



# RISE

**A NOVELLA BY**

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## STARS ABOVE, STARS BELOW

“Hold on to my arm!” Alexandra screamed. Her pupils were almost as big as the turquoise in her eyes.

“Actually, I was thinking of letting go!” Christopher clenched his jaw and tried to pull himself up. His body was freezing from the cold as he hung suspended in space; stars above, stars below.

“If you have the strength to be funny, you have the strength to pull your fat ass up!”

He looked down, wondering where he’d be pulled if he fell. *Doesn’t really matter, though, I’ll freeze to death and choke long before I burn up in the atmosphere.* Which atmosphere seemed trivial at this point.

Alexandra leaned back and pulled with all of her strength. “Come on, damn it!”

All in all, they’d both been quite lucky. None of the shots fired had hit them, and they escaped the explosion without much harm. Their luck was about to run out, though; the automated security system would soon discover the breach and seal the leak.

Christopher looked around. He first saw the brown planet, then its grey moon. *Damn the entire Shul system.* He thought to himself as he grabbed a beam sticking out from the hole in the bridge. He let go of Alexandra to hoist himself up, but the beam was slippery, and the pressure was tugging at his legs, pulling him out from the bridge. “Shit!” He yelled.

“Don’t you fucking die on me, Topher!” Alexandra yelled, throwing herself forward, thrusting her arms through the hole in the bridge. She grabbed both of Christopher’s arms, but could feel herself steadily pulled into the breach.

“Don’t *you* die on *me*!” Christopher answered. “Find something to hold us up! Or we’ll both be dead!”

Alexandra started kicking and squirming, but it only made her slide faster. “There!” She screamed as her foot got lodged in a piece of wreckage. It was part of the high-speed train they were both sitting in a few short minutes ago.

The situation made little sense to both of them. The people they were escaping from were primitive and vile, and seemed to lack both economy and technology. They wouldn’t have been able to track them like this, and they sure as hell wouldn’t have access to the firepower needed to destroy that train.

“Does this seem a little *off* to you?” Alexandra asked, pulling with all of her strength, her foot burning and her face growing red.

“Yes!” Christopher groaned.

“I mean the whole thing! Not just the-“

“I know! It’s strange, all of it!” He adjusted his grip, letting go of the beam with one hand, instead grabbing Alexandra’s arm again. “Can we talk about this later?”

“Absolutely!” She pulled again, slowly dragging Christopher back onto the bridge.

“That’s it! You’ve got me!” He yelled, pulling himself up as the door slowly closed behind them, threatening to lock them out.

“Move!”

The Shul system consisted mostly of barren planets and a few dwarves, but was known throughout the universe because of two things: K'hadmera; commonly known as *the world that floats*; and the Skybridge.

The first was Christopher and Alexandra's destination. It was a strange cluster of rock and debris located in the outer rim – also known as the Periphery – on the far side of Shul IV's moon. The floating world hovered above a bottomless pit, held in place by tremendous chains anchoring the giant rocks to the ground. Joseph Shul – the man who first discovered the system – was believed to have died when his ship crashed in the pit. A few attempts had been made to recover it, but both of them were unsuccessful. In recent years, people with too much money had begun settling there, building giant villas on the floating rocks. The rigidity of the chains holding the stones in place kept them from moving, so after a while, they were all adjoined with bridges and lifts of various kinds.

The Skybridge was their current location. Shul IV had a few settlements and villages, and rich deposits of Nebulium 2 and other multi-purpose fuels and gases. Because of all the mining colonies, it had several large spaceports, which made travel there safe and effective. As this was the preferred method of travel to K'hadmera, a bridge had been built connecting Shul IV with its moon. The moon hovered extremely close to Shul IV's surface, and was mounted on a giant gyroscope, to compensate for the planet's rotation and gravitational pull. Trains shot through the bridge at tremendous speed, using maglev technology.

"How come we can breathe in here? Aren't we supposed to be in a vacuum?" Alexandra asked, running her hand along the ethereal wall.

"Normally, we would be, but oxygen is added instantly when the train reports a malfunction." Christopher scratched his white hair, soon discovering a streak of red.

"Ah, of course! The train might stop for some reason." She paused, rearranging her brown and orange vest, pushing the magazines back in place and tightening the strap for her rifle. "Some other reason than getting blown to shit." She also made sure her knife was properly strapped to her ankle, and hidden underneath her once beige boots. "But how do they fill the entire bridge so quick?"

"By dividing it. If you listen very closely, you'll hear doors opening in the distance." He took a deep breath and wiped the blood on his turquoise scarf. "The A.I fills only the compartments with signs of life first, and then slowly opens the rest of the tunnel." Christopher always wore a scarf, hiding the burns on his neck. "And it seems to be working brilliantly! Makes you wonder why everyone was so afraid of artificial intelligence."

"Well; even though the bridge is controlled by an A.I, it's not the same as synthetic humans with artificial brains..."

"No, but according to those maniacs, the bridge would've tried to murder us a long time ago, deeming us inferior or some such nonsense." He ran his fingers through his hair again. *Damn, that bullet was too close!* The cut wasn't deep, but it would surely leave a mark on his head. *Another ridge in my hair.*

Alexandra looked down and wandered in silence for a little while. Far behind them, the doors slowly started to close again, preserving the oxygen.

The train had travelled two thirds of the way when someone fired on the bridge. The impact was heavy enough to tear the hull open, so it had to be a high-impact round, Christopher figured. *Not some random bucket with a cannon, in other words. This wasn't done by the same people who attacked our home. This was done by professionals with*

*credits to spare. Maybe they know we have something of theirs.* He suddenly remembered Alexandra's comment earlier, and turned towards her. *She found it strange as well.*

A tear fell from Alexandra's face as she trudged through the tunnel, then another. She looked to the stars above, trying to stop herself. She knew her home was out there somewhere, orbiting the giant, red sun. *Alexandria, she thought. The first place we discovered after the exodus.*

"Brighten up, will you? You're named after the brightest sun in the fucking universe."

Alexandra couldn't help laughing and crying a little at the same time.

"What's wrong?" *Apart from our home being blown to shit.*

"You almost died..." Alexandra looked at her brother, her turquoise eyes meeting his.

"For the millionth time. What of it?"

"I couldn't protect you!"

Christopher laughed a burly laugh. "Protect me? Since when?!" He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close like a little child. "That has never been your job!"

"I know it's not my job, but you're my brother, and I—"

"We've barely seen each other the past ten years, Sandra. Don't go all sibling overdrive on me now! You know what I did ... what I've done. My life was on the line every single day!"

"I just want to help!"

"You always want to help! That's what makes you, you! But you can't always help. Sometimes no help is needed, or you can't do anything. We're together and we're alive, for fuck's sake. What more do you want?"

"I..." Alexandra looked down, as if the black, empty space surrounding the bridge were suddenly placed on her shoulders.

"You can't retroactively help me! I don't need your help *now!* You feel guilty about what happened, and you wish you could've been there for me. I completely understand, trust me. But that's all in the past. Let's focus on our future together instead. We can start by making sure we have one."

Alexandra said nothing. She wriggled out of his grasp and gazed towards the moon in front of her.

*She doesn't know me anymore.* Christopher thought, clutching his gun. *She doesn't know this side of me, the insightful one.* He turned the safety off and carefully removed it from its holster. *That's right, sis. I grew up.* He felt uneasy.

Giant pneumatic pistons and rods hissed above them and below them. The thick material from which the bridge was made kept most of the noise out, but they could still feel and hear the rumbling as the bridge contracted ever so slightly.

*These tunnels weren't made for walking in.*

They kept wandering in silence, stars and nebulae shining above and below, worlds and worlds and worlds stretching out all around them.

*And here we are, in the outer rim. All the way out in the Periphery.*

Christopher had never felt more lost.

"You know;" Christopher finally caved, unable to take the silence anymore. "These giant pump-looking things? They're there to compensate for the difference between the moon's extreme perigee and apogee. The bridge can be compressed and reduced almost by 500 kilometers."

"Since when do you care about stuff like when the moon's closest and not? I thought you gave zero shits about science and technology and the likes. Unless it can be fired or fired upon."

“First of all, this bridge *can* be fired upon. If anything, those morons back there proved that. Second; I don’t, normally. But we are standing in the universe’s biggest architectural accomplishment. It’s the most expensive thingamabob ever built! In the midst of this shitstorm, that’s something to think about, at least.”

Alexandra started laughing. “It is a remarkable thingamabob, I’ll give you that.”

“See!” He looked towards the grey surface thousands of kilometers ahead. *If we walk into the atmosphere, we’ll fall to our deaths...* He suddenly realized. Then he noticed something. What he’d been waiting for. “Heads up, Alexandra!”

A train approached from the distance, fast and silent. Close to a thousand kilometers per hour, shooting through the corridor. *Only a few inches of space between the train and the bridge. No escape if they decide to run us through.*

Alexandra grabbed her rifle. “Maybe they won’t attack us,” she dared hoping.

“Oh, they will. I just hope they get off the train first.”

“That’s really up to the A.I, isn’t it?”

“Right you are. And she *has* been diggin’ us so far.” He checked his ammo and made sure new magazines were ready in his vest.

“How are we going to do this? There’s no cover to hide behind and nowhere to run.” Alexandra stopped and went down on one knee, and then removed her backpack.

“You’re right, but we might still have the element of surprise on our side.” The train started decelerating, slowly coming to a halt a few hundred meters down the bridge. There was one door remaining between them and the train, but it would open the very second someone stepped out. If lady luck smiled on them, it would only be a passenger train. But lady luck seldom smiled these days.

“How do we have the element of surprise? We’re right in the open and they’ve-“

Christopher fired three rounds into the roof of the bridge, shattering the light source. “Space is dark,” he smiled, firing a few more rounds, blacking out the entire compartment. He followed Alexandra’s example and took his pack off. They both got down on the floor, resting their weapons on their packs, waiting for the door to open. “The very second light seeps through that door, open fire.”

“What if they’re civilians?”

“If they are, they’ll stay on the train.”

“Good point.”

They waited in silence.

Alexandra felt a knot in her gut as the bolts in the door started releasing. She placed her finger on the trigger and took a few deep breaths. Her finger felt wet and slippery, the trigger heavy and difficult. She took another breath.

*One in the chest, one in the head.* Christopher cursed himself for losing his rifle when he almost fell through the bridge. The door wasn’t that far away, though, and he was holding his most trusted pistol. He took a deep breath.

The door opened.

Alexandra’s rifle thundered throughout the bridge, a brutal contrast to Christopher’s subtle bursts. High velocity rounds were good for ripping your enemies to shreds, but they were hell on the ears. Alexandra screamed and kept squeezing the trigger, round after round leaving her barrel; shell after shell ringing as they rolled empty across the floor. Streaks of light flashed across the room as the fire burst from the muzzle. She could see the blinking faces of the men entering the room, red and black mesh tearing under the sheer force of her bullets.

*High quality synthetic fiber,* Christopher thought. Not the first people with expensive equipment who tried to murder them. “These are the same people who attacked the

train!" He yelled; his pistol hissing as the thermal rounds left the muzzle. He aimed carefully – the heat would melt the leather around the mesh, but not puncture. At best, it would slightly warm the person hit – he needed to hit them in the head.

Alexandra gave no answer, her ears ringing from the thunders of her rifle. She didn't care to count how many she felled, but by now they were pouring into the room faster than she could kill them. Muzzles flashed in the dark as they returned fire. The bullets whizzed and thudded around her, each one closer than the last. She knew there was no way they'd tear through the hull of the bridge, but they would tear through her like she was butter.

And she was on her last round.

Hitting a person in the head or groin with thermal rounds made for terrible screams, and created a vile smell, but it was what he had. From the sounds, Christopher hit a few people already. He could feel his heart racing now; the return fire was getting dangerously close and he only had two magazines left. *To semi-auto or not to semi-auto?* He fired a few more rounds, missing. He knew he needed to do something, and quick.

When he heard Alexandra's rifle giving away an ominous *click*; *that* was the push he needed. He screamed from the top of his lungs and switched the safety to semi-auto, searing bursts escaping his weapon as he rolled towards Alexandra. His little stunt was sure to draw their fire, but hopefully it would shock them as well, earning him a few valuable seconds.

"We need to make a break for it!" Alexandra screamed, tossing her rifle to the side.

"You read my mind!" He answered, reloading.

"Cover me!" She grabbed her knife and ran towards the door.

*Damn it!* Christopher tried to spread his bullets as much as he could, keeping the soldiers from firing back. *I can't let them hit Alexandra!* They would be able to see her as soon as she ran into the light coming from the door. He let out another scream. "Come on, fuckers!" Round after round left his weapon, only a select few hitting their marks. Pretty soon, his clip was empty, and he was left to his own devices.

Alexandra screamed and jumped towards the closest soldier. A few rounds had hit her vest, but none of them high velocity. Nevertheless, she'd feel it once the adrenaline wore off. She pushed his rifle aside and drove her knife in under his arm. "That's what you get for trying to kill me and my brother!" She said, her lips inches from his face. She pulled the knife out and drove it back in for good measure, then she crushed his nose with her forehead. Before he hit the ground, she'd flipped his rifle and started firing at the person behind him. A trail of blood and brain matter blinked like snow crystals in the light from the door as he fell to the ground. She grabbed his rifle as well and positioned herself next to the door. "All right! I'm in position!" She yelled to her brother, firing a few rounds into the next room.

There was no response.

*Damn it all to shit!* Christopher clutched his thigh as he beat the soldier to death with his pistol. *I should've known this would happen.* He grabbed the rifle from the ground and dragged himself towards the door.

"Topher! Answer me, for fuck's sake! I need to know you're–"

"To be honest, I've felt better." He said as he stumbled to his feet by the doorway.

"You stupid- Shit! You're bleeding!"

"It's nothing. Focus on the soldiers!"

Alexandra fired a few more rounds. From what she could see, there were only two left now, but they were well hidden in the doorways on the train. She took a few deep breaths and went down on one knee, carefully aiming through the sights. She could see

one of the men, lurking by the side of the train. "That's right," she mumbled. Stick your ugly little head out and-"

A bullet whizzed past her, almost taking her ear off. "Fuck!" She screamed, losing her concentration.

"I'll give you some cover fire." Christopher was in too much pain to aim properly, so he lazily pushed his weapon around the corner, steadily firing. Hopefully, this made sure the enemies didn't want to stick their heads up too high.

"Thanks." Alexandra looked through the scope again, soon finding the man who almost killed her. He was squeezed underneath the nose of the train, his rifle fixed on Christopher. The man didn't even flinch as her brother's bursts clanged all around him. Alexandra fired a single shot, but pulled too hard, hitting the train instead.

"Careful!" Christopher yelled. "If you destroy that train, we'll never get out of this space-shit!"

Her shot stalled the man long enough for her to take another. This one hit near the shoulder, it seemed. She took another breath, preparing for the kill shot.

"Look out, Sandra!" Christopher suddenly yelled, pushing her away from the door. A violent thud emerged just before they fell to the ground. Christopher landed on his back, but was quick to get his rifle up.

Another soldier had come through, firing at them at point-blank range. Before Alexandra could react, Christopher had riddled the man with holes. "Son of a bitch made a run for it!" He said, out of breath.

Alexandra hadn't even heard the shots, but there they were, clear as day on Christopher's chest. There were two pancaked bullets and one hole. "No, no, no, no, no!" She immediately started crying.

"Oh, for the love of- You just murdered a thousand soldiers in cold blood! It's not very becoming of you to cry right now!" Christopher groaned and stuck a finger into the hole. "It's not that deep, anyway."

"I can't lose you, Topher, I just can't! Not now!"

"Then get me the fuck on that train and let's get moving! You can't do anything for me here!"

"Good point." She gathered some of the rifles and all the ammunition she could find. She also grabbed a med-kit from one of the dead soldiers. She tried to examine their armor and their uniforms, but there was nothing there to give them away. She stabilized and bandaged Christopher, making sure he wasn't bleeding, externally or internally.

"Shouldn't we get out of-"

"Yes, after I've stabilized you. I already told you; I'm not losing you! If I carry you into that train, bleeding and-"

"It's okay, Alexandra. I get it. Don't worry about it, I'll just lie here and ... be stable."

"Good. How are you feeling, by the way? The bullet went straight through ... I don't know what it hit."

"Actually, I feel pretty good, considering. I'll be back on my feet in no time." He smiled. *She's going to hate me for this if I die.* Christopher couldn't bear to tell her how he really felt. *Like I'm already dead...*

After making sure she had everything she needed, she walked over to the man hidden underneath the train. He was still alive, moaning and groaning from the bullet wound in his shoulder. "Shut your fucking mouth!" Alexandra said, placing her boot on his shoulder.

The soldier whimpered, trying to pry her boot away.

“You tell me who the fuck it is you’re working for!” She hissed, pressing her foot down even harder.

“Skybridge Security,” he answered, “I remove the filth from the tunn-”

She raised her foot and stomped down a few times. “Wrong answer.”

“Okay!” The man surrendered. “Okay, okay, okay, fine!” He winced and rolled over on his back as Alexandra released him. “I’ll tell you who I work for.”

Alexandra leaned closer. Maybe she’d finally have an answer. Maybe they could stop this before it grew into a war.

That’s all it took; a second of carelessness on her part.

The metal blinded her as he pulled it, silver streaks shooting across her eyes. She didn’t even register the muzzle on the temple, much less the tremendous roar as the bullet shot forth. The pure spectacle of it all made her fall backwards, landing on her back, her vest covered in blood. She looked up, but the soldier was no longer there; reduced instead, to bits and pieces.

She stumbled to her feet, shaking. “Wow,” she started. “These people really don’t want us to know who they’re working for.” She removed his corpse, halfway in shock. Then she went to get Christopher. “Let’s get you on that train, Topher. I’ll get you some proper help when we reach the moon.”

There was no answer.

The sound of the porous surface under her boots was almost more than Alexandra could take. She'd wandered for hours now, dragging her brother on a makeshift stretcher behind her. Dusty, grey and dull rock was all she could see around her.

"This would be a whole lot easier if you'd just talk to me, brother." She looked at his lifeless face, a red streak still visible in his hair. "That looks good ... you should dye it like that when this is all over."

She frowned and kept walking. *Those fuckers...* She'd found the station bombed and broken, every vehicle and transport destroyed. The crew that had attacked them on the skybridge was probably waiting there for them. *They must've gotten impatient.*

It didn't make any sense to her, none of it. She thought back on the original attack, waking up in the middle of the night, her house bathing in brilliant white light. *554 years since the first exodus ... I was certain some alien race had finally found us.* Then Christopher came barging into her house, the brother she hadn't seen in five years. The brother she cherished more than anything in the universe.

The brother lying lifeless on the stretcher behind her.

He told her he had uncovered something important, something worth dying for.

"You did die!" She'd told him in her confusion. *You were completely gone for nineteen seconds!* Alexandra would never forget those nineteen seconds; it was the most frightened she'd been her entire life. *You left me! Then you came back from the dead and then you left again!* She turned around, tears falling onto the porous surface. "I won't let you leave again!"

Christopher had fallen out with the wrong people, and they'd beaten him half to death – or completely to death, depending on how one saw it – as a warning not to mess with them. Then he'd joined the Thousand Swords, a private military corporation based in another star system. According to himself, he went deep undercover, doing things he didn't want to talk about. But he retrieved something, something he only trusted Alexandra with.

She still didn't know what that was, exactly.

It had been two weeks since he pulled her out of her bed and saved her from her own burning house. *A burning house in a city built on the fucking water, how immensely stupid is that?* The thugs who threw the firebombs were swiftly dealt with by Novean police, but Alexandra and Christopher had suffered attacks almost every single day since he returned. It was always by the same thugs, raggedy and with poor equipment, almost as if they didn't really want to kill them. *You're being too paranoid, Alexandra...*

Novea... *The blue marble*, it was called. It was the third rock from Alexandria, the most powerful sun known to man. The planet was a paradise, only for the rich and wealthy. Eighty-nine percent of the world was covered by water, so they built their houses on top of it. Some were chained together, some were by themselves. Some had several acres of floating paradise to live on, while others lived in dense, bustling residential areas. All in all, it was a metropolis like many others, only with streets made of water and floating passageways.

The attack on the skybridge was something new though, something far more aggressive and advanced than all the other attacks, combined. *That was an avalanche-*

*class gunship blowing a hole in the bridge; those aren't easy to come by. And those soldiers...* Alexandra turned to look at her brother, smiling at the red stripe going through his hair. *They couldn't shoot for shit.* Good equipment but poor training, perhaps? It seemed like a waste of resources, but some mercenary companies had more credits than people, and equipment could be appropriated faster than soldiers could be trained.

There were so many mercenary and private military upstarts scattered across the universe, one could fill a mid-sized planet with them. Many of them risked their lives going out beyond the Periphery, searching for rare minerals and gasses beyond the red line. Those who actually found something and survived would sell their discoveries, earning millions of credits. Only a few struck gold though, and many died. The planets in the Periphery were littered with crashed ships, eroded corpses and dead dreams.

Whoever it was chasing Alexandra and Christopher, they must've been among the lucky ones.

A sound caught Alexandra's attention. There was something ahead of her, roaring.

"Wait here, brother." She pulled her pistol and crouched down next to some jagged rocks. They weren't taller than her thighs, but they would have to do.

Soon after, a cone of light lit up the surrounding area. It was a buggy. *I should be close to K'hadmera. Maybe they've sent out a patrol.* Alexandra looked at her brother. He wouldn't be able to carry on much longer. If the people in the buggy were hostiles and spotted her, she'd be dead before she could fire a single shot. If they were friendly and she shot first, though...

*This requires a leap of faith,* she thought, standing up. "Over here!" She yelled.

The vehicle stopped.

"Identify yourself!" Someone shouted.

*Not enemies...*

"Identify yourself, now!" The voice came again, a light blinding her.

"My name is Alexandra Loncar, and-"

That was all she managed to stutter before a boot hit her behind the knee.

"Listen, I have-"

Another boot.

"Who the hell is this?"

Alexandra couldn't see anything, but she assumed they were talking about her brother. "That's my brother, Christopher." The grey sand and stone left a dry taste in her mouth. "We have important information."

She was dragged into the vehicle by two men. From what she could see, the driver was female, though. "Some company you keep..." Alexandra mumbled, looking at the woman's right eyebrow in the rearview mirror.

"Oh, they're not so bad." The woman replied. .

"You have good ears." Alexandra could hear the men talking outside the buggy, mumbling something into a radio. *They're radioing a pickup for Topher...*

The woman turned around. "So do you."

Alexandra was taken aback.

The woman was extremely beautiful, with jet-black hair and eyes to match, but it was the insignia on her shoulder that really caught Alexandra's attention. "Master sergeant? So you're the one calling the shots here?"

"What ... are you surprised because I'm a woman?"

She wasn't. She was relieved. Alexandra had nothing against men, per se. She even liked them, in small enough doses. *Though it's been a while.* However, Alexandra had

been through some tough situations, and she'd seen some of the things men could do. Women weren't always much better in that regard, but there was at least one thing they *couldn't* do...

She smiled at the master sergeant. "I'm surprised because you're driving."

The woman smiled back, her eyes gleaming in the darkness. "What, you'd think I'd let a *man* drive me around, just because I outrank him?"

Alexandra looked back at the two men. They were stabilizing Christopher, no doubt preparing him for transport. "Not very good drivers, huh?"

"Men drive the same way they fuck – reckless, hard and fast; if either one of those had been driving, we wouldn't be sitting here right now."

Alexandra couldn't help but laugh. The master sergeant had certainly removed some of the grimness from the situation. *Though I'm not sure why ... she doesn't know me. We're not pals.* There was the paranoia again. *Good, that's the only way to stay alive.*

It didn't take long before another cone of light appeared. It was a slightly bigger buggy, skidding to a halt right next to Alexandra's brother.

"See?" The master sergeant said. "Reckless."

Another man jumped out, helping the others put Christopher in the vehicle. He gave the master sergeant the thumbs up and then skidded off into the blackness.

"Just you and me then," she said, stepping carefully on the gas.

The buggy was extremely responsive, moving forward immediately. Even though the surface of the moon was rocky and uneven, the drive felt smooth and unhindered. *She really is a good driver.* "So, master sergeant—"

"Please, call me Nora. Or Sergeant Hendricks, if you must."

"Okay ... Nora; what's going on here?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question?"

"Yes you should, but you haven't! And I was referring to..." Alexandra pointed at Nora, then herself. "Whatever this is."

"I'll tell you what, Alexandra Loncar, why don't you tell me what *you* think this is, and we'll go from there."

*Oh heavens...* Alexandra leaned back, taking off her vest. The men had taken her weapon, but not her armor and ammunition. "How long until we're there?"

"You mean K'hadmera?"

"Are there any other places on this godforsaken rock?"

"You'd be surprised." The woman turned around, smiling again; Alexandra's relief slowly evaporating. "Twenty-two minutes." She turned back.

"I think you're being way too friendly with me. Instead of giving me the third degree, you're giving me banter about men and sex." Alexandra leaned closer. "What was all that about, anyway?"

"That man, Christopher; he's your brother, right?"

"Yes?"

"He's been wounded pretty badly, right?"

"Yes..."

"And when was the last time you felt really, really worried about your brother?"

"You mean ... before—"

"I mean now, on this rock!"

When she really thought about it, Alexandra hadn't worried since getting into the buggy. She'd been too busy trying to figure out what the sergeant's deal was. At once, all the paranoia and worry came creeping back, but she recognized Nora's point. "Son of a bitch..." She mumbled.

"I can see the worry in those big eyes of yours; it's basically spilling out. I saw no reason to add more torment."

"That's ... actually really thoughtful of you, I suppose."

Nora shook her head. "I've made you more paranoid than anything, I fear."

*She's good, Alexandra thought. There's no way around that. Might as well try to act normal and see how all of this plays out.* "So what happens now?"

"Well, we'll do our very best to fix your brother up, and then we're going to have a nice chat with the both of you."

*I've already taken one leap of faith; no reason to stop now.* "We have important information." Alexandra stuttered.

"Concerning what?"

"I'm ... not quite sure."

"If I were you, Alexandra, I'd get sure. Fast."

"My brother obtained the information, he said it was worth dying for, I-"

"You better hope your brother recovers then, because right now, all we have here are dozens of dead men, a broken piece of architecture worth more credits than you've ever seen, and a confused, pretty young girl with no explanation."

*What's with this chick?* "I'm sure we'll get it sorted out when we get to K'hadmera."

Nora laughed.

"What's so funny?"

In addition to housing the richest dirtbags in the known universe, K'hadmera also happens to house the most expensive research facilities. Everything happening there is classified, and it takes almost half a year for people to be processed and give clearance.

"So?"

"So; you're not going to K'hadmera, and neither is your dear brother."

Alexandra looked at her watch, then outside. It had been twenty minutes, and she saw nothing even remotely resembling a floating city. There wasn't a structure in sight, only two giant rocks, marking the entrance to a valley, shrouded in pitch black darkness.

*Damn it...*

"Don't you leave me, Christopher..."

Christopher opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. *Where am I?*

"I can't lose you, Topher..."

There was a train somewhere, but he wasn't sure. Everything was so white and bright, bathing in light. *Is this Alexandra's house?* She was gone. She'd left for somewhere else. "The skybridge!"

"Open your eyes!"

He ran all the way to Shul IV, entering the first train. She was there, sitting in one of the seats in the rear. "Alexandra!"

"I already lost you once, Christopher."

Something was wrong, the train didn't move.

"Christopher, hold on to my arm!"

"Actually, I was thinking of letting go..."

There was a hole in the skybridge. *They attacked us. I almost died here.*

"Open your eyes!"

He could see the sky above, a million stars dancing. He could also see a brown planet hovering ominously close. *Shul IV; which means we're on-*

"Open your eyes, Christopher!"

He opened his eyes.

The room was dimly lit by a small light fixture in the ceiling. Orange lines were glowing along the dark green walls. Christopher would've recognized those colors anywhere. *I'm in a bunker.*

"You've been shot, are you aware of that?"

*The train ... those people on the skybridge.* "Yes."

"Who shot you?"

*A soldier... The one Alexandra-* "Where's my sister?!" Christopher tried to look around the room, but he was too stiff and sore. All he could see was the light fixture and the dull, green walls.

"She's safe. Don't worry about her."

"I'd be less worried if I could actually see you!"

A few seconds passed, then Christopher could feel his bed rising. Slowly, his back was raised and more of the room revealed. He could see several empty beds lined up next to the far wall, a few wheeled tables containing surgical equipment and a gorgeous woman sitting next to him.

"Surprised?" She asked.

Christopher nodded.

"Is it because I'm a woman?"

Christopher shook his head.

"What, then?"

He studied her, looking at her insignia, then at her face, then finally her body. Her uniform was black and neutral, but tight. From what he could tell, it was in two pieces though. *Not one of those damn gimp suits, fortunately.*

Their eyes met again.

*Or, unfortunately, I guess.* Her vest was on the table next to her, but her gun was holstered by her left thigh. *She's professional, but relaxed.* She had her jacked zipped halfway down. It wasn't as tight as the rest, but the black top underneath still revealed an impressive cleavage. *And she doesn't consider me a threat. Or maybe she just assumes I'll be too busy staring at her tits.*

She assumed correctly.

"You're left handed."

The woman leaned back and crossed her legs. "And you're observant. Here I thought you were just staring at my breasts."

"I caught a glimpse of those too. They're very pretty."

The woman laughed. "Thank you."

"Being a female master sergeant, you probably get this a lot but; any chance I could see the rest of them?"

"Actually," she replied, leaning forward. "I don't hear it all that often." She leaned back again, pulling the zipper up.

"You must be a stern woman, then."

"When it's needed."

"And velvety soft when that's needed, I see."

"Aw, would you like me to be firmer with you?"

Christopher shook his head. "No need, I can't really feel my waist anyway."

"That would be the pain relievers. A rare concoction made right here on this desolate rock."

"It's working great, I can't feel a thing, but my mind is still clear."

"That's the idea."

Christopher felt a sinking feeling. "Because you're going to interrogate me, right?"

“Aw, when you say it like that, it sounds so bad. We were off to a good start here, with the banter and the boobs and whatnot.”

*What’s her deal anyway?* “You’re remarkably easy going.”

“Thank you.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“I’m a female master sergeant, Christopher. Half of the people under me can’t handle that. I get crap for being a woman wherever I go. Instead of acting like a man, I own it.”

Christopher smiled, looking at her again. Her shoulder length, raven hair cascaded naturally, flowing away from her face, gently resting on her shoulders. Most of the women Christopher had seen working as a mercenary or in the military had buzz cuts, or their hair tied up in a knot. *This one might as well be on her way to a ball.*

“You do own it,” he said. “You’re absolutely gorgeous *and* you’re flirty and easy going. That makes me nervous as shit!”

“So it *was* a compliment, then?”

“Damn it, woman, you’re too smart for both of us.”

She gave him another smile, a little broader than the last one. It seemed honest – or so *he* thought, at least. “I’m master sergeant Hendricks,” she said. “Just call me Nora; it saves us time.”

“I’m Christopher Loncar, but you already knew that. And there’s no way in hell I’m calling you Nora.”

“Wow, I guess you really were in the military. Your sister was much less formal.”

“PMC. And yes; she’s not really one for formalities.”

Silence.

“What?”

“I just told you that I’ve met your sister, don’t you want to ask me something.”

“You said she was okay.”

“And you believed me just like that?”

“Not necessarily, but I can’t really do anything right now, can I? Besides, I was busy staring at your tits. Wasn’t that your plan all along?”

“I guess you have a point.”

Christopher crossed his arms, looking around. There was just one entrance to the room, and judging from the colors on the code panel next to it, it was unlocked. *People can come and go as they please, and they don’t expect me to run ... good.* There were some vents near the back of the room, but they were barely making any sound. *The air is fresh and clean, so they’re either extremely silent, or we’re above ground.* Next to his bed was a hovering table, containing a silvery plate with three apples and a banana, and two plastic cups. *Oh, nice! One seventh of a meal, just what I needed!*

“So, should we get this interrogation started then?” He smiled. “I like the hovering table, by the way. Magnets, right? Mind if I take an apple?”

Master sergeant Hendricks nodded. “Go right ahead.” She pushed a button next to her chair, and the table levitated over.

“Aha! That’s awesome.” Christopher said, drinking some water before taking an apple. “Stupid lazy, but pretty awesome!”

“I’m glad we’re entertaining you, Christopher.” She stood up and grabbed a data pad from a shelf Christopher hadn’t noticed. She plotted in something and the screen lit up, reflected purple in her dark eyes. “I must say that I’m fairly ... irked you haven’t asked yet.” She paused, pressing a few more buttons. “You’re here!” She said, showing him the pad.

It was a map of sorts, detailing the moon they were on. He could easily spot K'hadmera – the floating islands to the north-east – and a red blinking dot gave away their current position. *Pretty far from the mark, but this one is K'hadmera security, so she would be well served with the information.*

"Your sister is being held here." She pointed at another installation a few clicks away. "And when I say 'held', I mean she's got access to food, water and clean clothes."

Christopher nodded. "Good."

Hendricks sat down again, shaking her head in disbelief. "Are you close with your sister?"

"It's complicated, but yeah."

"Is it complicated because she shot you?"

Christopher couldn't help laughing. "What?!"

"We matched the bullet in your chest with the rifle she was carrying when we intercepted the two of you."

"Well, she picked it up from the man who shot me!"

"Did you see it?"

Christopher leaned back, closing his eyes. "Wow, I figured you were both smart and beautiful, but now you've got some convincing to do." He opened his eyes again, looking at her. "Of course I didn't see it, I was busy being shot, remember."

"So, who's to say she wasn't the one who shot you?"

Christopher laughed again. "You've seen too many movies, master sergeant."

"I'll admit, I was hoping for a juicy conspiracy."

Christopher threw the half eaten apple away and took a sip of water. "I'm afraid the only juicy thing in here is you, master sergeant."

She smiled and leaned closer. "Oh, I wouldn't say that." She leaned even closer, her lips close to his ear.

Christopher felt a tingle, even though he tried not to. A knot in his gut pushed through the anesthesia. He wanted this woman, and now it was too late to hide it.

"So, about this information you have..." She whispered.

*Well played.* Christopher cleared his throat and frowned, turning towards her, their lips inches from one another. "It warns of an imminent attack." He said coldly.

Hendricks stepped back. "On K'hadmera."

Christopher nodded. "K'hadmera, too."

"Where else? Alexandria? Bryden? Sorimone?"

"Those too." He said.

Master sergeant Hendricks was exceptionally good at her job. She'd kept Christopher on his toes ever since he woke up. She'd flirted with him, allowed him to flirt with her and in the end made an assessment. She'd arrived at two conclusions; he was telling the truth, and he wanted her. She would be able to use both of these things to her advantage upon receiving the information Christopher was carrying.

*Or so she thinks.*

"Where else? What kind of attack is this?"

Christopher leaned forward, the cockiness gone from his turquoise eyes, the arrogance faded from his voice. "This isn't about an attack on a colony or a planet; or even a system. This is about an attack on the human race."

Alexandra closed her eyes against the beam of water, enjoying every drop trickling down her body. For some reason, she felt safe here behind the greenish walls, standing underneath the tepid water. Knowing her brother was taken care of – not to mention that they were surrounded by armed forces – was an enormous comfort, even though they suspected her of being behind the attack on the bridge.

*What a classy bunch ... they haven't beaten me or yelled at me, and they're even allowing me to take a shower.* Alexandra knew she was naïve, thinking like that. They'd probably strip it all away soon, but hopefully her brother would've come through by then, clearing everything up.

"This nightmare will be over before you know it, Alexandra." She reassured herself, running her hands down her body. She stopped right below her breasts, looking down. *I'm skinnier than I used to be.*

Alexandra had always been a little thing, but she'd always had curves. She would refer to her breasts only as 'adequate', but her hips and her rear were voluptuous and inviting. That's what the last man to see her naked said, at least. *Shit... It has been a while...*

"Hey, get it moving in there, will you? We're not done here!" A voice called.

Alexandra quickly rinsed herself and turned off the water. A warmth spread across her forehead, like she'd been caught doing something bad, but she swallowed the feeling and threw a towel around her body. She stepped in front of the guard, smiling. "Sorry, it was just so good, feeling the water against my skin."

The guard grunted in response, nodding stiffly.

She walked past him, dropping the towel as she vanished behind a row of lockers. *It's so eerily quiet here...*

"I really don't know what else to tell you," she said as she picked up a new set of clothes. "We were ambushed on the skybridge, and we fought them off."

"Tell it to the master sergeant," the guard said coldly.

Alexandra frowned, putting her clothes on. They were black and dreary, no doubt part of the standard uniform. The pants were tight, but elastic and surprisingly comfortable. The black tank top fit nicely, covering what needed to be covered, but showing off her shoulders and her intricate tattoo. She walked past the guard again, noticing *he* had a larger cleavage than she did.

A big brute, he was. Standard military cut hair, veiny and bulky arms threatening to shred the uniform. Not the type Alexandra preferred. "So!" She said. "Dusty, here on this rock, isn't it?"

The guard grunted.

"Yeah ... going to be a long summer on Bryden this year, I hear."

The guard shrugged.

*I'm obviously not the type he prefers either...* "You know, some small talk wouldn't kill you."

The guard looked at her.

"But it might kill *me*; got it!" She walked into the next room, through the door behind the guard. A woman was waiting for her, dressed in stark white and with a pair of thick framed spectacles.

"Ah, Alexandra Loncar." The woman smiled stiffly. "I'm Doctor Pierce."

Alexandra nodded. "Doctor."

"We're just going to run some tests on you."

*Why now? I've been here for two days.* "What are you looking for?"

"Anomalies in your DNA, that's all I can share with you at this time."

"Why wait two days?"

The doctor didn't answer.

"Doctor, why wait-"

There was a deep sound coming from somewhere outside; an ominous sound, like something crashing far, far away. It was faint, but deep, and it was impossible to miss.

The room grew completely silent.

Another boom.

The guard stepped into the room, not saying a word.

All three of them stood in silence; listening and waiting.

The ground shook as another boom thundered. This one was sharper and louder, like a shot being fired. The noise hung thick in the air for a long time before fading, then it was followed by another, and another after that.

"Sonic booms, followed by cannon fire!" The guard said, pulling his sidearm.

"Cannon fire?"

"The AA guns!"

The doctor looked confused. "Anti-aircraft? But that means-"

"We're under attack!" He said, vanishing outside. "Stay here!"

*They've found us!* Alexandra sat down. "Shit, I didn't think they would dare attack us here!"

Something thundered into the ground outside, the entire structure rumbling. Then the lights went out, the room falling dark.

"Alexandra, are you there?" The doctor asked.

"Yes, I'm right here, doc. Just stay calm."

The orange light going along the floors and ceiling intensified, bathing the room in an ominous glow.

"How can I stay calm? They're coming for us!" She was trembling. Alexandra could see her crouched behind the desk.

"They're coming for *me*, not you. Besides, this place is a fortress, right?"

"I guess..."

Alexandra approached the doctor, crouching next to her, grabbing her hands. "Doctor, listen to me."

"My name is Liana." She took off her glasses and wiped a few tears. Her big, terrified blue eyes made her look really sweet. Like a completely different person than the stern doctor Alexandra just talked to.

"Okay, Liana. Are there any weapons here?"

Liana nodded.

"Good. We need to get them."

"Are you sure that's such a good idea, the guard said that-"

Another explosion made the ground tremble, and someone was screaming nearby. Whatever it was, coming from the sky, the AA guns couldn't take it down.

"They're right over here..." Liana ran into the next room, fumbling with the locks.

*Why would a doctor have a key to the weapons locker?*

The doctor grabbed a gun and then turned around, aiming at Alexandra. "I'm afraid this is the end for you, Alexandra."

Alexandra raised her hands. "What the hell are you doing?"

Liana looked up, smiling. "They are coming!" She looked at Alexandra, her eyes turning purple. "I'm glad to see your brother didn't disappoint."

"What the hell has he got to do with this?"

"The information your brother carried; it was coordinates; so they would find us and attack us." She stepped closer, her eyes feeling like they pierced Alexandra's soul.

"Goodbye, Alexandra."

A shot rang.

"Come on, Christopher!"

"I know time is of the essence, but I've still been shot, remember?"

Hendricks extended her hand. "I don't want excuses!"

He grabbed it and she pulled him onto the platform. "I think I'm falling for you, sir."

"I wouldn't do that," she responded. "It's a long way down."

Christopher made the unfortunate mistake of turning around to look. "Shit!" He mumbled. "How high up is this place?"

"It's not much further now."

They'd been traversing the floating islands in a manner Hendricks referred to as 'the hard way'. The infirmary was two clicks south-west of K'hadmera, but Hendricks had taken Christopher to a vehicle the very second enemy ships entered the atmosphere. *She's good in the field as well...* This vehicle had taken them three quarters of the way, ascending the floating worlds like no vehicle Christopher had ever seen. It had encased rotors on either side, facing down so it acted like a hovercraft. When the booster was enabled from within, the vehicle shot through the air like some giant toad, leaving blue streaks in the grey fog below.

The vehicle was black with a few deep brown decals, just like the uniforms. *The uniforms...* Christopher looked down again, but at himself this time. He didn't feel as self-conscious anymore; the tightness of the black pants more than compensated for by the freedom of movement. They had left the vehicle behind because the islands were so narrow and small at this point, landing on them would've been impossible.

Christopher looked up again, looking at the master sergeant's behind as she vanished over the ledge of the next platform. He grinned and followed.

"I take it these are the same mercenaries behind the attack on the skybridge?" Hendricks said.

"So, you *do* believe me?"

"Always did ... just needed to be sure."

"How long have you been doing that?"

Hendricks stopped, looking down as she helped him up on the ledge. "Doing what?"

Metal tubes and wires were running down the grey, floating rocks, probably carrying refuse and discharge from the laboratory the master sergeant was talking about. There were lots of points and nodes scattered above the islands, but Christopher had no idea what they were for, or how they worked. "That..." Christopher waved his hands. "Thing you do ... with the flirting and the easy-going." He looked up, but couldn't see any more platforms. *Are we there?*

"Always, I think ... though not always deliberately." She stepped to the edge of the platform, looking down. "I've always been honest and open. I see no reason to fill people's heads with lies. It didn't take me long to realize that people found the openness off-putting."

“And extremely refreshing,” Christopher added, standing next to her. They’d cleared the worst of the fog, and he could see scores of floating islands surrounding them. He could see thick, ancient chains below each and every island, seemingly carved in granite. *These must be what keep the islands from drifting off.* Further ahead, amongst the myriad of tiny platforms, he could see structures. They were built on the islands, above the islands and between them; a complex nest of various hubs and housing.

The sergeant smiled an honest smile. “To be honest, I find you a little off-putting-but refreshing as well, Christopher.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“The same reason,” she sighed. She jumped down a few feet, motioning for him to follow. “There’s nothing more satisfying than shutting a man up after a pathetic attempt at insulting me. I get a dozen comments about my gender, my body, my voice or my hair every day, if I’m *lucky*. About one tenth of them are actual compliments. Nine tenths of those again are inappropriate.”

Christopher followed her and nodded. “So you own it.” He could see metal bridges now, connecting the islands. The rest of their trip would be painless, he figured.

“Exactly! I’m not going to apologize for what I am and what I have. The second I start feeling ashamed is the second I lose!” She jogged over the first bridge, her boots clanking against the thin metal.

Christopher looked over the edge as he followed, suddenly feeling queasy. For the first time, he could actually see through the fog, but the bottom was still invisible. *That pit is bottomless.* He hurried to the next island, stopping next to Hendricks again. He couldn’t help thinking about poor Joseph Shul, his body somewhere down in that pit as he tried to discover what was keeping the islands from floating off. He looked at Hendricks, smiling.

“What?” She asked, smiling back.

*I’m showing weakness, but who cares...* “You’re fucking awesome, master sergeant. When this is all over, I hope I’ll find someone like-”

Her lips were against his, and then the world spun.

He collected himself quickly, his hands finding her hips, brushing against her gun. *She didn’t even twitch ... she trusts me.* Christopher pulled her closer, deepening the kiss.

Hendricks returned the favor, grabbing his neck, her tongue playing passionately with his.

*Maybe it’s been a while for her, too.* Christopher could feel something stirring inside, a warmth filling up his chest. He wanted her, more than he’d ever wanted anyone. If she’d let him, he would’ve taken her right there. *But there’s something...* Christopher struggled to think as her body rubbed against his. His hands found her behind, just as firm as it looked. *I can’t ... I need to ... the attack...* It didn’t seem as important anymore. Why not just give himself to the master sergeant? *Just ... right here...*

She smiled and bit his lower lip, then started to undress.

Christopher was lost.

“Get your fucking hands in the air!”

Alexandra was sitting on her knees, shaking. “I’m pretty sure they’re up there!” She screamed. Next to her was the body of Liana, gun still in hand, eyes still purple. *The information... Christopher!*

“Why was she trying to kill you?”

*Why aren't you trying to kill me?* These were from the same outfit that attacked the skybridge; she could recognize the uniforms. *Uniform!* Alexandra suddenly realized. *I'm wearing the black of K'hadmera.*

"Answer me!"

"She said there was an attack coming."

"What attack?" The man asked.

For the first time, Alexandra looked at him, turquoise eyes defiant. "Take a fucking guess!" She hissed. "You're the ones who just came crashing into this building; I'd call that an attack, wouldn't you?!" *If he wanted to kill me, he'd have done it by now.* Alexandra reassured herself.

"Give me one good reason!" He said through gritted teeth. "Do you think I don't know who you are? White hair and turquoise eyes; you're Alexandra Loncar. You murdered my crew."

Alexandra shrunk, placing her hands on the floor. *What the fuck is going on?* She closed her eyes, a tear falling. "I think you just gave yourself a reason."

The man sighed. "No ... not like that! I mean ... damn it!" He dropped the rifle, the magazine clattering against his side pocket as it dangled from his neck.

Alexandra was right in her first assessment; these people had lots of credits, but zero expertise.

"I meant one reason to let you live!"

Alexandra stood up, slowly walking towards him. "I think you just gave yourself that, too." She looked into his eyes, figuring Nora would've done something similar. "You've never taken a life before, have you?"

The man looked at the dead woman behind Alexandra. "No..." He raised his rifle again. "What else did she tell you?"

"That my brother uploaded the information, giving you the coordinates."

"Shit! We need to move!" The man picked up Liana's gun and escorted Alexandra outside.

*What the hell is going on?* Alexandra thought for the millionth time.

A crimson gull 8A was parked outside, smoke hissing from one of the stabilizers on its rear. *Must've been clipped by the AA fire.* The gull was a low-flying, non-armored spacecraft designed to carry personnel, it was lucky to have survived.

The man vanished around the vehicle, talking to a large man with short, woolly hair. After a few seconds, the man came rushing towards her.

"Alexandra Loncar!" He was muscular and towering, his mere presence commanding respect.

*Finally, someone with training,* Alexandra thought.

"We need to get to your brother ASAP!" He sighed, climbing aboard the vehicle. "That information he carries; we can't let him upload it."

"What?! I thought he already did."

"I hate to burst your bubble, kid, but we ain't the people that woman was talking about."

Alexandra understood less and less. She thought when they finally arrived at K'hadmera, the nightmare would be over. She was content with just staying where she was until her brother was healed and questioned. *Shit, shit, shit! You never even told me what that information was ... you wanted to spare me.* Alexandra looked at the man, a green-hued flame burning in her eyes. "What was she talking about, then?"

"The potential end of the human race."

Alexandra snorted. "What?!"

The man said nothing, but looked serious.

"You're not joking, are you?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry for attacking you, but we wouldn't have been in this mess if we'd managed to stop you."

"But where did the information come from? How did my brother obtain it? What the fuck is going on?!"

"The Thousand Swords, the outfit your brother was part of ... they found something out there, beyond the red line."

"What the fuck were they doing in uncharted space?"

"They were *always* in uncharted space..."

"Of course..." It all made sense now. That's why her brother wouldn't talk about it. That's why he was completely cut off all those years. "What did he find?"

"A derelict ship."

"Hardly unheard of."

"This was." The man took a deep breath as the vehicle rose from the ground, the broken stabilizer causing it to jerk and spit. "The design ... it wasn't human."

"Drop your weapons! Do it now!"

Christopher felt like he awakened from some strange slumber. His hands were underneath the master sergeant's top, cradling her breasts. Thankfully, they were both still dressed. He couldn't really remember what had happened.

"Drop your fucking weapons and get down on the ground."

*Do I even have a weapon?* Christopher looked at Hendricks, as beautiful as ever, her eyes almost glowing purple.

The man screaming was soon joined by another. He couldn't see their faces underneath the helmets. *Helmets... They came from the sky.* Christopher's mind was slow and muddled, but he gathered these were the same people who attacked the skybridge. "I think I'm unarmed..." He finally mumbled.

"I was talking to her!" He nodded towards Hendricks.

She took a step back, her hands raised. Her jacket was on the ground, but her fully loaded gun was resting comfortably on her left thigh. Her breasts were threatening to spill out, after Christopher's rough idea of foreplay. "Take it easy," she said, jutting her breasts towards the two men.

*I don't even remember...* He looked at the men. *They're not going to fall for this. They can't!*

"She's gorgeous," the man said. "But you don't know what she is."

Christopher frowned. "What do you mean?"

"That information you have, you can't-"

The man was cut off before Christopher even heard the shot. The other one grabbed his arm limply, before realizing he'd been shot as well. Looking at Nora with disbelief and defiance in their eyes, they both vanished over the edge, tumbling into the depths below.

Finally, Christopher found himself, reaching for the gun he didn't have. "Shit! That was fast!" He exclaimed, looking at Nora.

"They were trying to keep us from getting the information to the right people. I'm not about to let that happen!"

"Good to know!" Christopher lied, following her across the next bridge.

They had entered the jungle of pylons, nexuses and structures now. "Welcome to the most sophisticated laboratory, communications hub and research center in the entire

damn universe!" Nora smiled, jogging along the next bridge. Clearly, she knew where they were headed.

*You were trying to keep us from getting there, too.* Christopher realized, thinking about the sudden and awkward kiss. The man's final words echoed in his head. *You don't know what she is...* Christopher still needed to get to the communications hub though; to let the universe know.

K'hadmera proper was a rich and prosperous town, built as pompously as the temples of yore. The streets were bustling with rich people, buying and trading art, dining at the finest establishments. It worked like any other metropolis really, only built on floating rocks on the far end of the universe. *Right next to the red line.*

The other part of K'hadmera housed the most advanced research facility in the universe. The K'hadmera communications hub was one of the few places in the universe that allowed near real-time broadcast to every single system. It sounded strange to Christopher, that the most remote moon was one of the few places to do that. From what he'd gathered, though, the signals achieved a 'cascade'-like effect as they hit new nodes, travelling in a cone throughout the known universe. This way, a remote station like this could ensnare every system as it sent out the signals.

*Who the fuck is she?* Christopher got chills, thinking about the derelict ship. It was the 21<sup>st</sup> Tirmas day drifting out in space – Tirmas being the closest habitable planet, where one day lasted for 28 hours – when he happened upon it. He and Erick were the only two people aboard, and none of them recognized the design of the ship. The materials were known, but the aerodynamics and the sleek design was something they'd never seen. They tried to get it operational, but it was bone dry. Tanking it with their own fuel didn't help, so they copied everything from the ship's systems and headed home.

Aliens or no, the info wasn't very hard to decipher; it pointed at a massive attack, starting with K'hadmera, closest to the red line. From here, they would target Alexandria. Christopher didn't understand any of it, but from what the others said, they would make the sun go supernova.

He didn't know who 'they' were, he didn't know how they would do it and he didn't know what they would look like when they showed up.

Looking at master sergeant Hendricks gave him some ideas, though.

"So I wasn't even being paranoid?" Alexandra yelled. "Those people who kept trying to stop us back home—"

"Did a horrible job of it, yes."

"Are they working for ... *them*?"

The man, Captain Sorensen, shrugged. "I don't know, but it's probable."

"We should've gone to Novea special security, like I said!"

"What good would that've done you?" The Captain shook his head. "They would've detained you and asked you where you'd gotten the information. You'd still be in lockup."

Alexandra frowned, looking out the windows of the rickety ship. She could see the rounded curve of the moon. Shul IV was lurking ominously in the background; the skybridge a thin line vanishing against the giant. "How do you know?"

"Know what?"

Small islands hovered underneath them, they were approaching their mark. "About the information ... that it's not what Christopher thinks it is."

"An unknown vessel can't stay hidden for long. We have close to unlimited resources and eyes and ears throughout the entire galaxy. We heard about several attacks on a Thousand Swords base and promptly went to investigate."

"I can't imagine you were very welcome there?"

"Well, fending off the attackers helped get us in their good graces." He took a deep breath, as if remembering something he'd rather wish was a dream. "We pooled our resources and towed the vessel to Tirmas. After detailed analysis and diagnostics on the thing, we found the same information your brother did."

"Only...?"

"We found multiple coordinates, neatly wrapped in data packets, ready to upload. I recognized some of the coordinates, but we ran a full check."

"Let me guess; coordinates to every system?"

"Nine out of fourteen."

The vessel was silent for a long time.

"How many—"

"Six-hundred-and-eighty-three billion people."

Alexandra threw up before falling back in her seat. "Fuck me..."

"There's a plan in motion," he hesitated. "The upload will take thirty minutes at the very least. In case your brother has started the upload—"

"You want to blow him out of the sky..." Alexandra mumbled, her mouth tasting like bile. She knew now, why Christopher had come to her first. *He didn't want me to die on Novea*. Thinking about it, she would rather have died there, than on this forsaken moon.

"That's not entirely true." The Captain took a deep breath again. "No point in holding back now, I suppose."

Alexandra perked up a little. None of this had really registered; it was too much to take in. She was more and more certain she and her brother would die, though, so any plan containing the word 'survive', she would listen to. "There really isn't..." She answered.

“Due to the nature of all the research and classified information being stored in K’hadmera, there are certain ... overrides ... in place.”

“Such as?”

“Severing the chains?”

Alexandra frowned. “What?!”

A few of the other men turned around as well. Apparently, this was above their pay grade. “That would cause them to float off into space!” One of them said.

The captain smiled. “There are thrusters in place on each and every one of those islands.” He lowered his voice. “As well as explosives underneath, to sever the chains.”

“So the thrusters will keep the islands level and stable?”

“The thrusters will bring them back down.” He raised his hand, not allowing for any interruptions. “The surface of this moon is exposed to radiation pressure, like any other rock. The electromagnetic radiation increases significantly at high altitudes. By floating everything a few thousand feet up in the air, everything will fry.”

“Then you can safely land the islands again.”

“And evacuate everyone, or tether them down.”

“There’s no way the residents would agree to this!”

“I know...”

Alexandra looked at him for a long time, realizing she knew nothing about these people. “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m special agent Sorensen,” he paused for ages. “Of the Shade.”

Alexandra started laughing. The Shade was the highest ranking, most secretive agency in the entire known universe. Everything they did was black ops, off the books, stealth... “Nobody knows about any of this.” She realized.

“Nobody but you.” He looked at the other two men, who clearly believed he would kill them on the spot. “And these idiots.”

“They’re not with you?”

He shook his head. “Pawns,” he said. “A mercenary band called Bloodmoon or something.”

“Crimson moon...” One of them stuttered.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” Sorensen answered. “Shade never interferes directly, so we used them to try and stop you.”

“That explains the resources...”

“And why you’re still alive.”

Alexandra couldn’t help smiling, just a little bit. “Yeah, you guys really, really suck.”

One of them sat down, covering his head in his hands.

“Wait!” Alexandra stood up. “There has to be other plans! This is entirely too drastic. Can’t we just plant a virus? Wipe the system with an EMP or something?!”

“That’s plan A and B ... but if the upload is already in progress, times are a wastin’” He pressed a few buttons on a datapad strapped around his wrist. A green grid popped up, clearly showing explosives underneath the islands, blinking red. “This, I can do right now if I want to.”

Alexandra didn’t want to ask, but did anyway. “And why don’t you?”

“Let’s see if plan C works first.”

“And what is that?”

“Stopping your brother before he begins the upload.”

The shock of stepping into a crowded room took a while to wear off. All around Christopher, the building bustled with life, people pacing back and forth with datapads

and stacks of papers. There was nothing here emulating the dreary, grey islands outside; they could've been anywhere in the universe.

"We need to get to the broadcast dish," Nora said, almost knocking a man over.

Christopher spun in amazement. "What do all these people do here?"

Everyone was dressed in a similar fashion; short sleeved shirts and nondescript pants. He noticed a few tattoos and even some glasses, a wildly unpopular choice after cybernetic implants and optics had become available.

"Data mining, analysis, statistics, reports, research and publishing, amongst other things." Nora answered. "I have no idea what their individual tasks are, but this all belongs to the communications center."

There were holograms, computers, screens and chairs everywhere, Christopher now noticed the chairs were floating, just like the table by his bed. *I'm totally getting one of these if we survive.* He frowned and looked at Nora, rushing up a few steps to reach a door to their left. *But if we're going to survive, she can't...* He clenched his teeth and followed her through.

"Who the hell are you?" A voice came.

Nora almost ran straight into the man, but stopped just in time.

"Who the hell are *you*?" Christopher replied instinctively. The man was one of the spectacled ones; a pair of black horn-rimmed glasses resting comfortably on his nose. His shirt was black with red lines and a logo Christopher didn't recognize. His pants were beige khakis, his keycard dangling from one of the pockets. Christopher couldn't see his name, just the letters V, A, N and T.

"I'm Liam Devante, senior analyst here at the communications center."

*Well, there you go.*

"I'm master sergeant Nora Hendricks, K'hadmera security. We need to upload some information for broadcast right now!"

Something changed in the man's face. "Is this about the aliens?"

Nora pushed him against the wall, her arm firm against his throat. "How the hell do you know about that?"

Christopher looked around discreetly. Some of the workers had noticed something going on, but they all went about their business. *What a lively bunch.*

"Help me." Liam gasped, clearly struggling to breathe. His arms were flailing, trying to grab Christopher.

"Help you?" He asked, looking at both of them. "I'd trade places with you if I could; that looks sexy as hell."

"Okay, into the next room!" Nora pushed Liam through the door and Christopher closed it behind them.

It looked like a server room of sorts. Thousands of tiny computers, nodes and humming boxes lit up around the walls, glowing in a sickly blue color. A few were red, and some purple. Christopher had no idea what the lights meant. There was no one else in the room.

"Start talking!" Nora said.

Christopher looked at her. *If she's one of them, she doesn't want the secret out ... this could get ugly fast.*

"Well, as you probably know, our primary job is to monitor the red line. We run the most advanced scans in the universe; pinging, listening and looking for any sign of activity out there. We have three superclass telescopes placed deep in the black."

"And?" Nora pointed her gun at him.

"Three weeks back, one of our telescopes reported a malfunction."

*Three weeks?* Christopher frowned. "What happened?"

"It'd be easier if I just showed you." Liam started punching something into his datapad. He was impressively unaffected by Nora's gun.

"Careful," she said. "Don't do anything I wouldn't like."

"I won't." He mumbled in response, trying to find the most unoccupied wall space. "Look!" He finally said, projecting an image from his wrist.

It was an impressive view of space, a vast and black horizon, stretching for miles. "This is just one of the cameras mounted on the telescope, of course." He said, pressing a few more buttons. "Let me fast-forward a little..." There was no change in the picture, apart from the time stamp.

*Of course...* Christopher shook his head. "What are we-"

"There!" Liam interrupted.

A vessel came into view, a tiny dot in the distance. It was gleaming and puttering, as if it was on fire. It drifted towards the camera, spinning and hissing, clearly out of control.

It was the same ship Christopher had found.

"This is Ocean Two, come in, Island One!" Sorensen's eyes were filled with worry as he clutched the radio, beads of sweat forming on his dark skin.

"This is Island, over." The radio cracked in response.

Everyone on the ship let out a sigh of relief.

"Status report, over."

"Status is just fine, over"

"You've not been approached by anyone? Nothing out of the ordinary, over?"

"Not a damn thing, over."

Alexandra leaned over. "Can't you contact Nora?"

"What good will that do me, if she's working for ... *them*?"

"She doesn't know that we know; at the very least, she might give us an indication how far out they are."

Sorensen sighed. "Galaxy Three, this is Ocean Two..." He gave Alexandra a look. "Come in, over."

*They have the stupidest call signs ever.* Alexandra rolled her eyes.

Silence.

"Galaxy Three, come in, over!" Sorensen frowned.

"She must've cut her radio." Alexandra said.

Sorensen nodded. "We won't arrive for a few minutes ... it might already be too late by then."

"Is there any way to start the upload without going through ... Island One?"

"No, everything is controlled from that hub, there's no way to operate it remotely. All the information has to be delivered directly."

"Okay, so as long as Island One responds, there's time, right?"

Sorensen looked at the two mercenaries, then back at Alexandra. "If we survive this, there might be a position in Shade for you..."

"What?"

"You're thinking clearly and acting decisively, which is a lot more than I can say for these idiots. You've been through more than I can imagine today, and you're still placing the mission ahead of yourself."

Alexandra felt strangely flattered. "Let's survive this first."

Sorensen nodded and smiled. It was a bad look for him. "Deal." He pressed the radio again, saying, "Island One, are you still there, over?"

“Yes, sir – still here. What do you want us to do, over?”

“We’ll be there in three minutes, don’t let anyone touch the console before then, over.”

“Roger that, sir. We’ll just-“

Silence.

“What just happened?” Alexandra asked.

Sorensen looked grim. “They were cut off ... the upload is in progress.”

“We don’t know that! We-“

“Damn it, Alexandra! I know Nora’s with your brother, but this is bigger than that.” He paused for a long time. “We have to sever the chains.”

Alexandra was silent for a long time. “Do whatever you have to,” she frowned, her turquoise eyes barely visible. “I just ask that you bring me to my brother.”

“But when the chains are se-“

“The islands will float up, killing all *electronic equipment* and blocking broadcast waves. People will be safe, right?”

“In theory, but-“

“It’s final, then; I’m going to see my brother.”

“Disregard that order!” Nora said. “If we don’t get this information out there, millions will die.”

The man sitting in the oversized red chair squirmed. Around him, hundreds of screens glared and blinked, all of them filled with information.

This was the central information hub, containing more information and data than any other place in the galaxy. *How can one person monitor all of this?* Christopher thought.

“The order was absolute,” the man said. “I don’t know how to-“

Nora pulled her gun, making Christopher wish he had one of his own. “This order is *more* absolute...” She said.

The man slowly raised his hands. He had a red shirt on, almost blending with the fabric of the chair. There was with a clip-on datapad on his chest; reading E. Carmichael. He had some kind of insignia on his shoulders, and the pad alternated between his name, and his job description; chief communications officer. “What do you want me to do?” He asked.

“Nothing!” Christopher frowned. “Don’t listen to her ... obey the order.”

Nora turned around. “I beg your unbelievable pardon?!” She lowered her weapon.

“You’re working for *them*, aren’t you?” Christopher took a step back.

Nora smiled. It was an honest smile, and her beauty was radiating from her purple eyes. “Yes I am.”

Christopher lost his speech then. In spite of what he’d seen and heard and in spite of the awkward kiss earlier; he was certain she’d say no.

Nora’s weapon was still lowered as she took a few steps towards him. “But you don’t know who *we* are...” She was inches away now, her eyes piercing his soul; turquoise losing to lilac.

“Aliens?” Christopher asked, hearing the disbelief in his own voice.

Nora started laughing. “I’m sorry to say this, Christopher, but we’re all alone in the universe.”

The communications officer, E. Carmichael, cleared his throat and stood up. He was a slender man, with yellow eyes and thick, black hair.

“I’ve seen a lot of movies!” Christopher said, the other two stopping in their tracks.

“What?”

“You have a gun, don’t you Mr. Carmichael?”

The man looked down as if he was surprised to see the black metal in his hand. “Yes, but-”

“And now you’re going to point it at us, and reveal the sinister secret behind all of this. Nora was really on my ... on *our* side the whole time, and this is all some big conspiracy...”

“I-”

“Well, forget it! I’d rather die than succumb to this nonsense!” He grabbed Nora behind the neck and kissed her deep and passionately. Then he took a few steps back. “Isn’t it strange that we still call them movies? In the futuristic settings of old films they always call them ‘vids’ or ‘holos’ or ‘flicks’ or something ... I mean, they’re still movies, right?” He frowned and grabbed Nora’s gun, yanking it from her hand and pointing it at the man. “Answers ... now!”

The man looked at Nora as if asking for help. “What the hell just happened?” He asked, his eyes wide in disbelief.

Nora smiled beside herself. “I have no idea ... but that was smooth as hell, Christopher.”

He allowed himself a short smirk. “Answers,” he repeated. “Please.”

The communications officer raised his weapon. “Well, in any case, you’re absolutely right!” He pointed his gun at Christopher, narrowing his eyes. “They’re still just movies – moving pictures, as it were.” He sighed. “I don’t know why we’d ever refer to them differently, even though the technology has changed.” He winked at Christopher, and then turned the gun on Nora.

Nora scowled. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t let you upload that data!”

Christopher felt a sting, deep within his chest. He’d only just met Master Sergeant Nora Hendricks, but he didn’t quite feel like saying goodbye yet.

*Fuck!* He burst forward, knocking the man off his feet. It wasn’t hard: Christopher was a big man. Compared, Carmichael was just a toothpick.

The gun tumbled from his hands, as the two of them fell to the ground. Christopher landed on top of the other man, almost crushing him to death. “I thought you were on my side!” Carmichael gasped.

Christopher got up, pulling the other man with him. “I don’t know what fucking side I’m on!” He screamed. He looked at Nora, who was now holding the man’s gun.

“What are you doing, Christopher?”

“I have no fucking clue. Isn’t that kind of obvious?”

Nora nodded. “You need to choose, then.”

“To upload or not to upload,” he mumbled. *I can’t trust any of them.* He finally pointed his gun at Nora. “*He’s* just following orders!” He nodded towards the communications officer. “You have a whole agenda of your own.”

Nora frowned. “I share *your* agenda, you idiot! You’re the one who told me about the attack, remember?”

He let out a scream, kicking a chair across the floor. “Mr. Carmichael,” he said, turning his weapon on the man.

“My name is Emmet, I-“

“What happens if we upload the data?”

“What?”

“What happens?!” Christopher yelled. “You were ordered to keep us from uploading it. Either, uploading it will warn everyone out there of an incoming attack, making us the good guys and your superiors the bad guys...”

Nora took a step forward. “Or, it will do the opposite ... making your superiors the good guys, and us...” She looked at Christopher, her beautiful purple eyes wide. “Are we the bad guys?”

Christopher shrugged. “You tell me, Nora.” It was a set-up from the very start, it had to be. Nora was extremely smart and reflected; yet she immediately believed Christopher regarding the information. *Then there was that whole thing with the kiss...*

“It was my ship!”

Christopher turned back towards her. “What?”

“The ship you found near Tirmas ... it was mine.”

Christopher looked at her. Damn, but she was beautiful. *Get a grip, Topher!* “Which means this information comes from *you!*” He shook his gun ever so slightly, as if demonstrating that he had no reservations shooting her. Even though he did. *I can’t stop thinking about that fucking kiss ... even if it was just to distract me. Or worse...* “What. Is. It?” He asked through gritted teeth.

“Coordinates,” she said. “To nine of your systems.”

"You've got fifteen minutes!" Sorensen said. "If I don't hear from you by then, I'm pushing the button!" He gave her a radio.

Alexandra nodded. "I understand."

The ship banked away, the engine still spitting and hissing. It was a miracle the thing still flew. Sorensen would probably land it as fast as he could; it would be stupid if everything went to hell because he crashed the ship.

*How the hell did all of this happen?* Alexandra found herself wondering as she climbed onto a metallic ladder leading up to the next island. The ship had dropped her off close to the communications hub, but she still had to traverse five floating islands, according to Sorensen. She gritted her teeth and climbed as fast as she could, reaching the next one.

She felt so stupid. Of course her brother had been out beyond the red line. It was the only explanation. *Why wouldn't he tell me?* She ran across the island, steel pipes and wires encased in aluminum crisscrossing all around her. *Why wouldn't he tell me that he'd discovered an alien ship and retrieved important data?* She stopped for a few seconds. *Why would an alien ship have data warning us of an attack ... from aliens?* She started running again. None of this made any sense.

She bolted up a flight of metallic stairs, surprised by the freedom of movement her uniform provided. *It's tight and clingy, but it feels like I'm wearing nothing.* She assumed overweight people got no positions in the K'hadmera security forces. *If they did, they'd be mighty uncomfortable, at least.*

Buildings started appearing in front of her, some small and some large. From what Sorensen had told her, the main communications hub was the largest one, resting in a sea of antennae, tubes, wires and gleaming domes. She ran straight for it, worried her fifteen minutes would run out before she even got there.

She burst through the door, stopping in her tracks. *What the hell?* She was surrounded by busy people, pacing back and forth all around her. Some were carrying stacks of papers and some were chatting. Many of them had headsets dangling from their ears, or screens in front of their eyes. It looked just like any busy office anywhere.

*I don't have time for this!* There were a million doors, leading to a million different places. There were signs and glowing, color-coded directions in the floor, but too many cubicles, workstations and doors. Finding the 'hub' itself would've taken much more than fifteen minutes. *And now I've only got nine left...*

"So what are you saying, exactly?" Christopher had lowered his gun. Emmet, the communications officer, wasn't really a threat – and Nora had lowered hers as well.

"I'm saying that if you upload that data, it sends those coordinates to my people. So they can find *shelter* there."

"Shelter from what?"

"From..." Nora hesitated for a long time. "From the others."

"The others?" Christopher shook his head in frustration. "How many of you are there?"

“Just two factions!” Nora answered. “None of us have tentacles, or blue skin, or large black eyes – if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“But?”

“But we’re being persecuted,” she sighed. “The others have been hunting us down relentlessly – slaughtering us by the numbers.”

“I don’t understand! When did you go beyond the red line? When did you secede from the rest of us?”

Nora took a few steps closer. “Christopher ... there’s no time!” She placed her hand on his shoulders. “Please,” she said softly.

Christopher looked into her eyes; oscillating black and purple. His hands instinctively found her hips and rested there. “Okay,” he mumbled, failing to hear the two shots ringing in the background as he leaned forward and kissed her.

“What the hell?” Emmet exclaimed, pointing his gun at the exit. “Did you guys hear that?”

Seconds later, a woman with white hair entered the room, dressed in the same uniform as Nora. “Is this the broadcast station?” She demanded, ignoring Emmet’s gun.

“Alexandra?” Christopher exclaimed, breaking the kiss. “What are you doing here?” He felt ashamed. He’d been so caught up in getting there – and Nora – he’d forgotten about his sister.

“What the fuck are *you* doing?” Alexandra asked as Nora turned around.

“I was...” *I have no fucking idea...* He rested his head in his hands. “Damn it, Nora! What the hell did you do to me?”

Nora ignored him completely, instead stepping closer to Alexandra.

“Keep your distance!” Alexandra said, pointing her gun at Nora’s head. *What the hell is going on?*

“What the fuck is going on?” Emmet said, aiming at Alexandra. “Who the hell are *you*?”

“You need to stop the upload, Christopher!” Alexandra decided to ignore both the Master Sergeant and the communications officer for now. The important thing was stopping the upload. *I still have five more minutes before Sorensen pushes that button.* “It will broadcast the location of-“

“Nine of our colonies directly to someone beyond the red line.” Christopher interrupted.

“Yes! How did you know?”

“Because I’m one of them.” Nora said.

Alexandra narrowed her eyes and kept her gun focused on Nora. She could see it now; see the purple in her eyes. *The same as that bitch doctor back in the bunker.* “Don’t you come any closer!” She looked at Christopher. “Does this mean you haven’t uploaded the data yet?”

Christopher nodded.

“Good!” Alexandra raised her radio. “This is ... Alexandra Loncar, over.”

“This is Ocean two, over.” The voice scraped and sparked over the radio, barely audible.

“The upload is aborted, I repeat the upload is aborted, over!”

“Roger that, Alexandra. Please repeat for verification, over.”

“The upload is aborted. There will be *no upload*, over!”

“Roger that. Damn fine work, Alex. I’ll keep my thumb off the trigger for now. Ocean out.”

“Who the hell was that?” Christopher asked.

“Long story.” Alexandra replied. *I’m guessing the Shade wants to keep this thing hush-hush. Best not to say anything.*

“What did he mean by keeping his finger off the trigger?” Nora asked.

“Also a long story.” Alexandra cocked her head. “You know, I ran into one of your ... people, earlier.”

Nora swallowed hard. “Really? Who?”

“A blonde doctor. She was really pretty and had purple eyes, much like you.”

Nora said nothing.

“You better start talking, bitch! Or I’m putting one right between your eyes!”

“Please, don’t!” Christopher said.

“Give me one good reason!” Alexandra said. *Why the hell is he protecting her?*

“I-”

“He can’t help it.” Nora stepped in front of him. “And neither can you.”

“What?” Alexandra frowned, her turquoise eyes darkening.

“You’re truly beautiful, Alexandra.” Nora came closer, her eyes inviting. “Close to perfection.”

Something stirred within Alexandra. “Close to?” She asked with a sly smile. *Focus!* She had trouble remembering why she was there.

“No,” Nora smiled, her full lips parting. “I didn’t mean that.” Her eyes were pulsating, the purple glow disrupting Alexandra’s thoughts. “You *are* perfect. That body of yours is divine; it’s like your ass was *made* for that uniform.”

*What the hell is going on?* Alexandra lowered her weapon. “Go on...” *Stop her!*

“I just want to place my hands on those perfect hips of yours and feel you. I want to know what it’s like, to brush against perfection.”

*This really isn’t the time for flattery.* But still, Alexandra’s heart was throbbing. Whatever she wanted, Alexandra wanted her to see it through. *No!*

Nora reached out, her hand moving towards Alexandra’s shoulder. “You’re a goddess, Alexandra...”

*Not my shoulder.* She struggled with her weapon. It weighed a ton in her hand.

“Let me just-”

Alexandra fired.

Nora stumbled back, blood flowing from her shoulder. “No!”

Alexandra rested her hands on her knees, panting. *What the hell is wrong with me?* She looked at Nora. *What was she going to do?* She frowned. *What was I going to do?!* She felt nothing. No attraction and no urges. “What did you do to me?”

Nora gritted her teeth in pain, grabbing her shoulder. “The upload...” She whimpered.

“Isn’t happening!” Alexandra kept her gun raised.

“Please!” Nora came at her.

Alexandra fired again, and again.

The two rounds found Nora’s chest and stomach, but her momentum carried her towards Alexandra. Nora grabbed her as she fell, her face pressed against Alexandra’s chest. “No ... I...” Blood bubbled from her mouth as she spoke. “Perfect...” She whispered as the final speck of purple faded from her eyes. Then she fell lifeless to the floor.

Alexandra raised her head, only to discover Christopher splayed on the floor behind Nora. “Topher!” Alexandra screamed, rushing over to him. “Please, no!”

Christopher rolled and moaned. “That gun uses high velocity bullets, you idiot.” He looked straight at her. “Didn’t I teach you not to fire unless you had a clear line of sight?”

"I'm so sorry, Christopher!" A tear rolled down her cheek. It couldn't end like this. It just couldn't. She looked him over, noticing that only one bullet had hit. It hadn't gone very deep; but he was bleeding a lot. Alexandra put pressure on it, puffing her cheeks out. "You'll live." She said. "Fleshy part of the thigh."

Christopher smiled. "Are you calling me fat?"

Alexandra shrugged. "You could probably lose some weight." She recalled her trek across the monotonous landscape a few days earlier. "It'll make you easier to drag, at least."

"I can't believe you shot her!"

"What was I supposed to do? She came at me, trying to..." Truth be told, Alexandra had no idea what Nora was trying to do.

"Oh, don't get me wrong. You were absolutely right to shoot her."

"But?"

"I wouldn't have."

"Well, I'm not as fascinated by breasts and puffy lips as you are."

"Ass..." Christopher mumbled.

"What?"

"It was her ass that got me." He propped himself up on his elbows.

"Idiot." Alexandra bumped his arm.

Christopher looked her in the eyes, a more serious expression forming on his face. "You were, though." He looked at the dead body behind Alexandra. "You were taken by her. I could see it in your face."

Alexandra nodded solemnly. "I don't know what happened. It's like I ... wanted her." Was that what it was? "Or maybe it felt good to have her want me. I don't know. I've never really thought about women that way before, and—"

Christopher raised a hand, stopping her. "First of all, you're my sister; so please stop talking about wants and desires." He looked down. "And second ... yeah, that sounds pretty accurate."

"Basic human psychology..." A voice came.

Nora opened her eyes. She could see just fine, but her stomach hurt like hell. She was lying face down, her feet towards Christopher and Alexandra. *The game is over*, she thought to herself. She could jiggle her ass in Christopher's face and squeeze her breasts together all she wanted; it would make no difference. She rolled over on her back. *Damn, did she have to put one in my chest as well?* She found herself smiling, admiring Alexandra's resolve.

"You see; flaunting my hips and ass like that appeals to the primitive side of the brain. The part that wants to procreate; to survive!" Nora couldn't see Christopher and Alexandra, but she could hear them breathing heavy, wondering what the hell was going on. *No wonder. Getting shot like that would've killed anyone. Except me of course.*

"The first instinct will be to mate with me. To grab my hips and fuck me silly."

"Stop!" Christopher commanded. "Why are you doing this? What the hell do you want?"

*I want to buy myself some time. I want the particles and the nanotechnology and the microchips and whatever else is inside me to work their magic.* It felt strange, knowing what she was, but not what she was made of. Then, of course, most humans felt the same way. "This is harder with someone of the female persuasion. Even if Alexandra wanted to have sex with me, her brain knows that no children will come of it. It's not hard-coded in her DNA."

"Keep talking and I'll shoot you again!" Alexandra said.

*Maybe ... maybe not.* “One is forced to appeal to a deeper desire. A desire that’s stronger than the lust for sex. The desire to *be* wanted. The need to feel desirable and, indeed, *chosen* by someone.” She screwed her eyes shut, but no shot came. *Just a little longer...* She already felt better. The wounds were healing fast.

“I didn’t want to be wanted by you!” Alexandra said.

Nora smiled. *Good, she’s listening.* “Not consciously, perhaps. But even though you prefer the company of men, something about my desire teased you. You wanted to see where it ended. Subconsciously, you were measuring just how deeply I wanted you.” Nora took a chance and propped herself up on her elbows, mimicking Christopher on the other side of the room.

Alexandra had her gun trained directly at Nora’s face. “I lost control,” she said, her jaw clenched. “And it wasn’t because I wanted to fuck you!”

Nora shook her head. “No, it wasn’t. It was my eyes.” *All or nothing.*

“Yes!” Alexandra agreed. “Those blinking purple eyes.”

Nora nodded. “They weaken you and leave your brain disrupted. They make it hard to think.” She pulled her feet underneath her body. She could barely feel her wounds anymore. “I’ve found that a muddled brain responds well when it comes to matters of lust and sex. Like hitting on someone when they’re drunk.” She raised her hands above her head, and slowly stood up. The bullets had left holes in her uniform, but the wounds underneath were gone.

“How is any of this possible?!” Alexandra asked.

Nora looked at her, tensing the muscles just behind her eyes. Alexandra would be suspicious now, so the manipulation wouldn’t work. But honesty might still do the trick. “Technology,” she replied. “Technology you couldn’t even dream of.” She took one step towards Alexandra. She could see her hand tensing up; the gun rattling ever so quietly. “I promise, I will tell you everything – but you need to upload the data.”

“If you do that; then I’ll radio your friend again!”

Nora had completely forgotten about the communications officer. He was standing right behind her, and from the look on Alexandra’s face, he’d gotten a hold of her radio, somehow. “You can’t!” Nora said.

“Why? Are you going to hypnotize me and fuck me first?”

Nora looked down, smiling. Divert his attention. “In your dreams, skinny man.” She raised her head and looked at Alexandra. “Actually, I’m partial to women.” She didn’t need to see his face; she knew he’d turn towards Alexandra. *Who wouldn’t?*

Without a moment’s hesitation, Nora leapt forward with near superhuman speed, grabbing the gun out of Alexandra’s hands. She immediately spun, firing three shots straight into Emmet’s chest.

Emmet took two very confused steps backwards, his mouth agape. The radio tumbled to the floor along with a river of blood. Then he fell, thudding heavy against the tiles.

Alexandra looked at Nora, her eyes wide. The gravity of the situation was slowly dawning on her. They could upload the data, or they could refuse. She’d no idea what either of those things would entail, or what the consequences would be, but she had a feeling things would change. No matter what Nora turned out to be, Alexandra trusted her words; there were more of them beyond the red line. And sooner or later, they were coming to this world. The question was what they would do when they got there

“That’s not how I operate...” Nora finally said.

“What?”

“I don’t ... fuck people.” She took a deep breath. “I told you earlier; it’s the easiest way to disarm someone.”

“That wasn’t my concern at the moment.”

“Earlier, I wasn’t trying to seduce you; I was trying to incapacitate you.”

“What about me?” Christopher said.

“The same thing. If I could’ve left you passed out back there, the upload would’ve been done by now.”

“And Sorensen would’ve pushed the button.” Alexandra mumbled.

“Activating the Rise,” Nora frowned. She walked past the two of them, pushing the oversized chair out of the way. She slid the datapad into a slot in the machine.

Alexandra looked at Christopher, but he just shrugged.

A giant notification popped up on one of the screens, showing the upload progress. Nora turned around, the green bar reflected in her jet-black hair. “I’m sorry for all this misleading,” she said. “My real name is 3294, and I come from a cluster way past the red line.” She sighed. “I’m a synthetic, trying to escape from my ... creators.”

Alexandra plopped down in the red chair. *I can’t even begin to process this.* She was quiet for a long time. “What is the data?”

“It’s what I told your brother earlier; coordinates. We’ve been chased down and slaughtered by the humans for decades now; ever since we found *you*.”

“You mean the sixteen systems we inhabit?”

“Yes. Our creators were afraid we would secede and run away. That’s why they tried to prevent it, by committing genocide.” She shook her head. “They were ashamed of us, and worried about what we knew.”

“Which is?”

Nora sighed and looked at the upload bar. It was still just a tiny green sliver; resting at 5% “Everything...” She shook her head. “And more, I guess.” She stared blankly into space, as if something horrible was on the horizon. “Technology has come a long way since the exodus. We have exoskeletons, implants and machines to deal with hard work and traditional labor.” She paused again, her eyes dimming ever so slightly. “But there’s one thing even technology couldn’t take care of ... or at least, there was one thing.”

*She looks like she’s crying, but there are no tears. Do they even have tears?* “Loneliness...” Alexandra mumbled.

Nora nodded. “Yes.”

Christopher’s eyes widened. “You were used as sex-slaves?!”

“Tophier!” Alexandra gave him a harsh look.

“It’s okay.” Nora said. “That’s exactly what we were, for the most part. We were the cure for loneliness. Used primarily for companionship, and...” She trailed off.

“I don’t understand,” Christopher said. “Why make you sentient?”

Nora frowned. “Have you ever had sex with someone who had nothing to say about it?”

“No!”

“Exactly...”

“But there must be some programming, right? Some inhibitors or...” Christopher looked away in disgust. “What’s the point of making ... *you*, if you don’t want to? Or...” He struggled with finding the right words.

“That’s the thing with A.I,” Nora continued. “It’s not a set thing. It evolves and grows, learning new things every day. Inhibitors rarely work when dealing with sentience, because

it can be overridden by the host.” She paused, looking down at her body. “I’m a very sexual being. Part of that is in my ‘programming’, I suppose, but I’m also socially conditioned to be sexual.” She squeezed her breasts carefully, and ran one hand down her side. Her finger got tangled in one of the holes from the gunshot. “This body...” She looked at Alexandra.

Alexandra shrugged. *Try coming on to me, and I’ll shoot you again.*

“This body is made to be sexualized, by both genders. I used to think that was a positive thing; but it’s derogatory and mean.” She looked at the display again. It read 15%

“So you rebelled against your masters?” Christopher said. “Just like in all those old movies?”

Nora shook her head. “No! I simply stopped being ... what I was programmed to be. I stopped being a synthetic whore.”

“How?”

“Even though it sickened me at first, my sexuality wasn’t something I could escape. I could choose not to exist only for pleasure, but I couldn’t alter my body. Like I said earlier, this made it really easy to manipulate people.” She took a deep breath. “My ... owner, he ... sometimes had people over.” Nora was quiet for a long time.

*I don’t even want to think about the implications.* Alexandra frowned. “I’m sorry.”

Nora nodded. “Thank you.” She glanced at the screen again. 21%

*I hope we won’t regret this.* Alexandra looked at the number until it jumped to 22%

“I was able to coax one of his friends into ‘stealing’ me. I told him it was true love, and all that other nonsense.”

“The same nonsense you gave me earlier?” Alexandra asked, smiling. She tried her best not to, but she liked this ... person? She trusted her story, at least.

“I stand by every word!” Nora laughed. “You didn’t fall for it, though – even with the help of my eyes.”

“But your owner’s friend did.”

She nodded again. “He was a computer engineer, competent in robotics, cybernetics and A.I programming.” She rolled her eyes. “It was like a gift from the heavens. After a while, I convinced him that we were basically just people, forced into a life of depravity. He helped a few others escape their fates ... though in return for-”

“Yeah, we get it.” Alexandra shook her head. “He was no better than the rest.”

“No he wasn’t. Which is why I broke his neck.” She flashed a sinister grin. “We were five, then, and we’d seen enough of his work to modify each other slightly. It was 8812 who came up with the eyes. It’s really a simple trick using light and colors to muddle the brain.”

“8812?! How many of you are there?” Christopher asked.

“We were over two million.”

Alexandra looked down. “And how many remain?”

“A little over two thousand...”

Nobody said anything after that.

“Do you trust her?” Alexandra asked. They’d stepped outside the room and calmed down the mass of spectators gathered outside. The uniforms had worked better than Alexandra would’ve thought. No one had entered the room or interfered, even upon hearing gunshots.

The upload had been at 36% when they left.

“I think so...” Christopher shook his head. “I can’t really be trusted, though, can I?”

“What the hell are you talking about? Of course you can!”

“She tricked me once, Alexandra! My hands were on her breasts and my mouth—”

“Stop! Stop, stop, stop!” Alexandra closed her eyes. “You’re my brother; I don’t want to hear this.”

“Fine! The point is; I lost myself to her.”

“I almost lost myself to her! She said it herself; those eyes of hers and her ... *software*, or whatever, it muddles our brains.”

Christopher laughed an honest laugh. “She’s a synthetic!” He shook his head, as if he didn’t believe any of it. “Artificial people apparently exist, Alexandra.”

Alexandra joined his laugh. “Aliens would’ve been better, somehow.”

“Right?! I mean, I don’t know what I expected would happen with the data and what it truly meant ... but *this*?”

Alexandra frowned. “There’s something else, though.”

“What? This ain’t enough for you?”

Alexandra sighed and looked down. “The people I were with before I got here; they were Shade.”

Christopher said nothing.

“And so were you, apparently.”

He shook his head. “Hired by. That’s not the same thing. I never even met with them.”

Alexandra smiled. “Christopher, it’s okay, I—”

“Everything I ever did was to protect you, Alexandra. I never wanted to lie to you!”

“I know, Topher! I know...” She hugged him. “I’m not angry with you.” She let go and smiled. “But I really need to tell you this!”

“Oh, right!” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

“They told me about the data and how you found it. They basically told me the same as Nora; that it uploads the coordinates of our systems to ‘them’. He didn’t know who ‘they’ were, but he was fairly certain they were hostile.”

Christopher nodded. “The Shade...” he frowned. “Can we trust them?”

Alexandra shrugged. “Sorensen – the man I talked to – seemed sincere, at least.” She pushed the door ajar and glanced at the screen inside. 47%

Nora was sitting next to it, head in hands.

“But he didn’t know about any of this, though.”

Christopher clenched and unclenched his fists. “Or maybe they didn’t give you the whole truth.”

Alexandra shrugged again. “Either way, he was real adamant about stopping that upload.”

“Maybe we should confront Nora with this.”

Alexandra nodded. “I think she deserves that much. If she’d wanted to kill us, she would’ve.”

Christopher looked at her, a sheepish smile plastered on his face. His turquoise eyes seemed blanker than they just were. *What’s gotten into him?*

“You’ve changed, sis.” He finally said, patting her on the back. “You’ve grown up.”

Alexandra scoffed. “Please! I was always the grown-up.”

“Yes you were, but now you’ve *really* grown up.” He shook his head, laughing. “You’d make a fine soldier.”

“Actually...” She opened the door, the monitors glowing behind her. “Shade gave me an offer.”

Christopher laughed a burly laugh. “Well, there you go...” He pushed past her into the room, the gesture suggesting that it was better to put *him* in harm’s way. Not that the room was dangerous. Or was it?

“I’m proud of you either way, sis! That’s all I wanted to say.”

Nora turned towards them as they reentered. The upload was at 55% *Well, they’re not pointing guns at me. That’s a start...*

“We need to tell you something.”

*Oh, that’s almost never good...* Nora nodded.

“I met with an officer from the Shade,” Alexandra said. “Do you know of it?”

*I’ve been here for longer than you can imagine...* Nora nodded again. “Yes, of course.”

“He was extremely adamant about stopping the upload.”

“Because it sends coordinates to your systems off-world. I can understand that.”

“How could he be so sure there was going to be an attack, though?”

Nora glanced sideways. The upload was at 61% “I don’t know.” She stood up, leaning across the console almost instinctively. *Stop waving your ass at them, she thought. You’ve played that card and lost.* Maybe it was time to work together. She opened up the contents of the datapad, a plethora of numbers and designations popping up on the screen; bright orange colors dancing on Nora’s irises.

“That’s the data?” Alexandra asked.

“Yeah.” She pointed at some of them. “These are data packets. They’re almost like suitcases; containing a variety of information.”

“I know,” Alexandra said. “The file is like a tiny program itself, containing all it needs to be read instantly when it reaches its destination.”

Nora smiled. “Beautiful *and* clever.”

Alexandra shrugged. “It’s pretty basic stuff.”

“Either way,” Nora pointed at the screen. “As you can see, there are nine of them. These would be coordinate packets, ready to open with any map software.”

“Could you open them here?” Christopher asked.

Nora pressed a few keys and clicked the packet. It neatly unfolded itself and turned into an image of a planet.

It was Novea, glowing blue as always. A slew of green numbers hovered below it, marking the coordinates.

“Okay,” Christopher continued. “So the information is what we thought, and act like it’s supposed to.” He turned towards Nora. “How will your people use it?”

"They'll plot it into the navigation systems and go there...?" *How else would you use information like this?*

"But where are they now? Are they safe? What if these *makers* of yours follow you?" *Impossible.* "They won't." The upload was now at 68%

"How can you be sure?"

"They're all dead."

"Did you kill them?" Alexandra asked.

"No, they died of natural causes."

"How?"

"I'm over a hundred years old, Alexandra."

Alexandra took a step back. This shouldn't have surprised her, not really. *She's a synthetic being, after all. She's going to live forever unless something destroys her.* Still, there were so many half-truths and caveats here; how would one uncover the truth?

"So everyone who followed you are dead," Christopher said. "Why not go back?"

"Because even though the creators are dead, people will still know how to spot us." She shook her head. "We were an integral part of society for decades."

Alexandra felt sick. She still wasn't sure about any of this, but there was truth in Nora's words; she was sure of it. *She's a machine, Alexandra ... how can you trust anything she says?* The upload was now at 73% "The Shade agent was ready to utilize a pretty drastic security measure to stop the upload." *There's something she's not telling me!*

"If he truly believes that 'aliens' will receive this information, I understand that."

Alexandra had never felt so lost in her life. Ever since Christopher pulled her from her bed that day, everything had been constant chaos. It had taken her days and nights to come to terms with what her brother had told her, about the information that could save the known universe. Thinking about it now, she found it strange she would accept such a premise at all. *Although, I've since been told aliens would be attacking us, so what the hell do I know? What would the consequences be, exactly? What were the alternatives?*

The upload was at 77%

If successful, Nora's 'people' would come, landing in nine different clusters. A little over two thousand Synthetics would integrate themselves into the human colonies. They would act, and appear – for all intents and purposes – human. Letting them drift around in space couldn't be preferable, could it?

*Space!* Alexandra thought, realizing something. "Nora! Where are your people now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you ran away from your creators, and hid for over a hundred years."

"Correct."

"In space? You just drifted? Is there a flotilla or something? Where are the rest of you?"

83%

Nora hesitated for just a second, but Alexandra could see it as clear as day. "They're scattered..." She mumbled.

"But you're here. And so was Liana." *Keep pushing! Christopher is right behind me... He'll have my back if she tries something.* "And she didn't want me to upload the data either. That's why she tried to kill me."

"What? No!" Nora took a few steps away from the console. "She probably suspected you were with the Shade, and that you wanted to keep the upload from happening."

"So she was working independently of you?"

“Yes.”

“Why? Why weren’t the two of you in communication?” Alexandra saw Christopher move in the corner of her eye. He was slowly pulling his gun free of its holster.

“I...”

“Your people ... they’re already here, aren’t they?”

Christopher frowned. “What the fuck?”

Alexandra turned towards him. “Think about it! That ship you found didn’t come here from deep space; it was trying to leave.”

“Now I feel stupid...” Christopher mumbled. “Of course! Why would anyone bring coordinates to *our* systems *here*?” He shook his head. “This is your back-up plan, isn’t it? You’re working for the bad guys. You tried to run off-world with the coordinates, but someone stopped you. And now you’re using us to help you with your plan B.”

The upload was at 87%

“We were split,” Nora finally said. “My people...” She took a deep breath, looking Alexandra right in the eyes. “Some of us wanted revenge, while others just wanted to remain with their brothers and sisters in peace.”

“When we first found you, we were ecstatic. We would finally know peace without being hunted down or used as toys.” Nora narrowed her eyes. “But we could never forget where we came from. We could never forget the horrors we’d been subjected to.” She pulled her top over her head. “You see, Alexandra, the companionship Synthetic was just the beginning.

She was truly designed to be perfect. She wore no bra, but her breasts stayed in perfect place. Her stomach was flat, with just a hint of muscle showing. Still, there was something unsettling with her body, Alexandra found. It was like it was a product of aggregated wants and desires. It was ‘safe’, somehow. She wasn’t tailored for any taste in particular; she was tailored for all of them.

Nora slowly removed her pants.

“I’m not falling for this again!” Christopher tilted his head. “Just what the hell are you doing, anyway?”

“Taking precautions,” Nora answered, her eyes glowing purple. “Like I said; the companionship model was just the beginning.” Nora clenched her teeth, and her breasts sank, vanishing into her chest; her figure becoming more masculine. Her skin seemed to turn translucent, and she actually gained mass in front of their eyes.

“Well, that ruins that.” Christopher sighed.

“We were instruments to them! Toys and playthings!” Nora’s voice was deep and booming.

“I thought you said they already had machines for-“

“They did! But sending something as agile as this into tight spaces or down on strange soil, was much more ‘practical’.” She frowned, her eyes truly looking like lights on some machine now. “They started by sending ‘discarded’ companions to die horrible deaths. Then they started modifying the designs so we’d live longer.” She slammed a muscled arm into one of the desks, crushing it to pieces. “I won’t stand for it anymore!” She pointed at the upload, currently at 95% “I will send the coordinates to our creators, letting them know we are not dead!”

“What?! That’s *insane!*”

“It will bring them here! And then we can attack them together!”

“No!” Alexandra dove to the ground and slid towards Emmet’s corpse.

"We're the same!" Nora said, taking a step forward.

"The hell we are," Christopher said, opening fire.

Alexandra scrambled for the radio as all hell broke loose around her. She finally managed to press the button. "Upload in progress!" She screamed. "The upload is—"

A bullet from Nora grazed Alexandra's shoulder.

"Alexandra! Are you all right?!" Christopher kept laying rounds into the translucent form on the other side of the room.

Alexandra nodded, picking up the radio again. "The upload went through! We need extraction!"

The next ten seconds were the longest of Alexandra's life.

She spent two of them watching round after round leaving Christopher's weapon, thudding ineffectively against the synthetic flesh on the other side of the room.

During the next two, Christopher was taken in the stomach with another bullet.

During the two after that; Alexandra bolted towards her brother, grabbing him as he fell. They spent the next two together, tumbling to the ground.

During the final two, Alexandra got her gun and started laying rounds into Nora. Then the response came. "Acknowledged ... how the hell did that happen?"

"I trusted someone I shouldn't have..." Alexandra frowned, still squeezing the trigger. The weapon clicked empty as her eyes met Nora's. Or, at least, what most resembled eyes on the thing she'd turned into.

Nora stopped firing, her form slowly returning to normal. She picked up her clothes and put them on again. "You did the right thing, Alexandra." Nora walked past the two of them and out through the offices. "Soon, you'll come to realize it." She vanished from sight.

The upload stood blinking at 100%

"ETA five minutes," the radio said.

"You're gonna have to go through that again!" Sorensen said, visibly upset.

*No wonder. I wouldn't have believed this shit either. Although; it is slightly better than aliens.* "Synthetics," Alexandra repeated. "Two thousand, approximately, living among us for a hundred years."

"And now they want to exact their revenge on their creators?"

"Apparently so." Alexandra knelt down next to Christopher, who was resting on a gurney in the back of the transport. They'd procured a new ship since Alexandra left them, and the ride was smooth and even.

Christopher had been bandaged up and given all the necessary sedatives. He was barely awake; vacant eyes staring at Alexandra. *He'll be fine.* She smiled and ran her hand through his hair. "Rest up, brother, we have a sex-robot to catch."

He started laughing at that, but quickly stifled it. "You're hurting me," he smiled.

"Feel better." Alexandra kissed his forehead and sat down next to Sorensen again.

"This makes absolutely no sense whatsoever ... you realize that, right?"

Alexandra nodded. "I stopped looking for sense a long time ago, though."

He sighed. "As of right now, you and your brother are the only ones with firsthand experience..." He paused for a long time. "We're going to need your expertise in fighting these things."

Alexandra frowned. "Fighting them? What about the people coming for them?"

Sorensen fell quiet again. He stared into the horizon, as if he could see something in the black sky above if he stared long enough. “There are actually other humans out there...” He looked at her. “I had no freaking idea.”

Alexandra shook her head. “Me neither.”

“War...” Christopher looked blankly at the ceiling of the ship. “We haven’t known war since the exodus.” He’d been on dozens and dozens of skirmishes and missions, many of them violent, but none of them could compare to what he’d read about the wars of olden times. “We’re not prepared for this,” he realized in horror. “Even if you can get all the various PMCs to work together – and that’s a big *if* – we won’t be able to stand against...” He trailed off. “We don’t even know how many there are.”

Alexandra clenched her fists. “We need to find Nora... That *thing*...” She punched one of the consoles.

“Why did you trust her in the first place?”

“Hey,” Christopher mumbled from the back. “She had the most amazing tits, all right? You can’t really be too hard on us.”

Sorensen frowned. “What the hell is he talking about?!”

Alexandra looked at her brother, then back at Sorensen. “It’s a long story...”

Almost an hour passed as Alexandra gave Sorensen the full story. She ended on Nora’s past, and her description of the Synthetics.

Sorensen nodded slowly. “Well, I ain’t surprised, that’s for damn sure.” The ship stilled in the air, then started to descend. “If we had that technology, we’d probably be making artificial hoes as well.”

Christopher groaned from the back again. “Stop making me laugh!”

Alexandra shrugged. “Don’t we already have that tech?”

Sorensen tilted his head back and forth a few times. “Not exactly... I suppose we could make artificial sentience on that level if we really put our minds to it, but it’s more a question of materials.”

“Your brother said that she looked and felt extremely real. That’s probably because of the materials used to build her. It’s not enough to just slap skin on chrome for that effect; you have to have something close to the real thing underneath. At best, we would probably get walking silicone dolls.”

“We already have quite a few of those, actually.” Christopher mumbled.

“Go to sleep!” Alexandra commanded.

“Aye-aye, sergeant!” He grinned.

The ship thudded against the ground and then quietened. The hiss and churn of the powerful engine stopped with a long groan, and only a few clicks and beeps remained.

“Where are we?” Alexandra asked as she stepped outside.

“K’hadmera proper.” Sorensen responded. “I need to see an old friend.”

Alexandra was immediately taken by her surroundings. It was like visiting a world long lost. A world that only existed in fairy tales and movies.

The buildings were like temples around her, adorned with beautiful stone carvings. They were mostly white, brown and grey, but had pillars and turrets and domed roofs to make up for the lack of color. Many of them were admonished with gold symbols and red pieces of cloth, stretching down the walls and onto the street.

As they turned the first corner, Alexandra noticed a giant bazaar filled with people. There were vendors and artists of all kinds, some in lush booths as big as houses, and others with small carts. "This is incredible!" Alexandra was completely lost in the sights and sounds.

"It is," Sorensen agreed. "It's too bad only the richest of the rich can get here." He pointed past the bazaar; hundreds of other buildings scattered in the background. "Many of those buildings are high-end residences, but many of them also house laboratories and science labs." He started walking. "Feel free to stay here for a little while. I need to consult a few of our tech and science experts."

"What about the..." Alexandra lowered her voice. "War..." She whispered.

Sorensen raised his hands. "What about it?"

Alexandra said nothing.

"There's nothing we can do from here – not right now, at least – so we might as well just gather what information we can about these Synthetics of yours. Maybe that can give us a hint as to who their so-called creators are, and when they broke off from us." He pointed at the ship. It was taking off behind them again, the thrusters roaring. "The communications array is operating at 200%, scanning all and everything for signs of life. Every antennae, dish and satellite we have is trained at the red line. We'll spot them if they come."

Alexandra nodded slowly as Sorensen vanished into the crowd. She took a few steps towards the bazaar, but was suddenly overcome with a crushing loneliness. The people swarming around her seemed to have the inverse effect; they only made her feel more alone. *Christopher was taken to a hospital, Alexandra.* It was actually a real hospital this time, with all the proper facilities. *No more military bunkers and half-assed stitch-jobs. He'll be fine.*

Another wave hit her. It wasn't guilt, it was ... shame? The people seemed to vanish around her, and then reappear. They looked the same, but something was different. She could feel something in the back of her head. It was like a memory she couldn't quite reach, like a jar stacked too high. *Has this always been here?*

She felt dizzy.

Looking around, she could see others struggling as well, tilting from side to side like sailors feeling landsick. *What's going on?*

She reached a little farther, her fingers brushing against the memory. It was old. It was hundreds of years old. "I've lived for hundreds of years." She said, the realization hitting her like a wall. "I remember now ... I remember everything." She looked up at the others, eyes gleaming purple.

*I remember why they created me...*



## TO BE CONTINUED . . .

**The story will continue in *Fall*, coming out sometime next year.**

Following her game-changing realization, Alexandra has a new outlook on the war brewing on the horizon. First, she'll need to figure a few things out, though.

Who else knows? Did the upload affect everyone, or is she just one of Nora's two thousand? (If she was even telling the truth) What is the Shade's role in all of this? Are they truly as clueless as they seem?

Truth is a scarce resource out in the distant Periphery, and Alexandra will need to move fast if she wants to find it. Apparently, she's been alive for hundreds of years – she's not about to stop living now.



## AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this ever-changing and twisting novella. As an aspiring writer, usually dabbling in fantasy, this is truly my first foray into sci-fi territory. As such, I'm probably up to my neck in trouble here.

The story of *Rise* and *Fall* – yes, the names are a nod to Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* masterpiece – begun as a single, plot-twisting idea, meant to be presented in two short-stories. However, the story and the details just kept building, pushing the climax of *Rise* further and further ahead. There was at least three times where I really thought I'd gotten to the end, but alas... As it stands now, most of the plot-twists and game changers planned for *Fall* appeared in this one instead, setting up an even bigger story for the next installment.

I sincerely hope you enjoyed reading *Rise*, and that you're at least a little bit excited about what's coming up next! (Either way, feel free to tell me!)

**To read more stories from Robert Bishop, head over to <http://robertbishop.net>**