

Welcome to the world of Halcyone Space

DERELICT (Halcyone Space, book 1): A group of teens stranded on a sentient spaceship must work together or risk being killed when the ship's AI wakes believing it's still fighting the war that damaged it decades ago.

ITHAKA RISING (Halcyone Space, book 2): A young computer genius struggling to function with a grievous head injury is willing to risk his life to get a black market neural implant, but what he finds is a planet that shouldn't exist and a rebellion that threatens the stability of the Commonwealth.

DREADNOUGHT AND SHUTTLE (Halcyone Space, book 3): When a materials science student gets kidnapped, she's drawn into a conflict between the young crew of a sentient spaceship, a weapons smuggling ring, and a Commonwealth-wide conspiracy and must escape before her usefulness as a hostage expires.

PARALLAX (Halcyone Space, book 4): Halcyone's crew is drawn into a conspiracy threatening to reignite a galactic war when they discover the hidden power brokers who have been quietly manipulating the Commonwealth for decades.

Please enjoy this excerpt from PARALLAX. Available June 2017.

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Chapter 1

TUGGING HER FINGERS THROUGH sleep-tangled hair, Dev stared at her barricaded door and wondered if Micah was awake too. She reached for the micro he'd gotten her. It was hard not to resent the easy access to funds that made the expenditure an afterthought to him.

The time glowed dimly on its display, nearly washed out by the brightness of the artificial light in her room.

Zero three fucking fifty.

It was no use trying to get back to sleep. Dev reached beneath her pillow for the polymer knife she'd made when she had been a prisoner aboard Maldonado's ship. The reflection of the blade in the bathroom mirror comforted her as she washed up and got dressed. Its weight in her pocket felt even better.

Her generic bedroom could have been aboard any ship or even back home in Midlant. The dorms were prefab construction, little modules bolted together and piled on top of one another. It was just one step above the temporary shelters the refugees had built out of the containers that used to deliver supplies and food to the settlements. But this room was hers. And she'd made it as secure as she could with a mechanical latch freshly bolted into her side of the door. Housing would be pissed, but that was their problem.

Dev walked to the window and yanked the blackout curtains aside. Below her, a twinkle of blue lights marked the emergency beacons on the artfully curved paths cut through the University's grounds. Even the Commonwealth Officer Training Corps first-years wouldn't be up for their daily run for another hour or so.

Now that she was awake, she felt safer turning off all the room lights. Standing in the abrupt darkness, she knew it didn't make a lot of sense. The days were usually easier than the nights, but even then Dev would make sure to get to classes early so she could claim a seat at the end of a row, closest to the door.

It was only when a smear of pink muddied the eastern horizon that Dev realized she'd been standing by the window for over an hour. She swore and dropped her new micro in the pocket with her knife before striding to the door and unbolting it.

Micah stood just outside her room with a cup of coffee in one hand, his other lifted to knock. By the time Dev's sleep-deprived brain had processed it, she'd already barreled into her roommate. The cup tumbled from his grip, spilling coffee all over him. She stood in stunned silence as the polymer cup bounced and rolled across the gray utilitarian carpet.

"Shit!" Micah stumbled back, brushing coffee from his shirt and pants.

Dev dropped her gaze to the floor and stared at his scarred bare feet, the now empty cup, and the dark stain spreading between them. "Crap. I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Good thing I made a pot, then," Micah said. "Help yourself. Just leave me some. I need to change."

She glanced up in time to see him hobble across their quarters. "I'm sorry," she repeated, even though he'd already disappeared behind his door. Retreating into her room, she grabbed a towel

from the closet and tossed it on the spill. The coffee turned the off-white material a dark, uneven brown. The earthy scent permeated their apartment. It was the real stuff. From Micah's private stash.

Damn it.

Sighing, Dev crossed to the small galley and poured herself more. She was still standing by the sink, cradling the cup in her hands when Micah reappeared, this time in his clunky shoes, wearing a clean shirt and pants.

"You're not going to dump that on me, are you?" he asked, leaning against the counter.

Dev flinched and some of the coffee sloshed over the side of the cup onto her hand. It wasn't as hot as the cup he'd spilled which meant she'd lost time again. Shit. "Stuff's too good to waste," she said, and took a large sip to cover her unease.

Micah made no move to pour himself some of the expensive brew. Instead, he studied her in the silent apartment. "If it's any consolation, I'm not sleeping too well, either."

By some unspoken agreement, after they had hidden their "borrowed" ship in a private hangar paid for with Micah's father's blood money, and after they'd returned to campus with cover stories both their advisers seemed to accept without comment, neither of them had talked about Dev's abduction.

She knew damned well why she didn't want to go there, but could only guess that Micah's guilt was what kept him silent. Which may have explained the new micro and the gift of morning coffee. "It wasn't your fault."

"If it hadn't been for me, he wouldn't have come here and found you."

He. Alain Maldonado. An image of her captor's narrowed green eyes superimposed itself over Micah's worried blue ones for a moment and Dev's hands shook. She glanced at his shoes,

envisioning the damaged feet they protected. Micah had more reason to hate the man than she did.

“He’s gone. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

“I could say the same to you, but it wouldn’t matter. He left his mark on both of us.” Micah looked down. “Literally and figuratively.”

She covered the uncomfortable silence that followed with a clatter of dishes, dropping her empty cup into the sink.

“Dev.” Micah’s voice startled her.

“What?”

“Have you talked to your brothers?”

She refused to meet his gaze. What was there to say to them? *Hey, how’s things? Guess what, I was kidnapped and threatened and got someone killed who was trying to help me.* There wasn’t anything any of her brothers could say that would ease the roiling mix of anger, guilt, and fear that she’d been battling since the trip back. It wasn’t like she could take a leave from Uni. Not and keep her position and her scholarship. She was her family’s last chance. Her brothers needed her to cope. Which is what she’d learned to do as a young child in Midlant. Cope.

“You should. Talk to them.”

“Thanks for the family advice, now shut up.” Dev winced at how sarcastic she sounded. Micah had every right to call her on it, but the only thing he did was raise an eyebrow.

“You promised to take me there.”

Dev looked Micah up and down. He would fit in at the settlement about as well as she had on a spaceship. His casual clothes were clearly customized, and his stance showed both his spacer history and an ironic grace from years spent playing the very public role of Senator Rotherwood’s son. “My brothers would hate you.”

“Sorry?”

Damn. She hadn’t realized she’d said that aloud. “Look at you.”

He glanced down at himself, frowning. “What do you mean?”

Even his scowl looked posed. It was as if he was always ready for a holo. Always controlled. Composed. The only times she’d seen him unguarded were in the biodome during his panic attack and when he’d walked into the bridge on Taro Odachi’s small ship to find Dev alive after she’d escaped Maldonado. The naked relief on Micah’s face had unnerved her. “It’s just that ...”

“What?”

“Dressed like that? You’ll be pegged as either a spacer or a city boy for sure.”

Except that’s not what they’d call him. They’d mock him as a voidhopper, which was definitely better than a highsider. Young highsiders still liked to take their chances slumming in the settlements. The ones that brought their own security details lived to brag about it.

“Then I’ll wear something else.”

Dev pushed past him and into the common room. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you want to go to Midlant?”

Micah’s uneven footfalls sounded behind her. They both stared out the window to the campus below. The blue emergency lights paled as the sun rose and a few early risers were crossing the well-manicured paths. “Because you’re right. I don’t understand. All I know of the settlements was what I learned in school. And that was filtered through the Commonwealth.”

“It’s not my job to enlighten you.” Dev’s face heated up. It wasn’t Micah she was mad at. Not really. It was the way her adviser was surprised that she’d come back after disappearing. It was the way her teachers never expected her to work as hard as she did or do as well. It was the way her classmates

avoided certain subjects when she was around, or were overly apologetic when they talked about anything related to the settlements. It didn't take long for Dev to drop every vestige of the Midlant dialect at Uni. But she never got over the anger that would blaze inside when one of her fellow students would take great pains to say, "Not you, Dev. You're not Settlement at all."

She thought for sure Micah would get angry and clomp away. Part of her even wanted him to. But the minutes passed and he stood next to her silently. Dev's breathing slowed and the tension in her shoulders eased. "I'm sorry. That was out of line."

"No, it wasn't." Micah retreated to the galley area and dragged over one of the high stools. He sighed quietly as he sat and Dev felt a pang of guilt. "Look, I spent most of my childhood having my life scripted for me for the sake of political expediency. Now both my parents are dead, I don't know what it's like to even have a family, and I never had much of a chance to make my own friends.

"Not until Halcyone. And not until you." He shifted his micro from hand to hand. "You don't want me to apologize anymore. Fine. I'll stop apologizing. But what happened out there? On Maldonado's ship? It links us, whether you like it or not. Besides, you made a promise." He looked up, then, and smiled. There was both a warmth in Micah's face and a practiced intensity.

"And did your father keep all his promises?" Dev winced. She was having a hard time holding on to the filters that kept her from being too conspicuous in the world beyond the settlements.

Micah shrugged. "No. And the consequences eventually caught up with him. Even halfway across the cosmos."

Dev had been so desperate to know that Ithaka truly existed—that somewhere out in the void there were some who refused to crack under Commonwealth control—she'd promised to take Micah to Midlant in return for knowing the truth. And he'd told her. Now either keeping her promise or breaking it would have consequences. Dev wasn't sure which would be worse.

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Ro opened her eyes to an empty bed again and swore softly.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to wake you.” From where she stood in the galley, Nomi dropped her gaze to the floor.

“What time is it?” Ro could just as easily have grabbed her micro or queried Daedalus Station, but it was a way to keep Nomi from withdrawing even more than she already had.

“Zero six seventeen.”

“Did you get any sleep at all?”

Nomi turned away and heated the water for coffee.

It had been barely a week since Ro had returned to Daedalus Station. A week since Alain Maldonado—her own father—had triggered a supernova’s worth of chaos, including Nomi’s arrest and interrogation. At least he’d managed to get himself killed in the process. There was some consolation in that.

Ro got up and washed up in the small head. Nomi had left the seal open on a packet of analgesics. It was the only thing out of place in the organized minimalism of the woman’s life and it spoke volumes. Sighing, she slid the meds in the empty slot in the recessed cabinet. When Ro emerged to change, the bed was already made and a full cup of coffee sat on the night table. She sipped at it as she tried to figure out what to say.

Nomi’s silence was like a new vibration in an engine. Left uncalibrated, it would shake the delicate mechanism of her girlfriend’s psyche apart.

Setting down her coffee, Ro walked across their quarters to where Nomi sat on the end of the sofa staring past her micro. Her unfocused gaze flicked up at Ro and then away again.

A faded and pilled quilt lay folded neatly across the back of the sofa. Unsure of what else to do, Ro sat and tucked the relic from her childhood around both of them. Nomi hugged her.

Ro waited, stroking the smooth dark wave of Nomi's hair. It felt like eons before she muffled some indistinct words into Ro's collarbone.

"Hmm?"

"I'm a mess. I'm sorry."

"Hey. No apologies. Okay?" Ro pulled free of their embrace and tipped Nomi's chin up. Her eyes were bloodshot. The dark circles beneath them were the color of a bruise. "That would be my job."

"I have to get ready for work." Nomi pulled away from Ro's gentle hold and frowned. "And before you ask, I haven't been able to speak privately to Simon since..." She gestured at the small room.

Since she'd been placed in house arrest and Simon Marchand, the now acting comms supervisor, had risked a charge of treason to send her a message.

"It seems like he's making sure we're never on shift together."

Was he avoiding contact for Nomi's sake or for his own? "Has he said anything to you at all?"

"Oh, he's the same perfectly jovial Cajun food-obsessed man he's always been. But other than complain about his unexpected promotion screwing up his official retirement? Not a thing."

Everyone on station was busy speculating about what had happened to Daedalus's previous comms supervisor. Lowell vanished not long after Nomi and Jem had uncovered evidence he was being paid covertly by the Commonwealth's Commander Targill. There wasn't enough data to know what

he'd been spying on, but they had a good idea. And it certainly wasn't officially sanctioned by the Commonwealth.

Aside from Ro and her crew, no one else knew the truth, except for Mendez, their station commander and she had been avoiding them as well.

It was too late to worry about trusting Commander Mendez. She already had enough evidence to have them all arrested. That she hadn't bothered Ro more than she would admit. Simon Marchand and his dubious loyalty was another matter.

What was he after? Simon was in the perfect position to communicate with Nomi if he chose to. So why hadn't he?

Nomi yanked off the blanket, stood, and paced the narrow space between the couch and the galley. Her micro tumbled to the floor. "I don't ... This isn't ... I'm not good at this shit. I do communications. Send packets in a clear path between one ansible and another. This? This is all static."

Static that Ro had brought to Nomi's life. Static that kept getting louder and louder with every orbit.

"And don't you dare apologize!" Nomi whirled toward her, brown eyes blazing.

Ro smiled up at her. "You know you're like destabilized aduronium when you're angry."

"Volatile and dangerous?"

"Bright and powerful."

Nomi blushed nearly purple and looked down, letting her hair swing forward to hide her face.

"Hey." Ro picked up Nomi's micro and glanced down at the display. "You're going to be late for comms if you don't get moving."

"Will you be on Halcyone today?" There was an edge to Nomi's voice that had never been there before.

“Probably not. I have to chase down a problem in the power-plant subsystems. Ping me when you take your break. I can meet you for lunch.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

Ro flinched. She was the sarcastic one, the one whose temper lay close to the surface.

Nomi reached for Ro’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “That was out of line. Will you meet me in hydroponics later? A walk would do me good.”

Taking a break and getting out of the cramped access corridors beneath the space station would be good for her, too. Nomi had taught her that. “Of course.” It would also be a safer place to talk than their quarters or Halcyone. The running water masked low conversations almost as well as the comms blockers Ro had installed on the ship.

“Guess we can’t just power up Halcyone and ask her to jump us somewhere no one can find us.” Nomi smoothed the top of her uniform before retrieving her micro and slipping it into a pocket.

“I wish,” Ro whispered, as Nomi headed out of their quarters and into the corridors of Daedalus Station. You couldn’t outjump fear. She knew that now.

Chapter 2

HIS MICRO BUZZED, vibrating the metal posts of Barre's bunk. He swatted at it and tried to go back to sleep. It tumbled from the edge of the desk, hitting the floor with a clang. Confused dream images tangled with the echo of the bright sound that his mind identified as a B-flat. It was too early for music. Too early to be awake.

He pulled the thin cover over his head and curled onto his side. The temporal foam shifted with him, cushioning his hip and shoulder on the narrow bed. His micro buzzed again. Barre linked his neural to the little computer and sent the signal to power the annoying thing down. His room fell silent. Barre let his head sink into the pillow. If Ro needed him, she'd damned well wait until a decent hour.

Halcyone's alert tone reverberated in his small quarters and blasted through his mind simultaneously. Barre yelped and jerked upright, hitting his head on the upper bunk.

"Halcyone! What the fuck?"

The sound cut out so fast, Barre's ears rang. He rubbed the spot on the side of his head where he'd struck the metal support.

"Halcyone?"

The AI was silent. Barre got the feeling she was sulking. He wasn't as skilled in reading the ship's physical state as Ro, but he quickly scanned the basics: They were still safely tethered to

Daedalus Station. Life support was operational. No one was trying to hack her systems. So what was the alarm all about?

“Halcyone?”

She wasn’t even answering his direct query. Fine. The ship wanted him up? He was up. Barre untangled the blanket from his legs. He shivered as his bare feet hit the floor.

“Priority message. Text only.”

Halcyone’s voice seemed sharper and more clipped than usual. Damned personality subroutines. It was hard enough dealing with Ro. Now he had a touchy AI to contend with. He was going to have to teach it what “not a morning person” meant.

“Fine. Be that way.” He leaned forward and picked up his micro. Definitely not awake enough to use his neural. As soon as he turned the device screen-side up, words started scrolling across it.

/She won’t respond to my messages. What’s her status?/

No greeting. No idents. And it traveled via the same secure messaging program Ro had enabled. There was only one person it could be from: Ada May. Which explained Halcyone’s sudden mood shift.

/She’s stable. My folks took her out of the induced coma three days ago./

He didn’t know why Lieutenant Commander Gutierrez hadn’t contacted May, but obviously she hadn’t. The soldier had a lot of healing yet to do, and judging by their brief conversations after she’d been injured, most of it wasn’t going to be the physical stuff.

/Can you talk to her?/

Barre was surprised to get May's reply so quickly. Either ansible conditions were extremely favorable, or she had some additional tricks to subvert Commonwealth comms that she hadn't shared with Ro. He was betting on the latter.

/Please./

He could just about hear May's soft voice in his head. It was practically the only thing soft about the old rogue scientist. But now that Taro Odachi—the man who had taken on the role of Charon, Ithaka's Ferryman—was dead and Gutierrez was refusing contact, May must be feeling vulnerable. While she had to have other supporters scattered through the cosmos, it was pretty clear that Ada May, Charon, and Gutierrez had a shared history. Maybe someday the lieutenant commander would even tell him about it.

/I'll do what I can. But it'll be hard to see her without attracting attention./

There was absolutely no reason he could invent for visiting the injured LC in medical. Barre couldn't admit he'd given her emergency care on Charon's ship after the Ferryman sacrificed himself to save her. Officially, Halcyone had been getting some refit work on Eurydice Station at the time and was nowhere near them when Gutierrez and Charon had gone after Ro's father and his stolen ship.

Barre set the micro down and leaned forward, shaking his head. His dreads slipped forward to hang in his face. What a supernova this mess was. He supposed he could visit medical when Jem was there for his scans, but that still didn't give him an excuse to talk to Gutierrez and anything that brought attention to the LC could endanger both Ithaka and her role in safeguarding it. Not that there was any guarantee she'd even be willing to talk to him.

Still, he was a better choice than Ro. She and the LC were aduronium and a quasi-quantum field. Barre yawned and glanced back at his bunk, but he was already awake. Maybe he could harass his little brother for a change.

“Good morning!” He let a few bars of what he considered Jem’s theme play through his mind. If the link between them worked, Barre would get revenge for all the times his perky little brother used to wake him up.

“I hate you.”

A triumphant anthem echoed through the link between them. Then it was as if a blast door sealed shut and the contact ended.

He grabbed his micro and typed a quick note to Jem.

/Need to talk. Come by when you’re up./

Barre sidestepped between the bed and his instruments to reach the cramped head. He could probably find storage space for everything, but having it all here with him made the utilitarian room home. He stripped off the baggy drawstring pants he slept in and tossed them toward the bed before sealing the transparent walls of the retractable shower. The facilities on Daedalus were far more spacious, but this belonged to him.

By the time he’d toweled dry and changed, the door chime sounded. Barre triggered the release. Jem stood in the ship’s corridor, two mugs of coffee in hand. His little brother looked wrecked and Barre immediately felt guilty for waking him, but kept silent. Jem hated when Barre fussed over him. He tied his dreads back with a small cord before taking one of the mugs.

“This had better be important.”

He gulped down the bitter, black drink. *“It is.”* Unless Jem wanted to climb up to the top bunk, there wasn’t enough room for both of them in Barre’s quarters. He ushered his little brother back into the corridor and headed to engineering. The largest single space on Halcyone, it had become their de facto meeting place.

Even knowing Halcyone was as safe as both the AI and Ro could make it, and even after the door sealed behind them, Barre was still concerned about speaking openly about Ada May and Ithaka—the hidden base of her anti-commonwealth insurgency. But until he and Jem had worked out all the bugs from their accidental and unreliable neural link, this would have to do.

“What gives?”

“Ada May messaged me. The LC isn’t talking to her.”

Jem sighed as he settled into one of the engineering station seats. “Well, Gutierrez certainly can’t communicate freely from the middle of medical.”

“I suppose not.” Though surely May had ways to encrypt and secure comms. “She asked me to talk to her.”

His brother lifted an eyebrow. It was nearly exactly the same look of cynical amusement that their mother often gave the medical staff. “Even if Mom and Dad let you loiter around their patients, what makes you think Gutierrez would talk to you?”

Barre shrugged. He had saved her life. But personal gratitude aside, there was absolutely no reason for the station’s lieutenant commander to speak with the unranked adult son of the station’s doctors. Even visiting her would raise questions they couldn’t risk. But Jem was in and out of medical all the time, thanks to their parents’ scrutiny. And Jem was good at not being noticed, at constantly being underestimated. “I was thinking it should be you.”

“Fine,” Jem said. “It’s not like she can order me to leave.”

There were advantages to being a minor. And Jem was a good choice apart from that. “Don’t let her intimidate you. I think she could use a friend.” The LC’s worst wounds weren’t the ones his parents were treating.

“I don’t think I’m that person.”

“And someone she can talk to about Charon.”

“Barre, I really don’t think I’m that person.”

“There isn’t anyone else, Jem.” After barely escaping the trap Ro’s father had set, Emmaline Gutierrez had been as vulnerable as Barre had ever seen her. It didn’t take a trained psychiatrist to know that Charon’s death had hit her hard. It was a loss that was tangled up in the complications of her secret past as well as her own guilt at surviving. If she wouldn’t talk to May and she couldn’t talk to any official on Daedalus, maybe Jem was the logical choice. Barre finished his coffee and set the empty cup down carefully. “Just do the best you can.”

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The silent bulk of the University’s biodomes surrounded Micah. Each one contained a carefully controlled atmosphere and soil ecology, protected by biometric security and full-on biohazard-style double airlocks and decontamination procedures. Small robots skittered around alien landscapes, monitored by vigilant AIs, carrying out their careful experimental programming.

These sophisticated environments were a far cry from the hydroponics setup Micah had cobbled together on Halcyone for his experiments on the ubiquitous hallucinogen grown and distributed by the drug cartels. With the use of one of the domes, Micah could control every aspect of the frustrating plant’s growth—from its genetic code to its soil conditions. But Doctor Parrish had essentially demoted him to a beginning student and the classes he’d been assigned to didn’t grant him access to the biodomes.

Instead, he had years of failed data, Parrish’s buggy growth-modeling program, and a long-forgotten glorified greenhouse.

Parrish didn't matter; the work did. Micah wasn't about to let a petty academic bureaucrat sideline him. It had been easy to slip back into the role of the diligent student. His teachers had made the appropriate sympathetic noises and excused his absence when he had disclosed the severity of his burns, and if he limped a little more than when he'd first arrived at Uni, it was as much expressing the reality of the constant low-level pain as it was deliberate theater.

How much of his father's persona had been that mix of truth and subterfuge? Micah stumbled to a stop, sweating in the late afternoon heat, uncomfortable with where that line of thought led. His father wasn't the reason he was here. His mother was. And it was for her sake and in her memory that he was returning to his work on bittergreen.

Micah pushed his way through the overgrown hedges that had hidden the equally overgrown dome from its more advanced fellows. Squashing a pang of guilt, he punched in the code Dev had shared with him and waited as the outer door swung open. Yes, he was going to use it as a study space and a refuge, as Dev did. And he was also going to figure out how to grow nonsterile bittergreen here.

The outer door sealed, holding him inside the small airlock. There was no decontamination routine, but he didn't know if that was because the last experiments were run here before that was automated, or the routines just no longer worked. Another thing he'd have to figure out. Bittergreen wasn't finicky about where it grew and Micah would have to make sure there wasn't any microbial contamination from soil tracked in from outside. That was one variable he hadn't had to worry about on Halcyone.

He hit the inner door release and was slammed with a blast of heat and humidity. Perfect growing conditions for the riot of weeds that over-spilled the neat lines of formerly organized raised beds. Weeds that would need to be completely cleared out, down to the last rootling and seed head if he was to get anywhere with the bittergreen.

For now, he needed to assess the dome's neglected controls. An access panel was mounted against the side wall of the biodome. As Micah studied the mostly unlabeled buttons, he wondered how long it had been since anyone had actually used the space.

He'd have to engineer a hard frost. Then clean out the beds and sterilize the soil. But to do that, he'd have to trace all the sensors back to the access panel that formed the central data hub of the dome. If he was lucky, he'd be able to pair his micro to the very basic user interface and control it remotely. It was more like Halcyone's life support modules than her higher cognitive processes.

That was probably why this dome had escaped anyone's notice.

As Micah lurched his way across the tangle of vegetation, following conduit and testing its integrity, he sighed, wishing Ro were here. She was much better at this than he was. In the time it had taken Micah to follow the water lines and locate the soil sensors, she would probably have programmed several drones to do the mapping.

He wiped sweat from his forehead and sat down at the edge of one of the raised beds. A low hiss was all the warning he had before the ground-level sprinklers turned on and soaked him. The startling laughter that followed made him tumble backward into the weedy and now damp bed.

Dev stood over him, still laughing, ignoring the water that sprayed up at her. She extended a tanned arm to help him up. Micah glared at the broken hose that was still spurting water straight up to the ceiling of the dome, three and a half meters overhead. He was going to have to install pressure regulators.

"It does that. Sorry."

It was good to hear her laugh again. Even if it was at his expense.

She leaned down to pick up his micro from the puddle it had fallen into and studied the crude schematic he'd been drawing. "Looking to reclaim this mess?"

He grabbed the device from her. “Once a botanist, always a botanist,” he said, shrugging. It was her space. Or at least she had a stronger claim to it than he did. He should have asked, but what would he have done if she’d said no?

“The water will turn off in eleven minutes. I could never find a way to change the programming. You just have to avoid that spot four times a day.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“I didn’t know you were setting up shop here.”

Micah felt his face burn. He should have asked. But then she would have wanted to know what he was growing. And why. “Is it okay? Do you mind? I have some experiments I need to finish and Parrish won’t authorize me for my own space.” He sounded whiny to his own ears. Maybe she wouldn’t take it that way.

“It’s a biodome. If you can use it, sure. Go ahead.” She paused, met his eyes and looked away. “Can I help?” Now it was her turn to sound tight and awkward.

Micah looked at the tangle of conduit left to trace. There was nothing at this stage that would reveal his plan to grow bittergreen. He wouldn’t have to lie to her. Yet. And her assistance would make the work go much more quickly. It was good to see her out of their apartment, too.

They worked in comfortable silence for the next few hours, until twilight fell and the interior of the dome turned a deep purple.

“Well, that’s a good start,” Micah said, brushing dirt from his pants. “Thank you.”

She looked up and smiled at him. “Now you look proper Settlement.”

“Still think your brothers would hate me?”

“Do you really want to find out?”

Micah stiffened, blinking in the stillness. Her face was lost to darkness; if the dome had artificial lights, he didn't know which buttons controlled them. He could use his micro as a lamp, but there was a quiet intimacy with the two of them standing side by side, draped in shadows. "So you talked to them?"

Dev sighed. "Yes. Giles told me I was being an ass."

Giles. Tanner. Vic. When Dev had been taken, Micah had found her brothers' contact information and had prepared a message to autosend in case he didn't make it back with her. He had quietly recalled the message and deleted it.

Micah sat on the edge of one of the raised beds. "What was it like?"

Dev joined him, sitting close enough for him to feel the heat from her body. "Growing up with three older brothers?"

He nodded, though she probably couldn't see him.

"Complicated."

She fell silent again. If she wanted to talk about her past, she would. Micah understood complicated. His relationship with the late senator was the very definition of the word.

Night fell. It was as dark as it was going to get. Micah looked up at the transparent dome overhead. No stars showed through the smear of light from the University and the cities nearby. And even if the grid were to fail, it would take a generation before the sky would clear enough for anyone to see more than a few bright planets and suns.

Somewhere out there, Daedalus Station kept watch over an insignificant wormhole. It was a miserable place. He should have been glad to have gotten away.

His feet were starting to throb. He'd been out since early this morning and hadn't had a chance to elevate them. Barre would lecture him if he were here. Micah sighed and turned to Dev. "You never told me what happened on Maldonado's ship."

"The bastard drugged me. I woke up in a stripped-down galley. What's there to tell?"

Micah knew there was more than that. The way her hand was never far from the slim, translucent blade she'd crafted was the biggest tell. But there were others, too. Maybe it was enough that she'd agreed to take him to Midlant. He shifted his weight forward and tried to ease some of the stiffness in his feet. "You hungry?"

"Why, you cooking?"

"Buying. Much safer that way."

"Deal."

There was a hint of a smile in her voice. It was a start.

Chapter 3

NOMI'S COMMS SHIFT passed swiftly. There was just enough traffic to keep her busy and her mind mostly occupied. Yizhi Chen sat in the command chair and was her usual model of efficiency. Quiet and competent, she had been part of Lowell's "two-crew" along with Simon Marchand for more than a year. Once Marchand had been promoted, she'd been moved up to the first-shift supervisor. Was she part of the conspiracy, too?

There were too many moving parts for Nomi to get a sense of the whole. The missing Cam Lowell was or wasn't a Commonwealth informant. Jem's hack had at least exposed a link and a money trail between him and Commander Targill.

He might be a Commonwealth war hero and decorated ship's captain, but he was someone Commander Mendez didn't trust. Someone who was far too interested in what Ro knew about Ithaka and who seemed to show up on Daedalus Station far too conveniently.

Lieutenant Commander Gutierrez didn't trust anyone. Well, that wasn't strictly true, but she certainly didn't trust Lowell. She'd spent the better part of her career keeping him under close surveillance. Had she known Targill had been pulling Lowell's strings?

But why?

Everything circled back to Targill.

And then there was Simon Marchand, who wanted to protect her from him.

“Ensign.”

Nomi jerked her head up. “Sorry?”

“Your break started three minutes ago.”

“Yes, sir.” She signed out her terminal and set her headset down. Twenty-seven minutes until she needed to be back. She set her micro for twenty, pinged Ro, and left comms. What were the chances that Ro would actually be able to break away from her work and meet Nomi in hydroponics? There was a time that would have frustrated her, but Nomi knew Ro’s infuriating ability to hyperfocus was part of who she was, part of what made her so relentlessly competent.

Not that understanding made it easy to live with, but she remembered her grandmother complaining about the same traits in her grandfather. And they managed a marriage that spanned more than half a century as they traveled across the cosmos. For now, it was enough that she and Ro were together. That Nomi knew Ro loved her. That she loved Ro. Conspiracies and conflicts notwithstanding.

Nomi nodded and smiled to station personnel on autopilot as she headed to the large parklike hydroponics bay. She spent time here every day. Sometimes alone, sometimes with Ro when she could pry the engineer away from her work. Nomi’s favorite spot also happened to be the safest place to have a quiet conversation—a bench next to the small waterfall that was part of the water reclamation system on Daedalus. She was grateful for the careful attention to the aesthetics of the place as much as she was for the privacy.

She set her micro down and stared at the churning water.

“May I?”

Nomi's heart sped up. Simon Marchand stood before her. His thick eyebrows highlighted deep brown eyes that always seemed amused and matched the boyish smile set in his weathered face. "Lieutenant." Her body stiffened but her voice was even and steady as she waved him to the seat next to her.

"Simon. Please. After all, we're not on duty."

"Simon. What can I do for you?" Nomi kept her gaze on the pool in front of her and her hands clasped in her lap to keep them from shaking.

"I seriously underestimated you. I won't make that mistake again."

His voice was quiet, conversational, but the words held a subtle threat. Or was Nomi confusing artifact for signal?

"Whatever you think you've accomplished, Targill will be back for you."

She drew her breath in sharply. "I'm an officer of the Commonwealth of Planets. He's bound by the laws, the same as I am." If he'd had any sort of solid proof of her data mining, she'd already have been arrested.

"And you're completely certain of that?"

She struggled for something to say and Ro's question jumped into her mind. "Who's side are you on?"

"That depends on how you define the sides."

The Commonwealth. Ithaka. Two sides and the silent war between them. A simple equation. But where did that leave Targill? And then there was Simon. Who was he working for?

Nomi wished Ro were here. She would be better at this real-time game of 'nought and shuttle. "You risked a lot to try and help me. Why?"

"And you haven't thrown me under the afterburners. Why not?"

She glanced over at the man who'd befriended her when she first got placed on Daedalus Station. "Are you even from New Louisiana?"

"Born and bred. You've had my gumbo." His expression of faux hurt was so sincere and so dramatic at the same time, Nomi couldn't help but laugh. "I need that data," he said, his voice just as light as if he'd invited her to dinner or told one of his long shaggy dog tales.

It wasn't worth denying what she and Jem had hacked. Too many people already knew about it. "Why?" Nomi glanced around. There were at least a dozen station personnel wandering the hydroponics bay. She could get up and leave and Marchand couldn't stop her. Couldn't threaten her.

"You've unbalanced a set of equations that have been carefully balanced for decades."

"But whose side are you on?" Nomi asked again.

"Think. Who already has the information you stole? Do you really want to give them the advantage? If I can protect you from Targill, I will, but I can't do it without your intel on Lowell. Whether you understand it or not, I'm your friend." He paused to shrug. "Or at least I'm not your enemy. That may be the best you're going to get."

"Nomi?" Ro's voice called out from the other side of hydroponics.

Nomi closed her eyes briefly in thanks to a deity she wasn't even sure her grandfather really believed in.

Marchand stood as Ro walked toward them. "Ro. Nomi. You know where to find me."

"What was that all about?"

"I have no idea."

Frowning, Ro sat down beside her. She took Nomi's hands in both of hers. "You're freezing."

Her micro's alarm startled them both. "I have to be back in comms in seven minutes." She had no idea how she was going to get through the rest of her shift now.

Ro stared in the direction Marchand had left. "I'll walk you there."

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If Lieutenant Commander Gutierrez had still been in intensive care, it wouldn't have mattered that Jem was the child of the station's doctors. But since she'd been upgraded to serious, but stable condition, she was no longer in isolation. Which meant—at least theoretically—Jem could visit her.

There was still the matter of what possible reason he had and why she would agree, but those were wormholes Jem would jump when he got there.

He entered medical and stood by the door, watching. His mother was on duty, which meant his father was probably asleep in their quarters. She moved with a calm efficiency that belied the intensity Jem knew was always simmering just below the surface. An intensity that seemed to burn through her control whenever Barre was concerned. At least it only used to be with Barre. Ever since Jem had gotten his neural implant, her emotions always seemed to be in turmoil around him, too. Or maybe he was just able to see them now that his damaged brain and the black-market device had wired his senses together.

One of the technicians flagged her down and she strode across medical to confer with him over a remote terminal. While she was otherwise occupied, Jem nodded to the daytime receptionist and walked in as he'd done thousands of times before in all the places his parents had been posted. He and Barre were practically raised in medical bays just like this one. At an early age, they had been taught where they were and weren't allowed to go; it never occurred to either of his parents that they would ever abuse their privilege.

Gutierrez had been moved to the step-down area. Thin scrims separated the beds. From inside, patients couldn't see through them, but from the angle of the monitoring station they were transparent. Not that it mattered. Gutierrez was the only patient housed there. Jem slipped through the opening and sat in the chair near the LC's bed.

She was alive, which given how bad she'd looked when they brought her in was astounding. They had had to detach her prosthesis. While Jem had spent his lifetime around injuries, he still had to turn away from the mass of decades-old burns-scars on her chest and left shoulder that told a vivid story of her amputation. Her newer injuries, including the gash along her right arm, were healing well. Her lower half was covered so he couldn't assess the state of her recent burns, but his parents were good at their work. Barre's emergency care had given the LC a fighting chance. Gutierrez would survive.

"I didn't realize the Durbins came as a package deal," she said. "What's your specialty?"

"I —" Now that he was here, Jem realized he had no idea what to say to her. "I'm sorry. People ... people are worried about you." People. She would know who that meant.

Gutierrez closed her eyes and turned her head away. But she made no move to hit the call button.

"They could build you a new arm." An image of the maker space Ada May had nurtured and hidden on Ithaca flashed through his mind. He was sure Dr. Land would be able to help her the way he had helped Jem.

"Why are you here?"

Jem flinched. Even though her voice was subdued, it still held the sharpness of the woman's accustomed command. He sifted through a number of possible replies, but none of them felt right and

he was afraid he might give something away about Ithaka or Ada May where Commonwealth ears could hear them.

As the silence lengthened, Gutierrez turned back to stare at him.

Deep circles darkened the skin beneath her eyes. Her short hair lay matted against her head. Without her prosthesis and her crisp uniform, she seemed small, lost. Something in her expression reminded him of how he had felt lying on a similar bed after the emergency surgery to release the pressure of his brain bleed. "I thought you might need a friend."

"A friend," she repeated. There was little tone or emotion in her voice. It was clear ice shot through with ash and it chilled Jem more than her anger would have.

He drew his legs up onto the chair and circled them with his arms. "I'm sorry. About Taro."

Gutierrez stared at him without blinking. "The Ferryman made his choice. He knew the cost."

Jem took a deep breath. "It doesn't make it any easier."

"For him or for me?" Her lips twisted into a half-smirk.

"Both."

"How old are you?"

"Does that matter?" He was old enough to know that sometimes even the clearest jump landed you in null-space.

"I suppose not."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." Gutierrez glanced at the opaque scrim but still didn't signal the call bell.

"Do you want me to leave?" Barre would have been better at this.

"Stay if you like. It doesn't matter."

Jem forced himself to look at the remnants of her left arm. It ended in a mass of capped scar tissue just beneath the shoulder. Conduit as thin as a human hair that had served as artificial brachial plexus and additional peripheral nerves would have to be completely replaced along with the purely mechanical elements of the prosthesis. “You haven’t talked to her.”

They both knew he wasn’t referring to Dr. Leta Durbin.

“There’s nothing to say. When I’m declared fit for duty, I’ll return to work.” Gutierrez shrugged. The scars on her left shoulder rippled in a way that made him flinch.

“And if you can’t? Who will take your place?” It was going to be hard enough for Ada May without the man called Charon—her Ferryman. But what if she lost Gutierrez, too?

“I’m just one old soldier. As replaceable as my arm.” Orange highlighted the words with the worry she refused to express.

“I don’t believe that.”

“I’m tired, Jem. And maybe there are some fights you can’t win.” She shifted in the narrow bed and winced. The whine of the autoinjector filled the cubicle. Her eyes fluttered, then half-closed as the pain meds raced through her. “Tell her that. There are some fights you can’t win.” Her voice slurred and she trailed off.

“That’s not ... You should ...” Before Jem could even begin to sort out what to say, she’d fallen asleep. “Great. Just seismic,” he muttered to himself as he crossed the medical bay to sit and wait outside his parents’ office.

“I don’t have time to run your scans now, Jeremy.”

His mother’s voice startled him. She stood in front of him, a pressed lab coat over her jumpsuit. He glanced up at her familiar scowl, not sure if it was meant for him or not.

“It’s fine. I can come back.” It would give him another excuse to talk to the LC.

“When was your last neo-benzo dose?” She glanced between him and her micro.

“Zero six hundred.”

She held his gaze for a long moment. As he returned her stare, he realized it had been months since he’d been able to hold his eyes steady like this. Maybe there would come a time when he didn’t need the meds anymore. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better than it had been.

“Your father believes you can be trusted to monitor your own dosing schedule.” There was a bitterness in her expression that tasted like burned polymer.

He expected her to be glaring at him with the same intensity that she had turned on Barre when she’d discovered him using bittergreen the first time. But she was looking past him, her eyes fixed on something far beyond the familiar and generic medical bay. There was a time Jem would have translated her reaction as anger, but he was sure it was fear. What in the cosmos would Dr. Leta Durbin be afraid of?

First Gutierrez, and now his mother. He suppressed a shudder. “It’s okay, Mom. I can come in to get them.”

“It’s better this way.” She nodded slowly, still not looking at him.

Better. Better for who?

Reaching into a pocket, she pulled out a portable med dispenser and unlocked it with a swipe of her hand. “Now you.”

Jem coded in his hand print without asking the questions crowding his thoughts. Why the controlled dispenser for the mild sedatives? They could be addictive, but they were easily reversed. There were far more dangerous drugs his parents handled routinely without the secured delivery system. And why now? She’d been giving him his neo-benzos for weeks.

“The techs will be able to access this if your father or I am not here.”

Did she think he was diverting his meds to Barre? As far as Jem knew, Barre hadn't used in months—not since he'd gotten sick on the tainted bittergreen from Hadria. That was before Halcyone. Now Barre had the ship and his music and his freedom. He didn't need bittergreen anymore.

"Sure, Mom." The little device delivered two sealed tablets into his waiting palm.

His mother waited while he opened the package and let the drug dissolve beneath his tongue in a burst of sour before slipping the dispenser back into her pocket. "Good. I should have time for your scans before shift change. You're welcome to wait in my office."

He needed to clear his head. "I'll come back. If that's okay."

"Fine."

Her voice was stiff and formal, but she couldn't hide the tinge of yellow that highlighted her uncomfortable emotions. Jem wasn't sure which of the two conversations was more unnerving.