours. And mark my words, we will see this through."*

Allaria watched as her father reluctantly transferred any more related files to Captain Marcus's datapad. She had not seen him in six years, and now, after all that time, all she felt was bitterness and betrayal. She had once hoped that seeing her father again might bring her some comfort, maybe even pride. Instead, she was faced with the painful truth that he had kept secrets—dangerous secrets—that put everyone she cared about in jeopardy. The hope she had carried for so long shattered, replaced with a sense of cold detachment. He wasn't the father she remembered; he was a stranger who had betrayed humanity by keeping silent for too long.

Captain Marcus handed the notebook to Simmons, his expression still dark. Simmons took it, her voice steady, *"I'll digitize and translate these pages as soon as we're back on the Einhorn."* There was no emotion in her words—just efficiency, a sharp edge that cut through the tension.

Captain Marcus then turned back to Dr. Laskari, his voice clipped, *"Thank you for your time, Doctor."* The polite words were laced with a clear message—this was over. He motioned for the team to leave, and they turned, filing out of the office.

As they left, Allaria glanced back at her father. He looked older, defeated. But she couldn't find it in herself to feel pity for him. He had kept secrets that endangered them all, and now they were paying the price.

The shuttle ride back to the Einhorn was heavy with silence. The oppressive atmosphere made the small cabin feel even tighter, the weight of everything they had learned pressing down on them like a physical force. The steady hum of the shuttle's engines did little to break the tension—it only added to the sense of stifling confinement. Each team member sat in their seat, lost in their thoughts, exchanging glances that spoke volumes about their uncertainty and unease.

Simmons was the first to break the silence, her tone serious, almost angry. *"So, Dr. Laskari knew all this and said nothing. The more I think about it, the more it makes my blood boil. We're supposed to be on the same side, damn it."*

Arturo shook his head, his voice tight with frustration. *"He thought he could solve this on his own. It's classic—believe you're the smartest in the room, keep it all to yourself, and think you'll save the world. But instead, you nearly destroy it."*

Utekli adjusted his glasses thoughtfully, his eyes still wide with a mix of fear and fascination. *"The thing is, we need to understand that notebook. The fact it's written in cuneiform—it's been passed down for thousands of years. And the prophecy... it's terrifying, but also... fascinating. Xal'athoth, the Convergence, all of it—it's almost like a nightmare come to life."*

Karega grimaced, his expression hardening. *"Nightmare is right. And we've just been handed the key to the door of that nightmare. It's our job now to make sure it stays locked."*

Allaria stared down at her hands, her voice quieter than usual, almost vulnerable. *"I knew my father was working on something dangerous, but I didn't think... I didn't realize I'd be at the center of it all. This isn't just about some ancient bridge or cult. It's about all of us."* She looked out at the stars through the shuttle window, her reflection staring back at her—eyes filled with fear, disappointment, and the weight of an uncertain destiny.

The stars outside the shuttle continued to drift by, the cold expanse of space a reminder of the uncertain path ahead. But for now, surrounded by her team, Allaria felt just a little less alone.

## CHAPTER 17

Simmons and Utekli were already waiting in the briefing room when Allaria entered, their excitement evident in their expressions. Utekli's eyes gleamed with anticipation, and Simmons was tapping her fingers impatiently against the table, barely able to sit still.

*"Allaria, you're not going to believe this,"* Utekli said as soon as she stepped inside. His fingers moved quickly over his datalink, sending the report her way. *"The notebook—it's fully translated. And what we found... well, let's just say it's not what we expected."*

Simmons nodded eagerly, her eyes wide. She picked up the notebook that lay on the table, its worn leather cover and smudged ink making it look almost sacred. She handled it as if she knew she was holding something far older than anyone in the room could fully comprehend. *"We spent hours cross-referencing with old Sumerian translations,"* she said. *"And the information we found—some of it is vague, almost incoherent. Directions and instructions that don't make any sense, as far as we can tell."* She paused, glancing at Allaria, her expression turning serious. *"And then... there are sentences like this one."*

Simmons gestured toward the display on the wall over the table. The room grew quiet, anticipation thick in the air. *"Here, look at this: 'Follow the whisper of winds that moan, Through twisted roots, beneath ancient stone.'"*

*"We don't know what this means yet,"* Utekli said, his voice quieter now, almost as if he were sharing a secret. *"But there's something here—something buried. I think the writer wanted to lead us to something, but it's not straightforward. It's like they're hiding a truth within these words, and it's up to us to figure out what that is."*

Allaria frowned, her eyes never leaving the display. *"Twisted roots, ancient stone... it sounds like a place. But where? And why?"* She could feel the anxiety bubbling beneath her curiosity, the sense that whatever lay at the end of these vague instructions could change everything.

Simmons tapped the notebook gently with her finger. *"It's wild, isn't it? The deeper we look, the less sense it seems to make. And yet..."* She glanced at Allaria, her eyes narrowed in thought. *"There's something about this that feels right, even if we can't understand it yet. We're on the verge of something, I can feel it."*

Allaria nodded, taking a deep breath. The words weighed on her mind, the uncertainty both thrilling and unsettling. *"Then we keep going,"* she said, her voice steady. *"We dig deeper, and we don't stop until we find out what this all means."*

Utekli smiled, his excitement undimmed. *"Exactly. We're just getting started, Allaria. And I think we're closer to answers than we realize. We still have a long way to go with understanding what this all means, obviously. Yes, it's all translated, but it doesn't make much sense yet. We're running it through the Einhorns AI system to see if there are any missing links."*

Over the next few days, Allaria immersed herself in officer training, pushing herself to absorb every lesson and command procedure. The academy's simulators challenged her tactical acumen, while the leadership courses tested her decision-making under pressure, but being on the bridge with actual officers and running actual procedures was different. It was real. Each evening, she retreated to her quarters, the soft hum of the Einhorn's engines a constant backdrop to her meditations. The serene practice helped her process the whirlwind of new responsibilities and the lingering unease about their mysterious mission.

Meanwhile, the Einhorn continued its drills, the crew honing their skills with meticulous precision—though weapons firing remained off-limits due to their orbit around Earth. The ship buzzed with a quiet intensity, everyone acutely aware that they stood on the cusp of something significant.

Finally, after a week that felt both swift and interminable, a notification blinked to life on Allaria's datalink. The data they'd been anxiously awaiting had arrived.

Captain Marcus convened the team in the briefing room. As Allaria entered, she noticed the room's subdued lighting casting elongated shadows across the sleek metallic surfaces. Holographic displays floated in the air, projecting maps and lines of ancient text. The atmosphere was thick with anticipation.

*"Glad you could all make it,"* Captain Marcus began, his voice steady but his eyes betraying a hint of excitement. *"Let's get started."* He then turned and gestured at Utekli to begin.

Utekli stood by the main monitor, his posture rigid but his fingers tapping nervously against his datapad. His analytical mind always sought control through information, and today was no exception.

"We've identified a particular poem," he said, adjusting his glasses—a habitual gesture whenever he delved into complex data. *"It appears to be the primary guide leading us to the portal we've been searching for."*

He gestured, and the archaic verses materialized on the screen in flowing script. Clearing his throat, he read aloud, his voice measured and precise:

*"In the sands where the sun does sear,  
Seek the place where none draws near,  
Twisting rivers mark the way,  
Where waters meet, their secrets lay."*

He paused, allowing the weight of the words to settle, then pointed to a holographic map that zoomed into the region of the Persian Gulf. *"We believe this is our starting point,"* he said, his tone factual. *"The confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers."*

Simmons leaned forward, her fiery red hair catching the ambient light. *"Exactly,"* she interjected, her voice carrying a hint of excitement. Unlike Utekli's formality, Simmons spoke with a lively cadence. *"We've cross-referenced historical data, and before the unification of Crescentia after the Gao-de attack, this area was known as the Middle East. Specifically, the country of Turkey."*

She tapped the table, bringing up images of ancient ruins and topographical scans. *"Turkey, or Crescentia now, housed some of the oldest known human settlements,"* she continued, her eyes shining. *"Fascinating stuff, really. But I digress."* She flashed a quick smile. *"Our satellite imagery indicates the remnants of an ancient road here, leading north into the mountains. It's not visible on normal imagery, but laser scans confirm it exists."*

Utekli nodded, scrolling to the next stanza of the poem:

*"To mountains north, where echoes sleep,  
Climb to caverns, dark and deep,  
Beneath the peaks that touch the sky,  
A hidden path where shadows lie."*

He glanced at the team, his expression earnest. *"This correlates with the road Simmons mentioned. It suggests a path into the mountains, possibly leading to a specific cavern."*

Allaria leaned back in her chair, her mind racing. She could almost visualize the journey—the scorching sands, the winding rivers, the looming mountains. But there was an undercurrent of unease. *"What about the next part?"* she asked softly.

Utekli's brow furrowed. *"That's where things become... less clear."*

He read the next lines, his voice tinged with frustration:

*"Follow whispers where cold winds creep,  
To stone that guards the secrets deep,  
The gate of black, with violet gleam,  
Awaits beneath where none can dream."*

He exhaled slowly, his gaze dropping to the floor. *"We've run countless analyses, but the AI can't make sense of it. Frankly, neither can I."*

Simmons rested a hand on his shoulder. *"We're all stumped,"* she admitted, her tone gentler now. *"Maybe it's something that only makes sense in person, present at the location."*

Captain Marcus stroked his chin thoughtfully. *"Could 'the gate of black with violet gleam' be a metaphor? Or perhaps a physical location emitting a particular light spectrum?"*

Simmons nodded eagerly. *"Possibly. These are things we've taken under consideration. If there's a mineral deposit or an energy field that emits violet light, it could explain that line."*

Allaria interjected, her voice firm. *"And 'awaits beneath where none can dream'—considering the entity we're dealing with consumes dreams, perhaps it's a place where dreaming is impossible. Maybe due to environmental factors or some kind of interference?"*

Utekli looked up, a spark of interest in his eyes. *"That's a good point. A location with anomalous properties affecting brain activity."*

Simmons snapped her fingers. *"Like certain electromagnetic fields! If we scan for areas with those anomalies, we might narrow down the location."*



The captain smiled slightly. *"Now we're getting somewhere."*

Utekli continued, his tone more hopeful:

*"Enter the cave, where silence weeps,  
Where darkness gathers and dreams do seep,  
Speak the words in silver's glow,  
And watch the ancient gateway grow."*

He looked around the room. *"The 'silver's glow' could be moonlight or some other natural phenomenon. Perhaps there's an activation mechanism that requires a specific condition."*

Allaria felt a mix of excitement and apprehension. *"It sounds like we'll need to be precise with our timing,"* she mused. *"And possibly prepare for conditions we haven't anticipated."*

Captain Marcus met her gaze. *"That's why we need to be thorough in our preparations."*

Simmons grinned. *"Well, nothing like a bit of ancient mystery to spice up our mission."*

The team shared a brief moment of levity, the tension easing slightly.

*"There may be another meaning, to the gate with violet gleam,"* Karega noted. *"The 'gate of black with violet gleam' could be a physical portal—perhaps a Gao-de construct—that becomes active during this time."*

Simmons pulled up a chart displaying planetary alignments. *"Every 6,000 years, our solar system passes through a region of space dense with dark matter currents. The Gao-de might be using Earth as a focal point to harness or study these energies during this period."*

Allaria tilted her head. *"Dark matter currents?"*

Simmons nodded enthusiastically. *"Yes. Think of dark matter as the cosmic web's invisible threads. Every 6,000 years, our solar system drifts through a particularly dense filament of dark matter. The opening of the portal seems to be timed with this cycle."*

Captain Marcus folded his arms thoughtfully. *"Are you suggesting that the dark matter facilitates the activation of the portal mentioned in the poem?"*

"Exactly," Simmons replied, her fingers dancing over the holographic controls to display a complex map of dark matter distributions. *"The increased presence of dark matter could lower the energy threshold required to open interdimensional portals. It's like a cosmic tide that makes the transfer of energies between dimensions more feasible."*

Utekli added, *"Our sensors have detected anomalies in dark matter density in certain regions of our galaxy at specific intervals. As we pass through them, it's possible that the Gao-de harnesses these fluctuations to conduct their rituals at the portal site."*

Allaria absorbed this information, her mind racing. *"So, the Gao-de are using Earth's position within these dark matter currents to facilitate their activities—whatever those might be."*

Allaria took a deep breath. *"So, let's talk about finding the locations,"* she began, *"we start at the rivers' meeting point, follow the ancient road into the mountains, search for anomalies that could indicate this 'gate,' and prepare for environmental factors that might affect our... dreaming capabilities."*

Utekli adjusted his glasses again. *"Precisely. It's not much, but it's the best lead we've got."*

Simmons looked at the captain. *"Shall I begin compiling environmental data and cross-referencing with our geological scans?"*

*"Do it,"* Captain Marcus affirmed. He then addressed the team. *"I want everyone to double-check equipment, review the mission parameters, and be ready for departure at 0600 hours. Get some rest. We'll meet again in ten hours."*

As the meeting adjourned, Allaria lingered for a moment, her gaze fixed on the fading holographic text of the poem. An inexplicable weight settled in her chest.

*"Something on your mind?"* Captain Marcus asked gently.

She hesitated before speaking. *"It's just... this feels bigger than any of us. Like we're stepping into the unknown with only riddles as our guide."*

He gave her a reassuring nod. *"I won't pretend it's not daunting. But I have confidence in this team—and in you."*

Allaria lay in her bed, her body still but her mind a storm beneath the calm surface. The room was quiet, almost too quiet, as she tried to find sleep. Then, without warning, an overwhelming presence invaded her thoughts. The temperature around her seemed to drop, the coldness sinking deep into her bones. She felt the familiar, dreadful sensation of being pulled away—her consciousness slipping unwillingly into the void.

She tried to fight, but it was futile. Everything around her disappeared, replaced by an endless darkness that felt alive, shifting and whispering secrets just beyond her understanding. Her breath caught in her throat, the air feeling thick, almost impossible to draw in. The silence in the void was unnatural, a suffocating absence that left her ears straining for something—anything—to ground her.

A thousand eyes opened in the darkness, all focused on her, watching. Each eye blinked independently, their gazes piercing her very soul, a thousand thoughts converging on her mind all at once. She had no form in this place; she was floating, lost, yet utterly exposed to whatever this presence was. The writhing mass of shadows before her shifted, pulsating, its form constantly changing, making it impossible for her to grasp exactly what she was seeing.

*“Your choice must be made soon,”* a voice echoed. It was not a single voice but many, a blend of whispers, shouts, and murmurs, as if countless beings spoke in unison. The words echoed in her mind, bypassing her ears entirely, their weight pressing against her consciousness. The voice carried with it an almost physical pressure, like a hand gripping her chest, squeezing her lungs.

Allaria’s heart pounded, her pulse echoing in her ears as she struggled to understand. What choice? What sacrifice? She had pushed these thoughts away before, burying them under the demands of survival. But now they were back, more urgent, more insistent. She felt her muscles tense, but her body refused to move—like she was anchored in place, held by an invisible force.

*“All choices have an accompanying sacrifice that must be made,”* the voice continued, its tone deepening, vibrating through her very bones. A wave of dread washed over her, her skin prickling as if a thousand tiny insects were crawling beneath it. She tried to speak, to ask what sacrifice, but her mouth wouldn’t respond. It was as if her voice had been stolen from her, swallowed by the suffocating darkness.

Allaria fought against the presence with all her willpower. Her thoughts were scattered, but she tried to focus, to find an anchor, something that would pull her out of this nightmare. Her chest tightened, her breathing quickening as panic set in. She wasn't here willingly. She wasn't supposed to be here at all. The void, the eyes, the writhing mass—it all felt like a violation, an invasion of the deepest parts of her mind.

The mass shifted, the eyes blinking, swirling, as if amused by her defiance. “*You will make a choice, and you will make a sacrifice,*” the voice repeated, the words resonating within her, vibrating in her bones like a distant rumble of thunder.

The darkness seemed to close in, her vision narrowing, the edges of the void shimmering and wavering as though reality itself was struggling to reassert itself. Allaria's body felt heavy, her limbs unresponsive, her mind trapped between two worlds—one real, one impossibly alien. The last thing she heard before the void finally began to release her grip was a whisper, softer this time, almost tender, yet filled with malice: “*You cannot run forever, child of two worlds.*”

With a jolt, Allaria snapped back into her bed, her heart racing, her body drenched in sweat. Her breathing came in ragged gasps, her chest aching from the effort. She looked around, her vision blurred, the room shifting and warping around her. Was she really back? Or was this another trick, another layer of the nightmare? The shadows in the corners of her room seemed to shift, almost as if they were watching her, mocking her.

She closed her eyes, trying to steady herself, but the presence lingered—an imprint in her mind, a reminder that she was never truly alone. The whisper echoed faintly in her ears, and she shivered, knowing that the choice—whatever it was—was coming for her, and there was nowhere she could hide.

## CHAPTER 18

Allaria and her team gathered in the shuttle bay, ready to make their descent back to Earth. Their first destination was the meeting point of the ancient rivers—a site that had once been full of life but had now returned to the desert, barren and hostile. The journey wasn't silent; as the shuttle cut through the atmosphere, there was a mix of anticipation and unease.

Utekli adjusted his glasses, his eyes glinting with curiosity. *"I've been running through everything we know about the portal. The symbols, the myths—it all points to something deliberately hidden, as if they didn't want anyone finding it. At least, not until now."*

Simmons glanced back at Utekli, a wry smile on her face. *"You think? I'd say hiding an interdimensional gate is worth a few secrets. What do you think we'll find in Crescentia? Traps? Guardians of some kind?"*

Arturo let out a nervous chuckle. *"Please, no guardians. I've had enough of those. Just some dusty stones and a map, please."*

Allaria listened, her eyes set on the distant horizon, the weight of the mystery pressing against her thoughts. She was drawn into the conversation, but a deeper tension sat at the back of her mind—the nagging thought of what her father had told them, what she might be walking towards.

The shuttle landed, kicking up swirls of sand. The desert stretched endlessly, a wasteland marked only by the heat radiating from the shimmering ground. The oppressive temperature settled on them like a second skin, instantly drenching them in sweat as they stepped out.

The team's datalinks blinked to life, and Utekli grinned, raising his arm to point north-west. *"Got it. The scanner picked something up—a radiation signature matching the stone structures we're looking for. About three hundred kilometers that way."*

Back inside the shuttle, there was no time to rest, only recalculating coordinates and another short flight over the arid terrain. The barren landscape gradually gave way to uneven hills, then the hints of structures—ruins jutting out from beneath the sands.

The display on Allaria's datalink flashed: Ur. The word sat heavily, laden with ancient echoes, stories untold.

They disembarked and stood before what was left of the once-great city—sandstone walls, crumbling towers, and pillars etched with markings that had defied time. The site was eerily silent, the kind of silence that seemed almost alive, as if waiting for something.

Utekli swept his scanner across the closest pillar, eyes widening as it beeped sharply. "*Look here,*" he said, excitement tinged with disbelief. He knelt down, brushing away sand to reveal carved symbols—symbols that mirrored those from Laskari's notebook, only worn with age.

"*These symbols,*" Utekli said, glancing up at the others, "*they're like the ones from the notebook. It's all connected. The cult, the portal—it's all been passed down through these ancient civilizations.*"

Simmons joined him, crouching to look at the symbols, her fingers lightly tracing their edges. "*I guess we're standing in the right place then,*" she said, her voice hushed with awe.

Arturo stayed on watch, his eyes scanning the distance as he turned to speak, his voice low. "I don't like it. It's too quiet. Feels like we're stepping right into a story that shouldn't be retold."

Karega moved toward the remnants of a wall, uncovering what appeared to be a small stone lever, half buried in the sand. "Hey, check this out. I think there's more here." He hesitated, his fingers brushing the ancient stone. "*Should we...?*"

Allaria moved closer, her breath catching slightly as she looked down at the lever. "*This is what we're here for,*" she said, her voice steady despite the unease bubbling beneath her words.

They shared a glance, and then Allaria nodded. Karega pulled, and a rumble echoed beneath their feet. A doorway opened—an entry into the darkness below, a passageway descending into the depths.

The air that rushed out was stale, carrying the scent of ancient dust and something else—something damp and unsettling. Allaria took a step back, staring down into the yawning blackness.

The team stepped cautiously down into the darkness, the crunch of their boots on stone echoing unnaturally, as if the very walls were listening. The air grew colder with each step, a deep, bone-chilling cold that seeped through their clothes. Allaria felt a shiver work its way up her spine as the narrow staircase twisted deeper into the earth. She had to resist the urge to reach

out and touch the rough stone walls—they seemed to be closing in, pressing in on them from all sides. The darkness was thick, oppressive, and even the bright beams of their flashlights felt muted, as though swallowed by the void around them.

"*Should we have worn envirosuits?*" Simmons muttered, her voice carrying a hint of unease. She took a cautious breath, her nose wrinkling. The air had a stale, sour edge to it, as though it hadn't moved in centuries.

Allaria paused, turning her head slightly to consider. "*Maybe. But we're already here,*" she said, her voice steady despite the anxiety twisting in her gut. "*Just keep moving, and stay sharp.*"

Karega was leading the way when he suddenly stopped, his flashlight beam fixed on the ground. "*Wait. Look at this,*" he said, his voice low, almost reverent.

The rest of the team turned their lights to follow him, illuminating the unmistakable imprint of **footprints** in the dust. The prints were fresh, the edges still sharp. They were modern, the tread from a standard pair of boots—but what were they doing here, in a place untouched by time?

"*Someone's been here before us,*" Karega said, the unease clear in his voice.

There was a tense silence as they all stared at the prints. Allaria's heart sank. She exchanged glances with Simmons, who raised an eyebrow, her lips pressed into a thin line. Utekli looked over his shoulder, as though expecting to see someone else in the shadows.

The prints trailed down deeper into the structure, and then another set led back out, their direction hurried, uneven. Whoever had come here had found something—and left in a hurry. A cold knot of fear twisted in Allaria's stomach. Rohith. It had to be him. But how? How did he know where to look?

Allaria took a breath, trying to steady herself. "*We need to find out what they discovered here. And who was here before us,*" she said, her voice betraying a hint of apprehension. She clenched her jaw, keeping her fears to herself, but her team could read the tension in her posture.

"*Rohith?*" Simmons ventured, her tone cautious.

Allaria only nodded. She didn't have to say it—they all understood the implications.

They pressed on, the air growing colder and the darkness feeling heavier as they moved deeper. The corridor opened into a broader passage, the walls adorned with cuneiform inscriptions, ancient symbols etched into the stone with painstaking care. Simmons and Utekli paused, their flashlights grazing over the carvings, their faces a mix of awe and sorrow.

*"Look at these," Utekli murmured, his fingers brushing over the ancient writing. "We're looking at a history thousands of years old. If only we had the time..."*

Simmons snapped a quick photo with her datalink, the flash briefly illuminating the worn carvings. She sighed. *"It's not enough,"* she whispered. *"But it's something."*

Allaria turned back, her voice cutting through the reverie. *"We're on the clock, remember? Let's keep moving."*

Their flashlights swept across the walls as they walked, revealing more inscriptions, the symbols growing more elaborate, more intricate. The air itself seemed to grow thicker, a weight pressing down on their shoulders. Allaria felt her pulse quicken, her instincts screaming that they were getting closer—to something profound, and dangerous.

After what felt like an eternity, the corridor opened into a vast chamber. The ceiling disappeared into darkness above them, and their flashlights fell on a steele, a towering slab of granite, its surface covered in detailed carvings.

The portal was the first thing they saw, etched deeply into the stone, with rays of light bursting forth from its center, the lines almost glowing in the dim light. The creature at the center of the portal was grotesque, its form alien, its limbs jagged and chaotic, as if it could barely contain its own power. It seemed to pulsate, even in stone—a nightmare frozen in time.

Around the portal, smaller creatures were carved, pouring forth from the gate, their bodies twisted in agony or ecstasy—it was impossible to tell. The scene was dynamic, full of movement, and Allaria had to look away, a deep unease settling in her gut. It was as if they were seeing something they shouldn't, a secret that was meant to stay buried.

"There's writing," Karega said, pointing to the base of the steele.

Simmons knelt, her datalink scanner in hand, and aimed it at the ancient text. The silence in the chamber was almost unbearable, each beep of the scanner echoing like a gunshot. Allaria



watched, her heart pounding. The weight of what they might discover pressed down on her, every second stretching out, their breathing the only sound in the oppressive darkness.

"*Come on,*" Arturo whispered, glancing back over his shoulder, the shadows seeming to shift at the edge of his vision. The air felt wrong, as though something ancient was watching, waiting.

Finally, the translation appeared on Simmons' screen. Her eyes widened, and she hesitated for a moment before reading aloud.

*"When the dark light is born, the path to the Devourer opens."*

The words hung in the air, heavy and ominous, their meaning unclear but filled with a sense of dread. Allaria felt a shiver work its way through her body. It was as though the darkness around them had just grown darker, the walls pressing closer, the weight of the ancient prophecy settling upon them like a curse.

"*What... what the fuck does that mean?*" Utekli asked, his earlier enthusiasm now replaced by unease. "*How the hell is that a clue?*"

"*It means,*" Karega said, his voice grim, "*we're in deeper than we thought.*"

The team scanned their surroundings, hoping to find more answers hidden within the ancient structure. Allaria's eyes darted to the imposing steele, her instincts telling her they might have missed something.

"*Check the other side of the stone,*" Allaria instructed, her voice a mix of tension and urgency.

Simmons moved cautiously, her flashlight casting long, eerie shadows that danced across the rough cavern walls. She stepped around to the back of the steele, her light flickering faintly. As the beam landed on the far side, her breath caught in her throat. She froze, her eyes widening, her mouth slightly ajar in sheer astonishment.

Arturo, seeing her reaction, took a hesitant step closer. "*What is it?*" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper, as if afraid to disturb the silence of the place.

Simmons didn't respond. She was transfixed, her gaze locked onto something on the steele. A chill seemed to radiate outwards, creeping into the air around them. The rest of the group exchanged uneasy glances before one by one, their curiosity—and a growing sense of

dread—pulled them forward. They edged around the stone, the shifting light of their flashlights slowly revealing the hidden image.

On the back of the steele, a chilling depiction emerged from the darkness. A robed figure knelt before a grotesque creature, the hood of his robes casting deep shadows over his face. The figure was prostrated so low that his forehead seemed pressed into the very earth itself, the angle of his body twisted in an unnatural arc, almost as if he were breaking himself in reverence. There was something about his posture—an unsettling devotion that bordered on madness.

Ahead of the figure sat the creature, an amorphous, sprawling form etched into the granite. Its writhing limbs twisted in chaotic, serpentine shapes, while eyes—dozens of them—were scattered across its grotesque body. Some were half-lidded, others open wide, their gazes following the kneeling figure as if feeding on his desperation. Between the creature and the bowed figure, wavy lines had been carved—streams of energy that seemed to move, representing a twisted exchange. It was as though the very essence of the kneeling man—his memories, dreams, and knowledge—was being siphoned into the creature, consumed to feed its insatiable hunger.

The air seemed to grow colder as the team stood before the image, the horror of what they were seeing sinking in. Simmons clenched her jaw, trying to shake the unease settling like ice in her chest. Arturo crossed his arms tightly, his eyes narrowing as if attempting to convince himself that this was just an image—a mere carving on a wall. But the energy and grotesque reverence etched into the stone hinted at something far worse—something that felt disturbingly real.

Arturo's voice broke the silence, shaky and uncertain. *"Is this... some kind of ritual?"* He took a step back, his wide eyes betraying his discomfort.

Simmons swallowed hard, her gaze glued to the image. "It's more than a ritual," she whispered, the words heavy as they left her lips. *"It's... a sacrifice."*

Karega stepped closer, his flashlight trembling slightly in his grip. *"Whatever this is, it feels wrong,"* he said, his voice hoarse. *"Like they knew they were offering themselves to that... thing."*

Allaria stared at the scene, her mind spinning. A knot formed in her stomach, her thoughts spiraling towards one terrifying conclusion. Rohith—did he come here to perform this ritual? Or

worse, did he think she was supposed to do it? Her heart pounded in her chest, the implications sinking in. They were not just searching for a portal—they were facing a dark power, ancient and dangerous, that demanded something far beyond what they'd imagined.

Simmons took a hesitant step forward, reaching out to run her hand across the carved lines of the steele. "Look at the streams," she said, her fingers tracing the flowing energy. "It's like the very life is being pulled from him—everything he ever was or could be, given to this creature."

Arturo shook his head, stepping back as if he needed space from the oppressive image. "*Who would do this willingly?*" he asked, his voice strained, his eyes darting around the cavern, almost expecting to see some lingering specter of the past.

The air grew thick with an unspoken tension, their flashlights flickering as though struggling to cut through the darkness around them. Finally, Simmons pulled out her datalink, her hands slightly shaking as she scanned the ancient writing beneath the grotesque scene. The device beeped, and they all held their breath, their eyes fixated on the screen as the symbols slowly shifted, translating.

The moment stretched, seconds feeling like eternity as the words finally took form. Simmons blinked, her face paling as her eyes widened. She read aloud, her voice barely a whisper:

*"When the chosen kneels, the Devourer awakens."*

The cave seemed to hold its breath. Silence enveloped them, the air growing heavier with an unspeakable tension. Each word seemed to echo, wrapping around them like a shroud. They had found more than just a clue—they had found a warning.

Arturo, who was usually the bravest among them, stood frozen, his eyes locked onto the grotesque image etched into the stone. His fingers, wrapped around the flashlight, betrayed a slight tremor, his usual confident posture seeming to falter under the oppressive weight of what they had uncovered.

The silence grew heavy, the air almost too thick to breathe. Arturo's voice was uncharacteristically shaky when he finally spoke, breaking the suffocating stillness. "*Let's get the hell out of here,*" he murmured, his eyes glued to the darkened floor, unable to meet anyone's gaze. It was a rare admission of fear, one that left no room for argument.

The rest of the team exchanged uneasy glances, their flashlights flickering as beams crossed over each other in the dim space. No one spoke, but in the quiet nods and the reluctant shifts of their feet, a collective understanding formed—there was nothing more to be found here, and they needed to leave, now. Each of them carried the weight of their shared fear, a sense of urgency pushing them to move. One by one, their flashlights turned away from the grotesque steele, the beams slicing through the stifling darkness. No one wanted to be the last one to turn their back on it.

The journey back to the entrance seemed to stretch into eternity. Each step they took echoed too loudly, the sound bouncing off the stone walls, as if the darkness itself were mocking their retreat. The air felt warmer with each step, pressing in on them from all sides, and every flicker of their flashlights seemed to distort the carvings on the walls—twisting, shifting, almost as if they were alive. Allaria's heart pounded faster, a primal instinct warning her to move quicker. She could swear she felt eyes on her, unseen but undeniably there, lingering in the blackness just beyond her light. She quickened her pace, her breaths growing shallow, and fought the urge to look over her shoulder. They were alone—or at least, they should have been. But the feeling of being watched wouldn't leave her.

Back on the shuttle, the silence that enveloped them was suffocating. The team settled into their seats, the darkness of the cave seemingly still clinging to them. Each of them stared at the floor or at nothing in particular, their expressions haunted. The usual exchange of banter, the casual talk of their next steps—none of it came. Instead, the only sound was the steady hum of the shuttle's engines, the vibration a low and constant reminder of their departure. It filled the cabin, an oppressive reminder of the heavy silence between them. It felt deafening, the weight of the unsaid thoughts and fears hanging thickly in the air.

Minutes passed, the shuttle's ascent almost complete before anyone dared to speak. Simmons finally broke the silence, her voice barely above a whisper, as if speaking any louder would make the nightmare they had just witnessed all the more real. "*What the hell does all this mean?*" she asked, her eyes darting nervously between her teammates, her expression one of disbelief.

Arturo shook his head, his fingers tapping restlessly on the armrest beside him. "I don't know," he admitted, his voice tense, lacking his usual bravado. "*But it felt... ancient. Evil, even.*" The

words hung in the air, and he leaned back in his seat, as if the admission took something out of him.

Utekli was staring out of the window, his gaze distant, lost in thought. He adjusted his glasses, his voice thoughtful but tinged with a fear that wasn't typical of him. *"The carvings weren't just art,"* he said. *"It was a message—a warning, maybe. Whoever left it wanted others to understand what they faced. That creature, the ritual..."*

Allaria sighed, running a hand through her hair as she processed what they'd seen. Her stomach was knotted, her thoughts heavy with worry. "Rohith," she muttered, more to herself than to anyone else. *"He must have been here. Somehow, he's ahead of us. He knows something we don't."* She frowned, the frustration and fear evident in her voice. It wasn't just about finding the portal anymore—there were larger forces at play, and Rohith seemed to have knowledge they were missing.

Karega leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his eyes narrowing as he spoke. *"If Rohith knows what we just saw, then we're in deep trouble. He's not just a rival anymore. He might be a key player in whatever this... this convergence is. And if he's already got a head start..."* He trailed off, shaking his head, the grim reality setting in.

The shuttle cut through the dry desert air, engines humming with a steady determination as they flew north. Allaria watched the terrain shift beneath them, the barren land slowly giving way to the rise of rocky, craggy mountains. The flight was silent at first, the riddle's cryptic lines echoing in each of their minds, the weight of the task ahead palpable in the air.

Simmons broke the silence, her voice low as if she feared breaking the fragile calm. *"To mountains north, where echoes sleep...right?"* She pointed to the horizon, where the mountain peaks began to emerge from the dusty haze.

Arturo nodded, his eyes narrowing. *"It's eerie, how quiet it is out here. There isn't any else here for probably a hundred miles. No humans on the scans we ran,"* he said, peering out the shuttle window. *"Almost like the place is holding its breath."*

The pilot guided the shuttle along a barely visible path, using the scanner to project an overlay on the cockpit display—a ghost of an ancient road that had long since been swallowed by the sands of time.

"Climb to caverns, dark and deep," Utekli mused aloud, his brow furrowed. He glanced over at Allaria. *"If the riddle's right, we'll need to find something more than just the base of the mountains. A cavern—hidden, buried deep. Something that we'll have to work to reach."*

Allaria nodded, feeling the knot of tension tightening in her stomach. *"Beneath the peaks that touch the sky. We'll have to go high, then lower ourselves to wherever this cavern lies. It's hidden, likely deliberately so. Whatever is here... it wasn't meant to be found easily."*

The shuttle arrived at the base of the mountains, their sheer height casting long shadows across the rocky ground, stretching out like fingers. They disembarked, the crunch of their boots against the rocky soil loud in the silence. The mountains towered above them, their peaks disappearing into the clouds—silent sentinels that seemed to guard the secrets within.

Arturo glanced up at the craggy heights, then at the rest of the team, his face tight with uncertainty. "You know," he said, a slight tremor in his voice, *"I've never been one to get spooked by a bit of stone and shadows, but this place... It doesn't feel right."*

"Agreed," Karega muttered, his eyes scanning their surroundings. *"It's like the mountains themselves are watching."*

Simmons gave a shaky smile. *"Then we'd better make sure we give them a good show. Let's find that cavern."*

They moved forward, picking their way over loose rocks and narrow paths. The air grew colder as they climbed, and an oppressive sense of stillness seemed to settle over them. It was as if the mountain had swallowed all sound, leaving only the crunch of their footsteps and the occasional clatter of dislodged stones.

*"A hidden path where shadows lie,"* Utekli quoted softly, his eyes scanning the rocky terrain. *"It has to be here somewhere. Look for anything—an opening, an unusual formation. Anything that seems out of place."*

They split up, each taking a section of the mountainside. Allaria felt the chill of the wind against her face, the sun having long since disappeared behind the peaks. She moved carefully, her flashlight scanning the rocky wall. The silence was almost unbearable, each breath she took echoing in her ears.

Suddenly, Simmons called out. *“Over here! I think I’ve found something.”*

The rest of the team hurried over, their lights converging on a narrow fissure in the rock, barely wide enough for a person to slip through. It was obscured by an overhang, the shadows making it almost invisible unless you were standing right next to it.

*“Climb to caverns, dark and deep,”* Simmons murmured, shining her flashlight into the darkness beyond the fissure. *“This has to be it.”*

Allaria stared at the narrow opening, a shiver running down her spine. There was something about it—an unnatural darkness that seemed to devour the light from her flashlight. She took a deep breath, turning to face her team.

*“This is it,”* she said, her voice steadier than she felt.

One by one, they squeezed through the fissure, their flashlights barely piercing the inky blackness ahead. The cavern on the other side opened up, the air growing even colder. The walls seemed to close in around them, the darkness pressing in from all sides.

Arturo's voice was a whisper, barely audible. *“I can’t shake the feeling that something’s waiting for us.”*

*“Maybe it is,”* Allaria replied, her voice tense. *“But we keep moving forward. There’s no turning back now.”*

As they moved deeper into the cavern, their lights fell upon markings on the walls—ancient symbols, carved deep into the stone, worn with time. Simmons ran her fingers over one of the carvings, her eyes wide.

*“This... this is it. This is where we’re meant to be.”*

The team pressed on, their flashlights cutting thin beams through the darkness as they descended further into the depths of the mountain. The air grew colder with every step, a creeping chill that seemed to seep into their bones. The weight of the riddle—*“Follow whispers where cold winds creep, to stone that guards the secrets deep”*—clung to them, guiding their steps with an eerie sense of inevitability.

Simmons glanced at the markings on the walls, her breath visible in the freezing air. “We must be getting close,” she murmured, her voice almost swallowed by the dark. *“Do you hear that? The air is making sounds like whispers as it passes between the rocks, the cold... It’s all here.”*

The narrow tunnel opened into a broader path, and the air took on an unsettling stillness. Karega paused, shining his light back toward the entrance they had squeezed through earlier. His brows furrowed as he studied the fissure they had come through—barely wide enough for them, let alone anything larger.

“Wait,” Karega said suddenly, his voice breaking the silence. *“That opening we came through... There’s no way that massive creature we saw carved on the steele could get through there.”*

Arturo turned, his expression perplexed. *“You’re right. That thing was... colossal. It wouldn’t fit through that crack.”*

Allaria turned her flashlight toward Karega, her face half in shadow. *“You’re saying it’s never meant to leave?”* There was a hesitance in her voice, as if she was afraid of the answer.

Karega nodded slowly, the beam of his flashlight trembling slightly. *“Maybe it’s bound here. Trapped. Or maybe...”* He hesitated, a chill running down his spine, *“Maybe it doesn’t need to leave. Maybe its power extends beyond the physical.”*

Utekli, who had been silent, spoke up, his voice tense. “It’s possible. If this creature is from another dimension, perhaps it doesn’t need to move in the way we do. Its influence might transcend physical space. And maybe...” *He glanced at the others, “Maybe it’s been waiting for something—or someone—to open the way for it.”*

Allaria’s heart pounded at his words, her thoughts immediately jumping to the prophecy. The bridge. Her role in all of this. She swallowed, pushing the rising fear back down. *“Let’s keep moving,”* she said, her voice determined but not without a hint of anxiety. *“The answer’s ahead.”*

They continued their descent, the path widening until they entered a massive carved-out chamber. Their flashlights revealed an awe-inspiring space—impossibly smooth walls, vast and curved, with no chisel marks, no sign of tools. The stone was polished, almost reflective, as if some ancient, sophisticated technology had shaped it. It was clear that this place belonged to a civilization that was far more advanced than anything they had ever read about.



Simmons ran her hand across the wall, her expression a mix of astonishment and disbelief. *“No way this was carved by hand,”* she said, her voice filled with wonder. *“Not thousands of years ago. It’s almost like...”*

*“Like it was cut with precision lasers or something,”* Utekli finished for her. *“But that doesn’t make sense. Not here. Not then.”*

Their flashlights swept forward, and that’s when they saw it—the portal.

It loomed over them, at least forty feet tall and twenty feet wide, a massive archway carved of an obsidian-like stone. The stone pillars that made up the portal shimmered with an unnatural, violet glow, as if it held within it the essence of something from beyond. The energy around it was palpable, a static charge that seemed to prick at their skin.

Arturo let out a low whistle, his eyes widening at the sight. *“Well, if anything was meant to bring a creature through, that’s it.”*

*“The gate of black, with violet gleam...”* Allaria whispered, reciting the riddle. *“It waits beneath where none can dream. This is it.”*

A chill ran down her spine, a sense of foreboding settling over her. She took a step closer, her flashlight’s beam dancing across the shimmering surface of the portal. *“It’s waiting for something—waiting to be opened.”*

The words had barely left her lips when a voice, cold and unsettling, echoed from the darkness behind them.

*“Indeed, it is.”*

The team spun around, flashlights illuminating the figure stepping out of the shadows—a familiar face, but twisted, almost wrong. Dr. Rohith stood there, his eyes glinting with a strange, unnatural light. He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

*“Welcome, Allaria. Welcome to the monolith of dreams,”* Rohith said, his voice dripping with an eerie resonance that made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

Allaria's heart skipped a beat. Her mouth went dry as she stared at him, the once-respected doctor now standing as an emissary of something far darker. "Rohith," she managed, her voice barely above a whisper. *"How did you—"*

*"How did I get here?"* he interrupted, his grin widening. He spread his arms, as if encompassing the entire chamber. *"I followed the same path as you, of course. I listened to the whispers, felt the pull of the old gods. The Devourer of Dreams... it calls, and I answer."*

Arturo clenched his jaw, stepping forward protectively. *"What do you want, Rohith?"*

Dr. Rohith's eyes flicked to Arturo, then back to Allaria. *"It's not what I want, my dear Arturo. It's what must be done. The Convergence is coming, and she"*—he gestured to Allaria—*"she is the key to it all."*

Allaria felt the weight of his words settle on her, crushing her chest. The prophecy. The choice. It was all happening, here and now.

Karega's voice was tense, his flashlight trained on Rohith. *"What choice does she have to make?"*

Rohith's smile turned cold, almost pitying. *"The choice to open the portal—or to destroy it. The choice to bring forth the Devourer and unleash its dreams upon your world... or to seal it forever."* He stepped closer, his eyes locking onto Allaria's. *"But tell me, Allaria, do you truly believe you have the strength to defy a god?"*

Silence filled the cavern, thick and oppressive, as Allaria stared at the man before her—no, at the monster he had become. Her team stood around her, their breaths held, their eyes on her, waiting.

Allaria stepped forward, her flashlight trembling slightly as she held it toward Rohith, the violet glow from the portal casting strange shadows across her face. Her voice was steady, but beneath it was a mix of frustration and fear that had been growing since they first arrived at the mountains.

*"Tell me why,"* she demanded, her eyes boring into Rohith. *"Why does the creature have to come here? What happens if I destroy the portal? Why hasn't anyone else destroyed it before now?"*

There was a moment of silence, the air thick with tension. Rohith tilted his head slightly, a thin, knowing smile curving his lips, and his eyes seemed to glitter with some hidden amusement. He looked at Allaria as if she were a child asking why the sky was blue—an earnest question, but hopelessly naive.

*"Very good questions, Allaria,"* he said, his voice dripping with mock admiration. *"Questions I wish I had the answers to... But alas, some things are lost to time—secrets held tightly by the entity itself."* He raised a brow, a gleam of satisfaction crossing his features. *"You see, not even I know the full truth. It's all part of the mystery, part of what makes this so... delicious."*

Allaria clenched her jaw, her frustration palpable. She had hoped, deep down, that Rohith would have the answers she needed—that there might be a clear path forward, some logical explanation. But all she was met with was uncertainty, and she felt the weight of her responsibility settle heavily on her shoulders.

Arturo, standing beside her, looked from Allaria to Rohith, his face etched with a mixture of confusion and determination. He took a step forward, his voice tense. *"Alright then—how can we destroy it?"* He gestured at the towering portal behind them, its black surface shimmering with an ethereal violet light. *"There has to be a way."*

Rohith turned his gaze to Arturo, his smile never faltering, but something dark and amused flickered in his eyes. He looked at Allaria pointedly, his voice almost a whisper. *"Only she knows the answer to that."* He paused, the silence growing heavy, his words lingering. *"The choice is hers to make, and hers alone."*

Allaria felt a shiver run down her spine, the reality of her situation slamming into her with the force of a tidal wave. Her eyes met Arturo's, his brow furrowed in concern, and she saw the question in his eyes—the question none of them dared to voice.

*"What do you mean, 'only she knows'?"* Karega's voice broke the silence, a mixture of frustration and confusion lacing his words. He turned to Allaria, his expression pleading. *"Allaria, do you know something we don't?"*

Allaria swallowed hard, her heart pounding in her chest. The words were on the tip of her tongue, and she hated them, hated the truth they held. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, her mind flashing to the images carved into the steele—the hooded figure kneeling before the creature, the lines of energy connecting them.

When she spoke, her voice was quiet, almost broken. “A *sacrifice*,” she whispered, opening her eyes, her gaze fixed on the ground. “A *sacrifice must be made to destroy it.*”

The silence that followed was suffocating. She could feel her team’s eyes on her, the weight of their stares pressing down on her like a physical force. Arturo’s face tightened, a flash of pain and disbelief crossing his features. Karega shook his head slowly, as if trying to dispel the words she’d just spoken.

Simmons’ voice was the first to break the quiet, a mixture of fear and disbelief making her tone waver. “A... a *sacrifice*?” She glanced at Allaria, her eyes searching her face for some kind of reassurance, some hint that this wasn’t as terrible as it sounded. “*What kind of sacrifice?*”

Rohith’s laughter echoed through the cavern—a hollow, sinister sound. “*Oh, I think you already know,*” he said, his eyes locked on Allaria. “*It’s always been you, hasn’t it? The bridge, the choice... You, Allaria, are the key to either ending this or opening the way.*” He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “*But can you do it? Can you sacrifice everything to protect a world that never understood you?*”

Allaria’s breath caught in her throat. She looked at the faces of her team—Arturo, Karega, Simmons, Utekli. She could see the fear in their eyes, but also something else—determination, loyalty. They were here because of her, with her. She wasn’t alone, but the weight of the decision was still solely hers.

“*We’re with you, Allaria,*” Karega said quietly, his voice steady, his eyes locking onto hers. “*No matter what it takes. We’re in this together.*”

Allaria nodded, tears stinging her eyes. She turned her gaze back to the portal, its violet light casting long shadows across the stone floor. The choice loomed before her—a bridge to an unimaginable power, a threat to all she held dear. And somewhere deep inside, she knew what she had to do.

She stepped forward, her voice steady despite the fear that threatened to overwhelm her. “*This ends here, Rohith. Whatever it takes, this ends now.*”

The portal pulsed, the air growing thick with energy, and Rohith’s smile faltered, his eyes narrowing.

*“You think you can stop this?”* he hissed, his voice filled with venom. *“You think you have what it takes?”*

The massive room began to grow dark, shadows pooling into every corner, the light retreating as if fearful. The darkness wasn't just an absence of light—it had weight, a suffocating heaviness that seemed to grow thicker by the second. It crawled along the stone walls like a living thing, an ink-black tide that threatened to consume them all. Allaria felt it settle around her shoulders, seeping into her very bones, each breath feeling more strained, like the darkness itself was pressing into her lungs. It felt as though, at any moment, it might choke her.

She took a deep breath, the cold air biting at her lungs. She forced herself to sit, her legs folding beneath her as the darkness pushed in from all sides. Fear clawed at her mind—what if the void didn't answer? What if she was too late? But she pushed those thoughts away, closing her eyes and focusing inward, her fingers pressing into the cold stone beneath her. Her heart pounded, each beat echoing in her ears, but she forced her breathing to slow, her thoughts to quiet. She was the bridge; she had to be.

Slowly, a faint blue glow began to emanate from Allaria's eyes, a gentle flicker that seemed almost fragile against the oppressive darkness. But it grew, gaining strength, the glow intensifying until it was almost blinding. The light poured out of her eyes, flooding the room, pushing against the darkness like a tide. Her teammates shielded their eyes, the radiance overpowering, and for one heartbeat, the room seemed caught between two forces—light and shadow locked in a struggle for dominance.

The light built to a crescendo, so bright it hurt to look at, and the air seemed to vibrate with an unseen energy. Allaria's teammates watched, their eyes wide with a mix of awe and terror. Simmons took an involuntary step back, her hand moving to shield her face. Arturo's jaw clenched, his hand instinctively moving to the weapon at his side, though he knew it wouldn't help. Karega's eyes flicked between Allaria and the portal, uncertainty and fear etched on his face.

In an instant, the glow reached its peak, and with a sudden, blinding flash, the room was engulfed in blue light. The force of it knocked the team back, and for a split second, it felt as if time itself had stopped. When the light receded, Allaria was gone. The room plunged back into darkness which quickly dissipated, the oppressive weight of it now gone. The silence that

followed was deafening—an emptiness that seemed to echo off the cold stone walls. For a heartbeat, no one moved, the shock settling in as they stared at the spot where Allaria had been. Simmons' hand trembled, her eyes still wide with disbelief. *'Where... where did she go?'*