

T. D. WILSON



SMUGGLER'S LOVE

*A Sci-Fi
Action
Adventure*



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T.D. Wilson

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CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Smuggler's Love](#)

[Books By This Author](#)

[About The Author](#)

SMUGGLER'S LOVE

Deimos Orbit

Mars Security Zone

Sunday, November 6

Earth Year 2140

Experience provided me a long career. My adventures took me places I couldn't dream of when I was kid. Along the way, I found people; friends, allies, and plenty of enemies. I never expected to find love, love so innocent it broke boundaries. The kind of love poets opine about. I heard once that love is patient, love is blind, love is transcendent—well something like that. All I knew was love got me in a whole lot of trouble.

“Woohoo!”

Never had a single word from a woman filled me with more excitement and terror at the same time.

With hands steadier than a seasoned pilot of hundreds of flights, my girlfriend eased my ship tighter into the slingshot around Deimos. “I can't believe you never let me try this before, Reese. This is amazing!”

My fingers continued their white knuckled grip on my chair. Fighting the increasing forces pressing on me and my wavering resolve; my jaw cocked at a weird angle. “My instructor made all his students do it at the end of their training; a final test before graduation.”

She turned her head. “You mean I can get certified?”

Her lack of concentration drifted our vector, shifting out of the slingshot window and closer to the moon. I stretched out my hand as an alarm chirped on the panel. “Eyes on the controls, Irina!”

She snapped her head forward. To her credit, she didn’t overcorrect. A jerk on the controls would have sent us into a spin and headed toward a certain impact with the moon’s surface. She tweaked the thrusters and our vector corrected. “I’ve got it.”

Our ship rocketed out of Deimos’s shadow, speeding into a high orbit around Mars. I took a deep breath, letting my tension ease. “Nice recovery.”

Irina flashed a smile, her green eyes wide. “Thanks.” She tapped the console. “You did great too, *Gracie Mae*.”

I soaked her in, hardly believing the events that had brought us together. Three months before, I was blackmailed by EDF Security to infiltrate the home base of the Almora Cartel run by Ulinda and Gideon Almora, Irina’s aunt and uncle. My instructions were to assist another undercover operative to disable the base’s defenses and allow Security to barge in. Once inside, I met Irina. Unlike her other family members, who either threatened to tear me to pieces or shoot me, she proved to be a sane alternative and, to my surprise, helped me complete my mission.

When the dust settled, I was arrested along with the Almoras, but Security released me, probably for services rendered, but with those hard asses, it’s difficult to tell. When I got back to my ship, I found Irina had stowed away onboard and we’d been together ever since. Keeping a low profile, we stayed closer to Earth while I taught her the ropes of being a transport pilot. This Mars run was the farthest out we’d travelled.

“Where is this delivery we’re making?” she asked.

“It’s called the Hideaway. My friend Kenton built it ages ago close to the Martian Polar Ice. It’s a secluded station with a strict client list and off Security’s radar.” Kenton Krieg and his longtime assistant, Annie, were two of the best friends a smuggler could have. Easy going, and as long as I didn’t bring trouble, they didn’t ask questions. I scored a room early on in my career and made sure to

visit as often as possible. Friends were hard to make in this life and I valued them like family.

“Secluded, huh,” her voice turned sultry. “Are you planning a romantic getaway?”

I winked. “Maybe.”

“As long as I can get to Mars Station while we’re here, I’m all for it.” Irina’s mother had grown up on the station and Irina still had family there. I promised we would swing by to collect some things her mother had hidden away from her father’s side of the family.

I straightened myself and rubbed my shoulder where my harness had cinched. A white light flashed on the sensor panel and I checked the screen. “Looks like there’s another ship in the area.”

Irina turned. “I didn’t see it before we started.”

“Not to worry. They’re probably headed to the observatory on Deimos. I’ve made supply runs there dozens of times.”

The light on the sensor panel turned red and a harsh klaxon blared.

“Reese, what’s happening?”

I grabbed the controls. “Whoever that is, they just targeted us. Switch over.”

Irina tapped a button, sending primary control back to my station.

“They’re closing, brace yourself!” I slammed the throttle to maximum and vectored toward Mars. The acceleration constricted my chest, but the inertial dampeners kicked in providing a slight respite. “Irina, does the computer have a reading on that ship?”

She studied the sensor readout. “Mitsu-Renault Corsair.” She shook her head. “The transponder is registering. I can’t get an ident.”

I grimaced. Corsairs were sleek transports, but their cargo size was limited. Over the years, retrofitted versions became the ship of choice for mercenary groups—and pirates. “They’re not rolling out the welcome wagon. That ship is closing to weapons range.”

Irina’s face turned to a picture of concern. “Can we outrun them?”

I checked the sensor screen and shook my head. “We can’t make the atmosphere in time.” I pointed to a bank of four switches

under the sensor screen and smiled. "Don't worry, we've still got a few tricks left to play. At this range, we can dodge cannons all day, but most of the Corsairs are fitted with a missile launcher. I need you to throw those switches when I tell you."

She nodded, her hands trembling.

I activated the comm system and switched to the emergency band. "Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is the *Gracie Mae II* on approach vector to Mars from Deimos to any ship in range. We are under attack by pirates. Please respond."

"This...EDF Sec... Repeat...mission." A powerful hiss drowned the responder's voice in the broken reply. I repeated the Mayday call and only the hiss of static returned.

"It's no use; comms are jammed." Another light flashed on the sensor panel. "He fired. I've got one bogey inbound." The distance tracking numbers under the approaching missile ran like a waterfall. I counted down in my head. Three...two...one. "Now Irina!"

She flipped the four switches. Three quick bursts vibrated from the rear of the ship followed by a hollow clink as an object detached from the hull. Bright purple light filled the empty space behind us; the plasma flares erupted in their brilliance. The sensor screen dimmed and the lights in the cabin faded to a pale red. I idled the engines, letting our velocity carry us away, and prayed.

Seconds later, the cabin filled with the flash of the missile detonation near the flares, engulfing the decoys with an orange cloud of roiling energy.

I checked the viewport. Our ship continued its path, Mars getting ever closer. Two blips remained on the sensor screen. One angled away and disappeared. The second blip slowed then turned to follow.

"Holy shit!" I screamed.

"It tracked the flares." Irina gave me a thumbs up. "That's good, right?"

"Yeah, but we're not up against pirates."

"What do you mean? They just tried to shoot us down."

I shook my head. "No. Pirates are after cargo. They use weapons that will disable engines or vent atmosphere. It might kill

the crew, but the cargo has a good chance of survival. That missile would have vaporized us.” I glanced at Irina, her posture straight as a pencil and her face pale. “That guy is no pirate. He’s trying to kill us. I set my jaw and spun my seat to face her. “This was a hit, Irina, a good old-fashioned assassination attempt, and I’ll bet one hundred credits who ordered it.”

Irina shook her head. “No; Jacob wouldn’t do that. He may be rash and impulsive, but we’re family.”

How I wish I could forget that my girlfriend came from my ‘involvement’ in a raid on the Almora Cartel, and Irina was the crime lord’s niece. “Lest you forget, Irina, your family ran drugs, smuggled weapons, stole and sold illegal and dangerous technologies. That’s just the short list among their many vices.”

“And only my cousin and I escaped.” She pointed, “And I escaped with you.”

“Exactly, because if Jacob had come, he’d have stabbed me in the back.”

“You mean like EDF Security tried to do to you?”

“Apples and oranges, Irina. I was coerced, and the nuclear weapons they stole had no business being with your uncle. Jacob tried to kill me twice at your family’s base. I’m pretty sure if he believes I had anything to do with the imprisonment of his father, it will only add fuel to the fire.”

She didn’t respond and chewed her lip.

“Irina, that kid is one neuron short of a complete psycho. I know he’s family, but your aunt and uncle were killers. Jacob might have been gunning for just me, but on the odd chance he knows you’re with me, I’ll go with your family’s familicide behavior.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Your uncle had your father killed.”

Irina disengaged the lock on her seat. She spun toward me in an ominous turn, her face contorted in a menacing scowl. “Reese, I know you mean well, but do not presume you know my family better than I do.” An unwelcome harshness filled her voice and the muscles in her frame tensed. Her glare sharpened the tip of a spear aimed at my heart. For the first time since I had known her, she scared me.

“I know who my aunt and uncle are. I know Jacob. That sniveling worm talks tough, but he is a belligerent buffoon who only thinks about himself, and at his core he’s a coward.” She sighed. “As much as I hate to admit it, my father broke the family rules and my uncle’s punishments were never kind.”

I searched her eyes, looking for the vibrant and caring young woman I knew resided there. “I’ve seen him kill people, Irina. He shot Marines invading the station and would’ve killed me had the idiot remembered to count the rounds in his pistol.”

She looked away, her tone remaining the same. “He did that to impress his father. Even with my uncle and aunt in prison, he still fears them. Any unsanctioned killing of family members would invite a reckoning. Uncle would have Auntie do it. He was always terrified of her.”

“She terrified me. She was half cyborg.” A cold shiver passed over me. I had witnessed the brutality her Aunt Ulinda had inflicted on two of my former business associates. “Your aunt didn’t have a sense of mercy and took pleasure in inflicting pain.” The mere memory made my stomach churn.

Irina’s hand touched mine and we gazed at each other. Her softness returned; her smile an offer of forgiveness. “I’m sorry, Reese. I get defensive about my family. You can’t choose family, and I’ve seen the best and worst of them. Now that I’m away from them, I want to do something better. My mother didn’t want to be defined by my uncle’s business and neither do I.”

“It’s, okay. I shouldn’t have gone there either. Near death experiences seem to bring out the worst in me.”

She folded her arms. “Do you always have to joke?”

I shrugged. “Eh, defense mechanism, I guess.” I tapped a button on the console and the sensor screen activated.

Irina froze, panic filling her eyes. “What are you doing? He might see us.”

“Calm down. We’re on silent running. The sensors are passive. If he’s still looking for us, his active sensors will give us heads up.” Still hurtling toward the atmosphere, I waited. No signals appeared. “Whew!”

“Is he gone?”

I nodded “Yeah. I think so. Along with the flares, we dumped a decoy. It broadcasts a duplicate of our transponder on a different vector and distorts targeting sensors. Poor guy’s trailing a ghost headed thousands of kilometers away.”

Irina secured her seat, while I adjusted my restraints and checked the reactor levels. All systems displayed green. “After we make our drop off, I’ll take you to see my outfitter. He sells the best countermeasures this side of the EDF military,” I chuckled, “maybe better.” I continued, “Ninety-nine percent of pilots like that zero in on their target, so sure their systems will hand them their prize that they never think to check—”

The sensor screen beeped.

Oh shit...

“...thermal sensors.”

A dot appeared on the screen, surrounded by a pulsing aura of a sensor sweep. The blip closed on our position.

“One of these days I’m going to learn to keep my mouth shut.”

“How did he find us?”

I started up systems, bringing the ship back to life. “He’s good. We idled, but the reactor is still active. His thermal scan found us after the energy from the missile dissipated. Strap down and get ready for a hard burn.”

I pulled my harness as tight as I could withstand, grabbed the throttle and shoved it to maximum. Acceleration forces pressed me deeper into my chair. I glanced at the sensor screen. Our distance to Mars flashed under our approach vector; the same for our pursuer.

Flattening my ship’s vector to the planet, I marshalled my thoughts. “Irina, we’re not going to make cover. We need to skip if we’re going to survive.”

“Skip?”

“Remember in last week’s training, we covered atmosphere re-entry?”

She nodded. “Yeah, you said we needed to enter an atmosphere like Mars or Earth at the proper angle to reduce heat and stress on the ship.”

“Well, this is the opposite. We’re going to flatten our approach and bounce off the atmosphere like a flat rock on water.”

“We’re going to what!”

I checked the flare stores and grimaced. “We’re out of flares and we need to generate a big enough heat source to blind his targeting system. When we bounce, the impact will generate a lot of heat.”

“Is that enough?”

“No. I’ll have to dump the remaining reactor plasma. It will ignite on the edge of the atmosphere and light it up like a new dawn. That should be enough to draw away another missile.”

She stared at me, those green eyes probing. “This can’t be that simple. There’s something you’re not telling me, Reese.”

I hesitated. “There are a few drawbacks.”

“I knew it!”

“In order for the targeting transfer to work, I’ve gotta kill the reactor. I need you to use the thrusters to keep us out of a flat spin and point us into a new re-entry vector while I restart it.”

“I’ve never done that before.”

“Learn by doing, Honey.”

“Have I ever told you that you’re crazy?”

“Third time this week.”

She deadpanned, “I don’t say it enough.”

I blew her a kiss and she returned it. The sensor screen flashed another warning; a familiar red light accelerated toward us. “New missile inbound! Ten seconds to impact.” I glanced at my control readout. “Eight seconds to skip. Get ready on the thrusters!”

Time slowed, every second lengthened tenfold. In the miasma of continuity, I plotted my next actions. Any miscalculation and we were dead.

Irina called my name; it stretched across the moments. Her fingers gripped the thruster controls, her face pensive and filled with doubt.

A sudden impact rocketed time back to normal. Waves of red flashed from the *Gracie Mae II’s* underbelly. I dumped the remaining plasma, pulled up on the controls and killed the reactor.

In the wash of our skip, the escaping plasma ignited, setting our impact point on the atmosphere ablaze in purple fire. The missile tracked to the massive heat source and exploded.

A purple and orange cloud of energy expanded like a balloon, sending waves of plasma in all directions. Too close to the blast this time, one of the waves hammered into the side of the ship and sent us into a spin.

Jostled by the impact, a buckle from Irina's harness opened. Partially sliding out of her chair, her hands fell away from the controls. "Reese!"

Fighting the rising centrifugal forces and my harness, I reached toward her. I grasped her arm. "I've got you!"

Overcome by panic, her free hand flailed for the harness.

"Irina! Don't panic. You need to concentrate." I slid my hand to her shoulder and pressed.

She turned her head, focusing on the harness. She grabbed a free strap and used it to return to her seat.

Mars' beautiful visage flashed past the cockpit again and again, always below the horizon. I fumbled for the reactor controls. "Irina we're in a flat spin. You've trained on this. Get those thrusters working."

She nodded and grabbed the controls. Quick bursts from the thrusters made the cockpit shudder.

I turned my attention to the reactor. I reset the controls from the emergency scram and started the restart sequence. Outside the ship, the whipping lights of the spin slowed. I smiled. "Great job, Irina!"

The reactor prime button turned green. I pressed it and nothing happened. "No, no, no, no. Don't do this to me, baby." I tried again and no restart. I unbuckled my harness and stood. The steady horizon greeted me outside the cockpit window.

"What are you doing?"

I turned and half-floated to the engineering station in the cockpit's rear. "When I dumped the plasma and scrambled the reactor, residual deuterium must have clogged the injectors. I need to completely flush the system to get the reactor started."

“What do I do?”

I stopped at the station, my fingers passing down the row of modules until I found the reactor systems. “Remember what we practiced. Get us lined up and enter the atmosphere.”

The sensor screen beeped again. “He’s closing on us, Reese!”

“Don’t worry about him! Our re-entry, and his, will blind him and give me enough time to restart the reactor.”

I hoped...

I started the reactor purge process, waiting for the second step to flush the lines. The ship shuddered and a red glow appeared via the cockpit window. Irina had begun our re-entry. The purge completed and I began the flush; my impatience growing with each second of its progress. The vibrations increased and I braced myself between the cockpit wall and base of Irina’s seat to prevent being tossed around the cabin.

Irina glanced back at me. “You okay back there?”

“Yeah, almost done. Has our friend started in yet?”

There was a pause. “No, not yet.”

The flush completed and the status indicator declared the reactor a go for restart. I began the sequence and the sensor system chirped a warning. “Is it him?”

“Yeah, he just entered the atmosphere.”

“I’m really starting to not like this guy!” The vibrations ebbed and I stood, making my way back to my seat. I strapped in and engaged the engines. The hum of power greeted my hand on the throttle. I increased thrust and sent us racing for the surface. “Where is he, Irina?”

“He’s clear of re-entry and closing.” Another alarm sounded. “He’s got a target lock!”

I jammed the throttle into the red zone, coaxing as much power from the engines as I could, and pulled back on the controls, putting the *Gracie Mae II* into a displacement roll. My harness cinched with the increase of forces; my head pounded. Irina’s gasp died to a whisper as she struggled to breathe.

A series of staccato bursts sounded above and behind us, and a stream of orange tracers whistled past. I pressed us into a dive, completing the roll with a bank to port. The pressure decreased and my lungs filled with air. “Where is he?”

Irina glanced at the sensor panel, her face red with exertion. “He over shot. He’s trying to come around. If you had weapons on this ship we can take the fight to him.”

“Irina, if I put weapons on my ship it would entice every bad guy to shoot at me, thinking I’m carrying something they might want.”

“Newsflash, genius, the bad guys are shooting at us for that very reason!”

“I know! I know! If we survive this, I’ll put them on the next upgrade list.”

I continued our descent and scanned the landscape. A thick red cloud blanketed part of the surface. Kilometers long, the Martian dust storm flowed eastward like a wave, its center approaching three identical hills that formed a triangle. I pointed to the formation.

“There!”

Irina stared at the hills. “Can we lose him there?”

“No, in that dust storm.”

“What makes you think he’ll follow us?”

“All the explosions and the light show we generated are going to draw some serious attention. He’s not going to hover around in the open and I don’t think this guy is the patient type.”

I leveled off at two hundred meters, checked our velocity and prayed I wasn’t wrong. We reached the hills and I turned toward the storm.

Irina’s finger tapped the sensor screen. “He’s re-engaging!”

“When we enter the storm, it’ll take several seconds for our sensors to compensate. There’s a canyon ahead. It’s our best chance to lose him and get somewhere safe.” I pulled up a console view from the aft camera and steadied my shaking hands.

We breached the front of the storm, the ship shaking under the assault. The hull chattered like a thousand mice as soil and stone particles bounced off. The camera image clouded, but the image of

our pursuer, closing fast, came into view. He entered the storm and the camera visibility reduced to a few meters.

Irina checked the sensors. “Nothing’s showing. Did he follow us?”

I nodded, carefully counting the seconds after we passed the hills. “He’s coming in hot. Hold on!” I pushed forward on the controls, sending the ship closer to the invisible ground.

The altimeter alarm sounded and Irina screamed. “We’re going to hit!”

“No, we’re fine. The canyon floor dips. An ancient river bed carved it.” A new stream of bright lights flew past us, barely visible in the storm; the assassin’s cannon fire hurtled through our previous position. The stream continued, swinging side to side in a vain attempt to score a hit.

The count in my head reached its end and I jerked the ship in a sharp starboard turn. I gritted my teeth through the G’s, keeping an eye on the rear camera. The cannon fire ended and a massive explosion lit up the screen.

“Woohoo!” My scream didn’t outdo Irina’s earlier call, but I wasn’t keeping score. I gave her a wolfish smile—well, maybe I was.

Irina glanced at my screen. “Was that him?”

I nodded, pulling back on the throttle. “I told you I know this terrain. Once I got my license, I hooked up with a transport outfit out here. We practiced all over this area and this canyon was my boss’ favorite for high-speed evasion drills.” The sensor station beeped. “The system adjusted to the storm. Take a look.”

She activated the ship’s sensors and the contours of the canyon appeared. “This canyon is a maze of twists and turns. How did you learn to navigate it?”

“Practice. Lots of practice.” I pointed forward, squinting against the storm. “There’s an overhang ahead. We can land underneath it. It’ll protect us from the worst of the storm.”

“Why land? Let’s just go.”

I shook my head. “When someone tries to kill me, I make it a priority to find out who they are and why. When the storm passes, I’m going to take a look at that ship and get some answers.”

I set us down under the overhang and powered down the engines. Before I could unbuckle my harness, Irina bolted from her seat and jumped on top of me. Her knee landed hard on my gut, driving the wind out of me.

I groaned. "What are you doing?"

She slid her leg off me and straddled my chair. She pressed her lips to mine, pinning me in place, while her hands struggled to find the harness release.

"Oh," I mouthed as I kissed her back, helping her with the restraints. Together, we worked out a solution and she started on clothes. I stopped her. "Shouldn't we head back to my cabin? I'm not sure my chair can handle us both."

She pressed a finger to my lips and pulled off her shirt. Her sensual grin set my passion bells ringing. "Practice, Reese. Practice."

Over the past few months, I learned Irina was an adrenaline junkie. The excitement, the thrills and the rush were all turn-ons, sexual triggers that I, even in my youthful prime, had a hard time keeping up with. The storm lasted another two hours and we took advantage of all of it.

The name's Reese Daniels, smuggler, transport pilot and moderately successful businessman. I've been called lots of names since I started my current profession like scoundrel, smartass, and miscreant. My aunt once called me a ne'er-do-well, but boyfriend wasn't something I ever expected. I must admit it was different, exciting and a tad bit disconcerting. To be honest, given my track record with women, and as well as my relationship with Irina had progressed, I was sure I was going to blow it.

White smoke billowed out of the Corsair's remains. Metal fragments littered the ground. The impact on the canyon wall had chipped away a large section of rock, leaving the aft of the ship covered in boulders. The bow of the ship lay wedged against the base of the cliff.

I checked my suit's scanner. "It looks like the reactor is inactive, so we're not in any danger." I started down a ledge leading to the canyon floor. "Come on, Irina. Let's get what we need and get out."

"Why don't we just leave? Security or the military will be all over this soon."

I shook my head. "Our pyrotechnics display in orbit has everyone occupied. Security is re-routing all traffic and the storm seems to have covered up our trail. We're safe for now and we need to know who tried to kill us and why or we'll end up being chased by even more bad guys."

She followed me and pointed to the case in my hand. "What is that thing?"

I hefted the case; deep black scarring marred the outside. "It's a communications package I picked up when I helped some Marines a while back. It took some damage when one of those aliens the EDF had been fighting tried to incinerate me. The Marines salvaged it and I, uh, kept it as a memento. If I can't get visual identification on the pilot, I'll use it to talk to the ship's computer or transponder to get our info."

We reached the crash and crept beside the mangled craft, inspecting the damage. "It looks like the pilot tried to veer off at the last second. The cargo bay is still intact, but the rest of the ship is a loss." I waved to Irina. "Let's check the cockpit."

Circumventing a piece of the ship's engine, I climbed on top of the fuselage. "This looks like the best way in." I edged into a crevice between the canyon wall and the ship and helped Irina across the broken chunks of cockpit glass. I gazed inside. The cockpit's metal and glass had collided with tons of stone in a test of momentum and fortitude and the cockpit lost, leaving the scene awash with death and destruction; my blood ran cold. "Go back out, Irina. Don't look."

Her scream turned into a strangled cry. She bent over and gagged.

I steadied her. "I'm sorry, Irina. Did you vomit in your suit?"

She shook her head. "No." Her voice strained and she coughed a few times. "That was horrible."

“Yeah, that’s something I wish I could unsee, too.” I pointed to the rear of the ship. “Go check the cargo bay doors. If I can’t get identification, the panel to the transponder is in the bay.”

“Okay.”

I helped her across the worst of the debris then climbed back into the cockpit. The forward area had been crushed including the main flight controls. I pulled up a schematic on my wrist band and zoomed in. The ship didn’t have an engineer station like mine, but the main computer access lay under a panel in the back of the cabin. A boulder twice my size had crashed through the top of the cabin, crushing the panel and any hope I had of access.

Swallowing hard, I panned to my left toward the pilot’s chair. Our would-be assassin was still strapped in his harness. The chair had broken loose and was wedged against a scorched bulkhead. The dead pilot’s charred suit had holes exposing blackened skin and bone in several places. I was certain the pilot was dead. Well, reasonably certain because his head was missing.

I did a cursory search and found no trace of his head or a helmet. Resigned to an uncomfortable fallback, I removed a device from my suit’s belt. I jammed the end of the device into one of the holes in the man’s suit, looking for undamaged skin. I found a solid surface on his right bicep and pressed a button. Two prongs punctured the skin, entering the muscle and extracted a tissue sample.

I replaced the device on my belt and rejoined Irina. “Did you find the release for the cargo bay?”

She pointed to an undamaged panel. “It’s here.” She pressed in the panel. It slid to the side exposing a small lever.

I shrugged. “Time for a little elbow grease.” I cranked the lever several times until a gap formed in the cargo bay door big enough for me to squeeze through. I moved inside and Irina followed.

A pale white mist filled the cargo bay with silver crates lining one side. Two crates had missing lids and their yellowish white metallic contents were scattered on the floor. I checked the schematic and found the panel to the transponder. I cleared the panel and pulled it open.

“Okay. The transponder’s intact.” I handed Irina the case and opened it. “I’m going to patch in and get what we can.” I connected the cable to a port on the transponder. The access crack was easy, having practiced it over the past several years, but uncovering the disabled ship identification proved difficult. After an agonizing few minutes, I found a buried file.

Irina poked her head at the display. “Did you find it?”

“Yeah. La mano de la Muerte. Death’s Hand.” I unplugged from the transponder and closed the case.

“No wonder the pilot would keep that under wraps. Do you recognize the name?”

I shook my head. “No, but I know a person who might.” My suit’s HUD flashed a warning. “Uh-oh.”

Irina put her hands akimbo. “You really need to stop doing that. What’s coming for us now?”

I glanced at the floor of the cargo bay. “We’re standing on it. Looks like the hired gun was hauling some nasty material. It’s radioactive, probably an iridium isotope.”

Worry crept into Irina’s voice. “Are we in any danger?”

“Not yet. Our suits are protecting us for now, but we’ll have to go through decontamination on the ship.”

We hustled out of the cargo bay and briskly walked back. We entered via the cargo and bay and I re-pressurized. I opened a sealed compartment. “Take off your suit and put it in here. The material in that ship is clinging to the fibers. It’ll take some time for the system to extract it.” I pulled off my helmet and pointed to the front of the bay. “The decontamination shower is right there. There’s a very limited amount of water, so complete your scrub and get out.”

Irina put her suit in the compartment. I managed to climb out of mine when pieces of clothing arced in front of me, landing next to her suit. I glanced up at her and my jaw went slack.

Naked and sporting her sly grin, she gestured toward the shower. “You know how long it’s been since I have had a real hot shower with anything relatable to soap?” She pulled off my jacket. “Let’s not waste it.” She turned and skipped away, black hair bouncing across her back, her pale lithe form as graceful as a swan.

It took every bit of my resolve to not chase after her. She opened the shower and stepped in. She reached out her arm, beckoning.

I stripped off my clothes, falling to the ground in my haste. I gathered them and my suit, stuffed everything into the container and started its cleaning cycle. I sprinted to the shower. I took her hand and closed the door behind us. Leave it to Irina to make an intense and tedious fifteen minute clean and scrub process a hell of a lot more interesting.

I slid out of bed, leaving Irina wrapped in a blanket and deep in slumber. Creeping into the cockpit, I sat in my chair and checked the news vids. There wasn't any mention of the firefight in Mars orbit or the crash of our attacker's ship on the surface. After our visit to the wreckage, I moved my ship a thousand kilometers away and tucked us in a deserted ravine I found years ago. The scanners were clear and I hoped they stayed that way.

I checked the comm panel. Two messages waited. I opened the first message and scowled. "*We need to talk – Greywalker.*"

I huffed and deleted it. Sergeant Maya Greywalker had been the one who blackmailed me into helping her agent infiltrate the Almora Cartel base. The genetically modified security officer had given little choice but to help her with the scheme and everything about those few days left me raw.

I keyed up the second message and grinned, finally some good news. I opened a comm channel and waited. After twenty seconds, the screen filled with a dark eyed beauty. "Good to see you, Jax."

"Daniels." Jax's thick Indonesian accent always put a fun twist to my name. "How's my favorite client?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I'm your favorite? Jax, you're a fixer with thousands of clients, from garbage haulers to cutthroat smugglers. I can hardly believe you would single me out."

She pouted, flipping her long dark braided hair across her shoulder. "I'm hurt, Daniels. You and I go back a long ways."

I nodded and smiled. "That we do, Jax. That we do."
Jacquelin Amari Xindia was the best fixer in the solar system and if anyone could arrange deals to get equipment to the EDF's ultra-secure Proxima base, she would find a way. Fixers, like smugglers, had different relationship ideals. Her close friends and confidants called her Jax, while the rest of the world referred to her as Jacqueline. Only those who earned her ire ever called her Ms. Xindia. "Do you have the information I need?"

"I do, but first things first. Did you make the delivery to Kenton?"

"No, I got sidetracked, hence the need for the information."

She rolled her eyes. "At least tell me the cargo is still intact."

"It is. I'm fine too; thanks for asking."

"Well, Kenton would be very put out if you didn't deliver." She changed the subject, "What would he want with all that stuff anyway?"

"I don't know. He probably has to pay off one of his clients that he pissed off. It happens. Or maybe he's got something special planned."

"Eww. Bavarian dark chocolate and Ortiz sardines? Expensive tastes to get them off Earth and just, eww."

I shrugged. "Hey, it's his life, I'm not going to get involved."

"Why not? He is your friend."

"True, but I have a rule not to solve other people's problems, even my friends."

"But you're a smuggler, Reese. What you deliver may be part of their problem."

"I'm just a means to an end in that case. What they do with what I deliver is none of my business."

She shook her head. "No wonder you've never had a serious relationship. I brought the topic up with your sister during our last call. We both agreed. She says you have commitment issues."

My brow furrowed. "My sister? When did you talk to Gracie?"

"Not long ago. She is a partner in your business, is she not?"

"Yes, but..."

“I,” she accentuated that part, “make it a priority to have my finger on the pulse of all my clients, including their partners. I check in from week to week, perhaps more if there’s juicy tidbits to learn.” Her right arm flashed in front of the screen, a tattoo of an oriental dragon along its length. The colors changed, oscillating across the spectrum as she moved.

“Nice ink. Is that new?”

She smiled. “Yes, yes it is. Enrique is a wonderful artist. I keep him close. Unlike you, I prefer to savor my relationships. He has a wide range of talents I enjoy.”

I cringed. “I really didn’t need to know that, Jax.”

She laughed. “Oh, Reese, you’re too easy to manipulate.” She tapped her finger on her lips. “You know, I did hear a rumor that you hooked your docking collar to Irina Almora.” She leaned closer to the camera, a sly bent to her voice. “Tell me that’s not true?”

I didn’t reply, turning my gaze to the side.

“It is!” She took a deep breath. “Are you insane?! She’s an Almora!”

“Hey!” I shot back. “You’re in no position to judge. She’s not like the rest of her family.”

“Really? What do your precious smuggling rules have to say about hooking up with someone like her?” She folded her arms. “I can’t believe you would even entertain opening a box like that. Pandora would be ashamed.”

Jax was correct. I had a long list of smuggling rules. They existed to keep me alive in this business. Never getting involved in long term business relationships with criminal organizations, gangs, assassins, and sociopaths ranked near the top of my list. The risks of those associations far outweighed the rewards, no matter how golden. I never added psychotic killers to the list, because I was never stupid enough to consider that a possibility. However, working for Jax, tended to break it, but if you can’t trust your fixer, who can your trust.

I glowered. “Jax, you know me. I’ve made mistakes, done some things I’m not proud of, but these past three months with Irina.

I can't explain it. She's fantastic." I pointed at the screen. "By the way, you helped create those smuggling rules."

"Huh. God forbid I should help promote some sanity into my assets." Her eye twitched. "Or worse, provide them with a conscience."

"Jax, I'm being serious. She helped relocate my family after the incident at her Uncle's base, even helping to create new identities for them. I wasn't sure how Gracie was going to adapt to being a Brenda in public, but it's growing on her. Irina provided for supplies and fuel for my ship, and never asked for anything in return."

"Anything?"

"Well, uhm..."

"Ha!"

"She's special, Jax, and...I care about her."

"What does your sister feel about her?"

Calling up the memory of that first meeting on Earth brought a new euphoria. "We spent two weeks on Earth. I don't think I have seen two people become faster friends. They were inseparable, whether we were out on a supply run, sitting at the dinner table, or just hanging in Gracie's room." My fingers tapped the controls of my pilot station. "You've talked to Gracie recently, so you already know. What did she say?"

"She said you had it bad. Whatever that means."

Yeah, I knew, and I think it was time to monitor those relationship and dating vids Gracie had been watching.

Jax regarded me. "So Irina is the reason I haven't heard from you in months. I mean Kenton is a good friend and client, but you didn't return any of my requests."

"I know. I'm sorry. There's just been so many things going on. After we left Earth, we traversed the orbital stations and moved out to the Luna bases. She's been tapping into private funds she set up without her Uncle's knowledge to help with her mother's family. Plus, I've been teaching her to be a pilot. It's taken a lot of work, but she's really got the hang of it. I should be free again after I deliver to Kenton. Do you have any new jobs lined up?"

Jax picked up a data pad and traced her finger along the screen. "I have one new job. Deep Space Transport. I brought it up to a few others, but they've all turned it down."

"Why?"

"The clients are strange. I'm used to the fast talking, full of themselves lowlifes, or the slick businessmen looking to circumvent the rules, but these people are different."

I was suspect. "How different? Not willing to pay?"

"Oh no. They have money. I always do my due diligence, but there is something odd. They are very quiet. When I talk to them about their needs, the schedule, their cargo, I get blank stares, like they're waiting for something before they respond. It's eerie. It's like I'm dealing with some sort of cult. When they talk, it's direct, no embellishments, not banter, just simple details." She huffed. "It's always the quiet ones that freak me out. Never mind. I've put it on the back burner. I'll find something else for you once you complete your drop to Kenton."

"That's fair. But what did you find out about the person who tried to kill me."

Her features hardened; her delivery an ice pick to my skull. "Hector Vega."

My jaw dropped. "You're not serious."

"Very. The ship ident and his DNA match. It was him."

"Oh my God. The man is a stone-cold assassin, one of the most expensive contract killers out there."

"Still think palling around with Irina Almora is good for your health?"

I fell back into my chair. "Who do you know who could even afford this guy?"

She swiped her data pad. "I just forwarded you a list of his known associates."

The list appeared on my screen and I scanned it. "No surprise that Jacob Almora is on there."

She made a set of air quotes. "He is the 'face' of the Almora Cartel at the moment, but there is a lot of turmoil there."

Most of the other names I didn't recognize, but I pointed to the one I did. "Harold Vexler is on this list, the construction mogul?"

Jax shrugged. "Guys like Vexler have their hands in a lot of pies. He has enemies and Vega can be a solution. Talk to your old boss about the list. He can give you some more insight."

"Grimm?"

She nodded.

"I guess I can take a trip to the station after I see Kenton at the Hideaway."

"He's not at the Hideaway. He took Annie to the station."

"Huh, it must have been important to get her up there."

Jax yawned. "It's late, Reese. I need my beauty sleep if I'm going to be able to function tomorrow."

I laughed, "Like you need it."

She grinned. "Flatterer."

"I learned from the best."

"Take care of yourself, Reese. And watch your back." She ended the call, leaving me with more questions and deeper concerns than when I started.

The floor creaked behind me. I spun to find Irina in the cockpit doorway. Dressed in one of my shirts, it covered to mid-thigh, but tight enough to accentuate her curves, a confection for the eyes.

She yawned, leaning against the door. "Who was that?"

I didn't answer. I wouldn't have been surprised if my tongue was hanging out; my gawk was real. I snapped my libido back where it belonged. "That was Jax. She got identification on our hitman."

"Who was it?"

"Hector Vega. A serious hitter with a nastier reputation."

She rubbed her eyes. "Vega, Vega. I think I remember my uncle talking about him."

"Yeah, it seems your family was a frequent customer. I wouldn't be surprised if he offered them a rewards program."

She joined me by the pilot seat and kissed my forehead.

"Reese, do you always have to make jokes?"

"It helps, especially when my life is on the line." I pointed to the list of names. "Jax provided a list of his associates. We're going

to go to Mars Station. I know someone who might shed some light on who was responsible.”

“Who’s your contact?”

“My old boss, Grimm.”

“Grimm, that’s his name?”

“His real name is Kyle Grogan. He was a military fighter pilot before he started his transport business. His callsign was Grimm. It’s a catchy name and it stuck with most of his friends and co-workers, and that’s what everyone calls him.”

“Still kind of strange.”

“Yeah, well, he was in an accident. He did a few test flights on some of the EDF’s fighters a while back. The crash cost him his arm, some good skin reconstruction, and did a number on his voice. The military gave him a new cybernetic prosthetic. Nothing like the supercharged ones your Aunt Ulinda had, but if he ever had to hit someone, they’d know it.”

“He sounds interesting. I’d like to meet him, but I thought we were going to the Hideaway first?”

“Turns out, Kenton and Annie are on the station. I’ll connect with them there first and get down to the Hideaway afterward.”

“Sounds like a plan.” She cocked her head and pointed at a name on the list. “Harold Vexler is one of Vega’s clients?”

I nodded. “Do you know him?”

“Know him? He’s been a close friend of my family for years.”

“Friend-friend or other type of friend.”

She smacked my shoulder. “My mother’s family, Reese. He was always so kind to her. However, when she married my father, my uncle made some overtures. Over time, he became one of my uncle’s best associates.”

“Harold Vexler is a lieutenant in the Almora Cartel?”

“Lots of people are, but most of them don’t know the others. That’s how my uncle liked to do business and not all of those so-called lieutenants are involved in illegal operations. Some provided information, while others generated money.”

“It sounds pretty complicated.”

“It was...but that life is behind me now. I’ll ask mother’s family at the station tomorrow and see if they know anything.”

“Where are they meeting you?”

“I have to reclaim some of my mother’s items in a secure area and then I’m meeting them outside one of the station’s theaters.”

“That’s good.” I met her gaze. Her lips quivered, her eyes held a familiar angst. I took her hand. “I’m sorry about today. Seeing that kind of death is hard to swallow.”

She nodded. “I haven’t seen many people die, especially people like that. I usually heard about those things after the fact. I guess it insulated me.”

“You seem to be handling someone trying to kill us pretty well.”

She ran her fingers through my hair. “It seemed there were always threats against the family or dangerous situations. A few years ago, my father invited one of his best associates to our home for a celebration. After dinner, his associate stopped me at the dining room door. He pinned my arm to the wall and put his other hand over my mouth. He told me that he did a major favor for my uncle and that he was going to be given anything he wanted in return.”

A burning sensation filled my chest and I straightened. “Yeah, that’s not right. What happened?”

“His breath stank of alcohol and pungent desperation. When he moved his face closer to me, I snatched a butter knife from a tray and stabbed him in the crotch.”

Internally, I grimaced, and I shifted in my seat. After an uncomfortable silence, I subtly crossed my legs.

She frowned, looking down at me with a condescending glare.

I cleared my throat; my voice slightly higher than before.

“What happened to him?”

She shrugged. “Auntie ripped his throat out right before she spaced him and his entourage.”

I closed my eyes for a moment. “Yeah, that’s going to be in my nightmares now.”

Not offering any sympathy, she yawned again and pulled at my sleeve. “Come to bed. You need your rest.”

I stood and followed her to my cabin. If tomorrow was going to be anything like today, I wasn't going to get a lick of sleep.

I secured the ship at our berth at Mars Station and waited outside my cabin for Irina. "You ready, yet?"

Footsteps crept closer to the door. "Just a second." A few minutes later, Irina opened the door, but I was hard-pressed to say it was her. False tattoos covered the left side of her face, partially hidden by white hair that could have belonged to a music performer. A strange greenish-yellow glint flashed over her eyes.

"Wow." I pointed to her red jacket and tight black pants. "That disguise is perfect." I waved my hand at her eyes. "You sure you need those?"

She pulled on a set of gloves. "They're a retinal disguise, Reese. The station scanners pick up on retinal signatures and facial recognition. My special contacts provide a cover to match my identification and diffuse the facial scanners."

"Any chance I could score a set of those?"

She sighed. "We talked about this. My uncle had them made for all members of his family. They're keyed to each individual genetic code. The forger who crafted them went underground when my uncle was arrested. I don't know of anyone else who could duplicate it."

"Can't fault a guy for trying."

"You're cute." She kissed me on the lips and headed to the hatch.

I tapped my comm band. "Is your locator on?"

She checked her band. "Check."

"I've set it to a private band that only I can see. Wherever you are, I can get to you."

"I'll be fine, Reese."

"I know, I know. It's a big station and there's the issue with someone trying to kill us."

She grabbed my arm and triggered the hatch. "I'll be quick and meet you after."

"Okay. I'll see if I can find Kenton. I already reached out to Grimm. He's at his office in the Business Sector."

I let Irina leave first. I planned to let her go through Security before me, while I hung back and watched for any trouble. The heavy crowd from the berths made it difficult to track her, but I could have followed that white wig with a sextant.

She cruised through Security and I checked my comm band. Her locator didn't register. Worry crept in and I stood on tiptoes, peering over the crowd. I couldn't find her and the line stopped moving.

Strong hands grabbed my jacket, pulling me out of the line. In a twisting blur, I was thrown into a side room, landing on my chest in a slide. The door slammed shut behind me. Anger welling, I stood and confronted my attacker.

A tall, beautiful woman in a grey EDF Security uniform stood at the door, arms crossed. "You lied to me, Mr. Daniels."

I wiped an invisible layer of dust off my jacket in a disparaging swipe, not holding back my contempt. "Nice to see you again, Sergeant Greywalker. You're a long way from Jupiter station. Did you travel here to harass me or just slumming?"

Her luminous blue eyes flashed with anger. She strode toward me, her glare hotter than the sun. "Irina Almora. Where is she?"

I snorted. "How should I know?"

"You lied to me before, Mr. Daniels," she seethed, "and you're lying to me now."

"Lying is such a strong word. I prefer concealing the truth to protect a friend and not benefiting my accuser. How's that?"

Her fists clenched. "You are dangerously close to being tossed in the station's brig for a very long time."

I took a step back. I had seen her inhuman strength and emotional instability first hand at the Almora base and I didn't want to be on the receiving end of a blow from her. But my snarky mouth lobbed another volley. "Really? On what charge? Being annoying? If so, hold on, I'm just getting started."

Greywalker spun away, her auburn hair whirling in her wake. She paced around the room for a few seconds then stopped to face me. “You have no idea what you’re getting involved in. The danger of being in her presence.”

I crossed my arms. “You mean like the utter terror of being forced to gain the trust of Irina’s aunt and uncle, two verifiable psycho killers, and then betray them? Oh wait, I do. You put me in that scenario!”

The tension in her face softened. “I...regret having to put you through that. The situation had grown dire and my options were limited.”

“Yeah, I get it. Weapons of mass destruction in the hands of whackos wasn’t ideal. I was your excuse. Better yet, I was expendable.”

She hesitated, taking another measure of me. “And you did what was necessary. I thank you.”

“Necessary, right. I barely managed to get out of there with my skin intact. I watched Ulinda Almora execute two of my former business partners because you set them up with an EMP instead of the warhead they were supposed to deliver.”

“Heinrich Wessman and Uri Sidirov were vile, ruthless thugs, who by your own admission were going to kill you for stealing their ship.” She exhaled and lowered her gaze. “Taking down the Almoros was the right thing to do. I’m not going to apologize for that. They were stealing vital weapons from the war effort and could have used them on innocent people.”

I sighed. “It still doesn’t cover the fact that I have nightmares about the whole ordeal.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “It seems your troubles are only beginning to manifest, Mr. Daniels, or else you wouldn’t have been targeted by Hector Vega.”

“How did you...”

Of course she knew. The damn woman knew everything. She probably was the one who kept the attack out of the news feeds.

“If Vega was sent after you, Irina is in grave danger. You need to bring her in. I can help.”

“Why don’t you just pick her up yourself?”

She shook her head. “Any operation like that would be noticed and I need all the players in the field still in the dark.”

“What? You’re using her as bait?”

“No, I am trying to help her. If you bring her in, quietly and secretly, I can control what others see and hear. She can help us uncover the various networks still functioning from the Almora Cartel.”

I looked skyward and growled. “You don’t understand. She doesn’t want your help. She has a lot of distrust toward EDF Security, and from my perspective it’s warranted.”

“I understand, but the longer she stays in the wind, the danger will mount. There are parties interested in what she knows, just like me. Others just want her dead.”

“Yeah, on that last one I suggest you look up her cousin, Jacob. That punk had to be the one who sent Vega after us.”

“My people are tracking his movements, monitoring communications, but he has become even more elusive than his father. Irina has too.” She stepped closer, her blue eyes staring into mine. “She’s on the station, isn’t she?”

I said nothing.

“I can help her, Daniels. Jacob is making new friends, people with a lot of money and influence. If he gains access to all his father’s contacts, assets, and intelligence network, he could be more dangerous than his father and aunt ever were.”

“Why doesn’t he have that now?”

She smiled. “You don’t know, do you?”

I glared at her. “Know what?”

“Irina designed many of the protocols for communications, money transfers, and even transfer schedules for the Almora Cartel. She knows every contact, code phrase, and account number.”

A memory from my first real conversation with Irina flashed into my mind. “Numbers are cold,” I murmured.

“What was that?”

I shook my head. “It’s nothing. She’s not a criminal, Sergeant. She just wants to be left alone.”

“There are powers in motion that won’t let that happen. You need to bring her in.”

I pointed at the door. “Are we done or are you going to charge me?”

She stepped aside. “You’re free to go.” She held out a data card. “When you need to contact me—and you will; use this to set up an encrypted channel. I’ll put my people in place.”

I took two steps past her, spun around and snatched the card. I pointed my finger. “I am not agreeing to anything. I still don’t trust you.”

“Nice to see you again, Mr. Daniels.”

I opened the door and stopped. “One more thing.”

“Go on.”

“What do you know about Harold Vexler?”

Stepping out of the room, I straightened my jacket and rejoined the line. Irina was nowhere to be found. I checked my comm band. No messages flashed and no response from her locator. “Damn it.”

Past the checkpoint, I mingled with the embarking crowd heading into the station proper. I switched to Kenton’s locator and it flashed on the promenade, one level above. He normally didn’t keep it active, but he was traveling with Annie.

Putting off Kenton for now, I headed for my other stop. I took the left path entering the Business Sector, whose walkways encircled a large pillar of vid screens that intersected through every level. I passed two industrial machinery suppliers, their exhibits packed with potential customers. War time spawned big business.

On the opposite side of the walkway, labor outfits displayed their workforce expertise. The only offices packed deeper for potential new employees were the military recruiters. One group, Certified Labor, one of more prominent unionized labor suppliers operating on Mars and other colonies, had modest displays of construction workers and equipment operators. Several muscular men, real life tattooed examples of their membership, milled in front

of the exhibit's office. A few offered me hard stares. I had a few runs with their types in the past. Certified Labor had a distaste for freelance pilots. I gave them a sly wink, certain to get their attention and kept on walking.

Almost to the middle of the district, I spotted the sign, *Reliant Transport*. A large man stood underneath the sign, its red glow reflecting off his grey crew cut. He spotted me and waved.

I joined him, shaking his gloved hand. "Grimm, it's good to see you."

"It's been a long time, Daniels." Grimm's deep baritone like the bottom of a tomb. "I was surprised to get your message."

"I know, I know. I've been busy."

"How's your sister?"

"Gracie? She's fine. I moved her into a new place with our aunt."

"It's nice you look after her. When are you going to bring her out here? I could use another good pilot. I can have her trained and flying cargo in a month."

"She's still a kid, Grimm. She's not ready for this."

"Were you?"

"That was different. I make a living and provide for them. I was older than she is now when I started. I didn't have the luxury of being a kid."

He nodded. "I know. Your parents were good people and I think they would agree that Gracie needs to experience more, learn what life has to offer. The military gave me that opportunity. I'm not saying it should be the same for her but cloistering her away on Earth isn't going to help. I could use new pilots. I've got a new training program. After study and simulators, we start with lots of easy runs between Earth and the Lunar bases. It's not like the crash courses I had when you started."

"One day, Grimm, but it's too dangerous right now."

He stiffened. "Dangerous? Is that why you reached out?"

"What do you know about Hector Vega?"

His cybernetic hand balled into a fist, synthetic tendons popping like muted guitar strings. "What did you do, Reese?"

“That’s...a long story.”

He beckoned me to follow. Leading me to his office, he offered me a seat and shut the door. He paced beside his desk, staring at me, not speaking.

After a few minutes of watching him, I threw up my hands. “What do you want me to say?”

He stopped, an expression of shock and disappointment draped across his face. “Do you have any idea the kind of man Hector Vega is? People on his radar don’t come back.”

“The only things I know are from rumors. However, he’s no longer a problem. I’m interested in the people who hired him.”

Grimm sat in his desk chair and rubbed his hands over his face. “What do you mean, he’s no longer a problem? The man doesn’t give up.” His eyes widened in recognition and he leaned forward. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

I nodded. “You were right. He didn’t give up.”

“You need to tell me everything, right now.”

I relayed everything for the past several months, my escape from Ariel during the alien attack, how I helped take down the Almora base, Greywalker’s involvement, and of course, Irina.

Grimm took it all in with a stoic expression of an iceberg. When I finished, he stood and circled his desk. “I warned you.”

I put up my hands in a placating gesture. “Don’t go there.”

“I warned you what would happen if you started smuggling.”

He went there...

He stormed around my chair. “Working for criminals, constantly at odds with EDF Security, and putting everyone you care about at risk is against everything I ever taught you! Not to mention, a majority of the deals go south and leave you dealing with more dangerous people gunning for you.” He pressed his hands on my shoulders. “Is this the life you envisioned? What about your sister? Do you realize the effect this would have on her?”

“Hey!” I tried to stand, but he pushed me back down. “Listen, working for you was some of the best years of my life. Yes, smuggling is dangerous, but the rewards are there. I’m doing this for Gracie a hell of a lot more than for myself. She understands the

dangers. She worries and I try to be careful, but getting the best money takes risks. That's why I had to go out on my own. I knew you wouldn't understand and Jax—"

He spun my chair around and I slid off. He grabbed me with one hand and shoved me back. "Jax convinced you to leave? My niece got you mixed up in her schemes?"

The room spun for a moment and I grabbed onto the base of the chair to keep from tipping over. "I left on my own, Grimm. I found a couple of small deals and when I wanted to branch out, I ran into Jax and she found me new clients, better pay and helped me vet deals so things wouldn't turn nasty. She's probably saved my skin more times..." I stopped and glanced at him. "Jax is your niece?"

He straightened, the tension in his face easing. "Yeah. You didn't know?"

"Nooo." I couldn't hold back the snark, I just let it flow.

"Huh. I can't believe she never told you."

I rubbed my forehead with the base of my palm. "Me either." I stood and pulled out the data card with the names Jax provided. "But today has been a day of revelation and I'm hoping you can add to it. This is the list of names Jax uncovered with known connections to Hector Vega. My money is on Jacob Almora, but I want to be certain."

Grimm took the card and inserted it into his desk terminal. He rubbed his chin, studying the names on the screen. "I think you might be right. Most of these names are either dead or still in prison. Jacob and Vexler are the only two that are still active."

"Jacob is a loose cannon. Irina doesn't believe he would order a hit, but I have other intel that says he's made some new friends, expanding his influence. What about Vexler?"

Grimm sat on the corner of his desk and folded his arms. "Vexler is an old guard businessman. He's cast a wide web, but construction and material is his core. There have been a lot of rumors flying around about involvement with criminal elements, but it has to be in the shadows. It's not something I or my people have seen."

Grimm drummed his fingers against his arm and his left eyebrow twitched. I'd known the man long enough to know when something really bothered him—and when he didn't want to talk about it.

I pulled the data card from his terminal. "There's something else, isn't there."

Grimm grunted but said nothing.

"Dammit, Grimm. I have people gunning for me. I need to know." I moved in front of him. "It's Vexler, isn't it?"

"Leave it alone, Reese."

"What did he do?"

Tears formed in Grimm's eyes. I'd never seen him cry, hell, I'd never even seen him sad. Disappointed, irate, and so pissed off he couldn't see straight, but not sad. The man had a laugh that was so infectious he could make a turtle giggle. Sad wasn't in his vocabulary, not Grimm. He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a picture. He stared at it for a few seconds and set it on the table.

A younger Grimm in a pilot suit before the prosthetic and restorative surgery stood next to a woman half his size. Happiness glowed from the woman's face, her dark skin radiant in the daylight. She wore a yellow dress, covering her extended belly. The woman could have been Jax's twin.

I stared at my friend. "Grimm, who is this?"

He sniffed. "Her name was Kara. She was my wife, Jax's aunt."

"Jesus." I ran my hands through my hair. "I'm sorry, Grimm. I didn't mean to dredge this up. I'll go." I turned to leave and he put his gloved hand on my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks.

"It's okay, Reese. I haven't...I've needed to talk about her for a long time."

I turned around and gazed at the picture. "What happened to her?"

"I was just starting my transport business, before my accident. Vexler's company needed a fleet of haulers for a new asteroid mining job. I got the contract, pooled my pilots, but halfway through, Vexler farmed the job to a competitor and tried to cut us out. We

protested, but while that was in process both transport groups made runs, the first to arrive getting credit. Things got heated during one of the deliveries and one of my pilots rushed the dock and got rammed by a rival pilot.”

“Wouldn’t Security and the Transport board handle that?”

“They did. They found the fault against the other transport company and pulled their operating license.” He picked up the picture, his fingers tracing Kara’s outline. “However, it didn’t prevent two of their number to pay my home a visit.”

Oh crap.

My heart sank. I didn’t want to ask the next question, but the look on his face beckoned. “What happened?”

“I wasn’t home. The authorities found her beaten and bloodied in the kitchen. The thugs tried to burn down the place, but Kara had triggered our security alarm. Fire crews saved the home, but Kara... our daughter.” Grimm sniffled, holding back a sob. “I, uh, was in a bad place for about six months after. I’d show up at the office like a zombie. I’m certain I wore the same clothes several days in a row. Luckily, my team kept things running.”

“No one could have blamed you for that, Grimm.”

“When the military called about a new test flight program, I jumped at it. It was something to distance myself from everything. Those new fighters were great machines, but my mind wasn’t right. Test pilots need to be laser focused.” He pulled off his glove, exposing his prosthetic hand. He rotated it in front of his face. “I lost it up there and it cost me.”

“Grimm, you don’t have to torture yourself about it. I get it. I understand.”

He shook his head. “It’s not about torture, Reese. This is about my issue with Vexler. He caused this. He didn’t send those people to my home, but his actions put all of it into motion. He’s responsible.”

“And if he’s the one responsible for sending Vega after me, we can take him down. Get justice for Kara.”

Grimm put the picture back in the drawer, slid the glove on his hand and faced me. “It’s not about justice anymore, Reese. I made

my peace with what happened. I had to move on and you know how?”

“How?”

“Family, Reese. When I bring in new pilots, I stress that they are part of a family and if they have families, they need to maintain a focus on them. That’s why I continue to remind you about Gracie. You can’t protect her, certainly not forever. You need to guide her, teach her about the world and how to function in it.”

I considered his words for a moment, and as much as I wanted to shout my objections, he was right. I couldn’t protect Gracie forever. “Alright, once this whole situation with the attempt on my life has been resolved, I’ll sit down with Gracie. We’ll start planning. I’ll gauge what she wants to do. If she wants to be a pilot, I can’t think of a better teacher.” I smiled. “You’d have made an excellent father. Family is important and it makes sense for your business too.”

He returned the smile. “The family concept I use wasn’t my idea.”

“Whose was it? Some generational idea passed down?”

“No, my family wasn’t very close. When I woke up in the hospital bed after the accident, Kara’s mother was at my beside. She stayed with me through every surgery and rehab, put up with my anger, my guilt, my pain, my bullshit, and waited until I was whole again.”

“She sounds like an amazing woman.”

“She was, and Kara was just like her. When I asked her mother why she stayed, she said the answer was simple—Family is important. They care, they guide, they protect, but most of all they love, and love can heal the deepest of wounds. When she left to go home, she hugged me and said that Kara had chosen wisely, and she saw the best things about her daughter in me. That’s why I believe in family and what I pass on. No frills, no fuss, just that principle.”

“I agree, family is important. As much as it weirds me out, I could see Irina as part of my family in the future.” I opened the door. “We need to go find, Irina. Vexler has a presence on this station and I bet Jacob has people here too.”

We left Grimm's office and made our way upstairs to the promenade. Grimm and I separated in the crowd asking shop keepers and a few restaurant staff if they had seen a woman matching Irina's new description.

I struck out, but after a few minutes, Grimm joined me. "I got a hit. Someone saw Irina headed toward the Banking Sector."

"Great, let's go."

"Reese!" shouted a woman from behind me.

I spun to find a short plump woman running toward me. She wrapped me in a hug, her brown hair streaked with grey nuzzled my chin. I tapped her shoulder with my hand, my voice strained, "Easy, Annie. Need to breathe."

She loosened her grip and lifted her head. "It's so good to see you, Reese. What brought you here?"

"Long story, Annie, and part of it involves you." I scanned the crowd around us. "Where's Kenton?"

As if on cue, a rail-skinny tall man stepped into view. His eyes found mine and he stopped, his expression surprised and uncertain. He glanced side to side and smiled. "Oy! Bring it in!" He stepped closer and reached over the top of Annie, embracing me. "Reese, what the bloody hell are you doing here, mate?" he whispered, his East End London accent as thick as ever. "We were supposed to meet at the Hideaway."

"I was headed there, but I got sidetracked. Jax mentioned you and Annie were on the station, so I figured I'd find you first."

He nodded and looked at Annie. "Did you find your sweaters?"

She smiled. "Oh yes. I found some new yarn too; I want to make some scarves. The nights still get cold. We need the regulators serviced."

"We will, love, we will," Kenton assured her. "Those regulators have been nothing but a load of tosh."

I put my arm around Annie. "Come on, Kenton. You didn't bring her all the way up here just for sweaters and yarn, did you?"

“We’re expanding, Reese!” Annie exclaimed. “We even started a new enterprise.”

Kenton grimaced at her announcement. “That’s right we did.” He nudged Annie with his arm. “And we need to keep it on the downlow, right?”

She gasped. “Oh, right. Sorry.” She leaned around me. “Grimm, is that you?”

Standing silent in the background, Grimm took a step closer. “Yes, Annie, it’s me. How have you been?”

“Wonderful as always. You haven’t been to the Hideaway in ages.”

Grimm smiled at her. “I’m sorry, I’ve been too busy running my business these days. I’ll make an effort and come see you soon.” He extended his gloved hand to Kenton. “Long time, old friend.”

Kenton’s tapered fingers grasped Grimm’s in a brief handshake. “Likewise, mate. I might have some business to discuss soon. It may not be the bee’s knees at the get go, but it’ll be worth it.”

Grimm smiled. “Business is always good.” He paused, offering me a sideways glance. “Speaking of which, I have an urgent matter to attend. I’ll leave you in Reese’s capable hands.”

Recognizing Grimm’s intentions, I nodded. “I’ll catch up to you later.”

Grimm waved goodbye to Annie and disappeared into the crowd, heading toward the Banking Sector.

I nudged Annie and together we stepped closer to Kenton, my interest piquing. Vetting business deals was an important smuggling rule. Getting stiffed, turned on, and double crossed happened too often. Business deals with close and trusted friends, however, were like gold—shiny and good enough to sink your teeth into. “So tell me. What’s this new business opportunity that you even had to bring my Annie all the way up here?”

Kenton threw an uncompromising stare at Annie, but she didn’t shy away. “It’s a new mining gig. The Hideaway’s been hemorrhaging for a while now. It’s been hard enough to keep any bits and bobs for us. A survey turned up significant rare metal

deposits close to our home. There were even indications of neutronium.”

The implications of such a find sent a waterfall of credits flashing before my eyes. “Whew,” I whistled. “That could be significant. Especially with the war going on.” The recent alien invasion into the solar system had kicked everyone’s economy into high gear to support the war effort. Valuable sources of neutronium for ship armor and even the rare pidium for space fold drives were more valuable than diamonds.

A twinge of excitement spurred in Kenton’s voice. “I staked a claim for the rights with the Mining Bureau but…”

There’s always a ‘but’. It was becoming an occupational hazard. “But what?”

Kenton sighed. “The claim was contingent on operations beginning within three months after filing.”

“That sounds fast.”

“It is. The need for raw material has accelerated. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the capital and the claim lapsed.”

I frowned, hoping the opportunity hadn’t dried up. “Why didn’t you say anything before? I could’ve helped.”

“I appreciate that, Reese, I really do. I immediately filed a new claim, but another group filed a contested one. It’s called Martian Horizons.” He paused, scanning the crowd. “Sorry mate. I don’t like talking about this in the open. The whole mess has me really brassed off.”

Martian Horizons didn’t strike any bells with me. “I’m not familiar with that group.”

“I don’t know much about them, but they’ve amounted to some serious backing. I’m here to solidify my funding, reach labor agreements and purchase construction materials. It’s taken longer than I had hoped, but if I can prove to the Mining Bureau of my capability and meet their schedule, I can secure the rights.”

The dilated pupils of Kenton’s eyes held an uncomfortable agitation. The lines of strain on his face clued me into something he wanted to tell me—or couldn’t. He had always been a close-to-the-vest kind of guy and I didn’t press. Thinking back on my discussion

with Jax, I decided to take a chance and be a better friend. “What can I do to help?”

Kenton considered my question. He glanced at Annie then back at me. “At the moment, nothing, but like I told Grimm, we’re going to need transports to haul material. Can I count on you, mate?”

I slapped him on the shoulder. “Damn right you can!”

Annie hopped up and down, her excitement boiling over. “It’s going to be so wonderful working with you, Reese!” She grabbed my arm. “Oh, bring Gracie, please. I would love to see to her face to face.”

I grinned. “Deal.”

She hugged me again, giggling with glee.

Kenton patted her shoulders. “I have one more thing to handle and then we’re headed down to the Hideaway.”

Annie released me and I sucked in a needed breath. “Same here. Grimm is helping me with something. I’ll send you a message when I’m about to leave.”

Kenton struggled, but he produced a genuine grin. “Thanks, mate. I’m tired. It’s been a long road and I want this done. Sometimes you never realize what you must do to accomplish your dreams. These Mining Bureau wankers are real sticklers. I just need to mind my Ps and Qs and we’ll all be rolling in credits.”

“Well, I’m sure it will be worth it.”

He took Annie by the hand. “I hope so too, mate. Don’t forget to message us.”

“I won’t forget.”

They waved goodbye, heading downstairs to the Business Sector.

I meandered through the crowd, looking for Grimm and keeping a watchful eye for Irina. I reached the far side of the promenade when Grimm walked out of the Banking Sector.

He spotted me but didn’t make any obvious gestures to confirm. I met him at a bistro at the end of Restaurant Row. “Did you find her?”

He peered over the crowd, not making eye contact with me. “Stop looking at me.”

I picked up a menu from a bistro table and perused. “What’s the matter?”

“I was followed on the way to the bank. My tail was waiting when I left.”

“Is he still on you?”

He checked his comm band, looking disinterested. “Can’t tell. I lost him leaving the Banking Sector.”

“What did he look like?”

“Average height, brown hair wearing a dark brown jacket.”

I glanced up from my menu. “You just described fifty people on this side of the promenade. Are you sure you were followed?”

“I am. He may have circled around and is working toward us from the docking bay side.”

“I doubt it. If he’s smart, he knows you’re on to him. He’ll hang back and try to trail us both. Where’s Irina?”

“One of my buddies at Richmond National said she came inside and met the bank’s VP. He took her to the safety deposit boxes.”

“Yeah, she said she needed to retrieve some of her mother’s belongings on the station. If her mother had something valuable and didn’t want the rest of her family to know, it was probably there.”

Grimm tapped his comm band. “Any luck on her tracker.”

I shook my head and set down the menu. “No. She’s still in the wind. Let’s head back to the docking bay. She may be headed toward the ship.”

I left the bistro and stopped at another table. Grimm left a minute later. When he passed me, I zigzagged through the crowd, edging my way to his side.

“Where did you learn to shake a tail, Reese, old reruns of *The Spy Who Failed Me*?”

“Relax. I know what I’m doing. And for your information, my grandmother loved that show. She called it the best rom-com of her time.”

Grimm sighed and rolled his eyes but didn’t stop walking.

The crowd thickened between two bistros and a restaurant, the air heavy with roasted meat and conversation. Unable to get

through, we turned to the right. Wedged tighter than a Conga line on a slow rum boat, the path ahead became impassable. More people crowded in behind us.

Penned in and unmoving, Grimm glanced down at me. "How are you feeling about your tail avoidance skills now?"

Before I could answer, the mass of people to our left parted like the Red Sea. Several tall and muscular men in black pants and short sleeve shirts flanked the opening. The two closest men gestured us inside toward a secluded bistro.

My day just kept getting better and better.

I gave Grimm a nervous glance. He shrugged and we stepped into the bistro. Once inside, the men shifted their positions to a semi-circle, denying entry to anyone from the outside. Even two EDF Security guards changed their path and forced their way through the crowd to continue their patrol.

The peaceful quiet of the bistro was deafening. Seated at a center table, an elderly man studied a data pad next to a plate laden with pastry crumbs. Not acknowledging our presence, he picked up an elegant coffee cup and sipped.

I cleared my throat.

The man looked up. He set down his cup and gestured to the chair in front of him. "Mr. Daniels, welcome. Please do have a seat."

Grimm stiffened, fists forming, and a stifled curse on his lips. "Vexler," he growled.

Harold Vexler threw Grimm a contemptuous glare. His gravelly voice demanded attention. "Mr. Grogan, would you kindly wait outside. I'd like to have a few words with Mr. Daniels." He paused for effect. "Alone."

A well of red rushed Grimm's face like magma rushing up the throat of a volcano. His body shook, his teeth grinding. He didn't move.

I turned to him. "Grimm."

He ignored me, his breathing coming in deep huffs. The men around us grew nervous, preparing to intervene.

“Grimm!” I shook the big man with both hands.

He snapped his head at me, eyes blazing.

“Grimm, I got this.” I pointed outside the bistro. “Go on. I’ll meet you later.”

He relaxed, taking a few deep breaths in the process. The redness in his face receded. He considered me for a moment and nodded. He walked to the edge of Vexler’s perimeter and stopped. He turned his head to the side. “You can’t trust him, Reese.”

“Please. Not trusting people is my superpower. Go. This won’t take long.”

Grimm left the bistro without another word, mingling with the crowd.

I walked by the remaining guards toward Vexler’s table. Each man held a small grey box in one hand. Taking my seat, I gave my best smile, full of every bit of smugness I could muster. “It’s a nice trick with the boxes. Focused white noise?”

“Better. They’re also a scrambler. I like to keep my private conversations private, Mr. Daniels.” He gestured to his right, a man in waiter attire approached with a ceramic carafe. He added a steaming liquid to Vexler’s cup. “Coffee? I have Pierre here import fresh beans weekly.”

I tapped at the empty cup near me. “Fill her up. It must be better than the two-month-old, freeze-dried stuff on my ship.” Pierre filled my cup and I sniffed. “Oh yeah.” I took a brief sip, letting the hot liquid swirl in my mouth and caress my taste buds. “That’s the good stuff.” I set down the cup. “So, what do we need to discuss, Mr. Vexler?”

“I won’t mince words with you, Mr. Daniels. Where is Irina Almora?”

Sitting back in my chair, I gazed past Vexler’s men and into the crowd. I let my shoulders slump in resignation. “I have no idea.”

“Mr. Daniels. Don’t waste my time. I know she’s here on this station.”

“Wow; that sounds like a great piece of information. Did you come up with that all by yourself?”

“I make it my business to know things.”

“Really, I thought your business was construction and working for the Almora Cartel.”

Vexler frowned, his wrinkled face filled with pits and crags left me wondering if it had ever bothered with a smile. “Business acquaints a man with strange bedfellows, Mr. Daniels.”

“Funny. I always thought that was misery.”

“Depends on the type of business.”

The way he said it made my skin crawl. “What do you want with Irina, anyway?”

An unpleasant strain entered his voice. “That is my concern.”

“Well if she’s here as you say, why don’t your people go find her?”

“I, like many of my associates, prefer to get our information from the most reliable source. It would be in your best interest to tell me. I’m not a patient man.” He picked up his coffee cup and drank, never taking his eyes off me.

My fingers thrummed the table. “Or what, you’ll put another hit out on me?”

He put down the cup and wiped his chin with a napkin. “Mr. Daniels, if I wanted you dead, you wouldn’t be here having this conversation.”

“Oh, so you weren’t the one who sent Hector Vega after me.”

“If Hector Vega was sent to kill you, son, you wouldn’t be breathing. The man is crass and arrogant, but he is relentless. He’s the perfect killer and he wouldn’t stop until you were dead.”

I took a drink from my cup, savoring the flavor. “That’s true. He was relentless. I think it caught up with him.”

Vexler’s eyes widened. “Are you saying Vega is dead?”

“Yep. Smashed, burned, and decapitated against a Martian canyon wall.”

“And you killed him...” Vexler fell back into his chair, his expression turned introspective.

I smiled. "See, there's something you didn't know. Score one for me." I leaned forward, not letting him recover. "Here's another piece of info. Whoever sent Vega after me was gunning for Irina, too."

He stood, shaking, his voice elevated. "I would never harm her!"

I smiled; soaking in the gratification that I could push someone else's buttons for a change. "You see, that is what I call information sharing." I sat back and steepled my hands. "Now why is Irina Almora so important to you?"

Vexler, unsettled by his lack of composure, glanced from side to side quietly assessing any witnesses to his actions. He clearly valued his self-control, noise dampening field or not. His gaze returned to me, filled with hostility, but it didn't last. His professional businessman demeanor returned. He smoothed his pinstriped suit jacket, adjusted his red power tie, and took his seat. "I have known Irina's family for generations."

"I think we already established that."

"I'm referring to her mother's family, not the Almoras." He sighed. "I pleaded with Irina's mother to not marry her father. That life would smother her, devour her soul."

"And it did."

"Yes."

"So what? Now you need to protect Irina as some sort of family debt?"

He chuckled. "I must admit, Mr. Daniels, I'm beginning to like you."

I shuddered. Compliments like that had repercussions.

"I must also admit that my motives are not entirely altruistic. Irina is special and she has information I need."

"Information about the Almora Cartel; operations, finances, etc. The kind of stuff only someone close to Gideon would have?"

He grinned. "Yes, Gideon kept his subordinates at arm's length and for good reason. Many members of his organization are far from pleasant and operated on Gideon's example." He paused.

“You know, you are very insightful. I could use a man like you on my payroll. I could provide you far better opportunities than Ms. Xindia.”

Well, at least I knew where he stood with Jax.

“I must politely decline. As tempting of an offer as it may seem, I like my independence. It has a better chance of keeping me alive. Speaking of that, if you didn’t send Vega after us, who did?”

Vexler traced his index finger across his left palm, following each crease. “It could have been any number of Gideon’s associates, but a hit at this stage would have been premature. The information she possesses is far too valuable.”

“What about her cousin, Jacob?”

Vexler scoffed. “Gideon should have ended that experiment early on. But he promised his mother to keep him involved, even if it meant not passing leadership of the Cartel to him.”

“Would he have put out the hit?”

“Unlikely. Interfamily assassinations are not trivial and he fears punishment, always has.”

“I hear he’s made new friends, bolstering his position.”

“I’ve heard the same rumors. I don’t know who his friends are and frankly I don’t care, as long as he stays out of my hair. Jacob is a spineless bully who would have better luck peddling whores and drugs to upstanding religious zealots than running an organization like the Almora Cartel. He is a borderline psychotic and petulant, but he’s not stupid.”

One of the men in the perimeter left his post and approached the table. He bent low, whispering something into Vexler’s ear. Whatever was said, he gave no sign of acknowledgement. “I have an offer for you, Mr. Daniels. Bring Irina Almora to me. I realize you may not know her exact whereabouts, but I trust you can contact her. I can see to her well-being and you will be compensated.”

I squinted. “What if she doesn’t want to join you?”

The wrinkles of his brow creased. “Convince her.” He stood. “Unfortunately, I have another matter requiring my attention. I’m sure you can see your way out.”

“I’ll consider your offer and I will discuss it with Irina, but I have a request.”

“Name it.”

“What do you know about Martian Horizons?”

He snorted. “That is your price? Information on a fledgling mining company?”

“Indulge me.”

“Very well. Martian Horizons is a relatively new venture. They have claims on several metal and energy sources, including neutronium on the planet and are looking at new asteroid claims.”

“Do you know who runs the corporation or provides their funding?”

“No.”

“Are you doing business with them?”

He scowled. “Mr. Daniels, I have a wide-ranging business, focused on construction. Like you, I have competitors. I don’t have a monopoly. Martian Horizons has made arrangements with other parties.”

“So they’re not using your business for any of their needs?”

“I believe I covered that.”

I nodded. “Thank you for the clarification.”

Vexler turned to leave and stopped. “You have twenty-four hours to bring Irina to me.”

“Or?”

“Or I’ll find her—and you.”

I remained in my seat as Vexler’s perimeter collapsed, his men and his waiter falling in behind him. The sounds of the promenade returned like an oncoming freight train, along with the hustle and bustle of the crowd.

Grimm joined me at the table, cautiously eyeing Vexler’s exit.

“What did he want?”

“The usual.”

“Irina?”

I nodded. “And he politely offered a threat if I didn’t bring her to him.”

“Kind of redundant isn’t it. Don’t you think he tried to have you killed?”

“I don’t believe he did.”

Grimm scoffed. "I told you not to trust him."

I stood and left the bistro. "It wasn't about trust. He seemed genuinely hurt that someone tried to kill Irina."

Using his big frame, Grimm opened a path in the crowd. "I still think he's involved in all this."

"Maybe, but we need to find Irina and get her out of here before he does."

"One of my pilots spotted someone with her description in the Business Sector a few minutes ago. She may be heading back to your ship." Following Grimm, we changed our path and headed for the stairs.

Arriving in the Business Sector, Grimm checked in at his office while I scanned the crowd. I couldn't find her in the sea of people and more arrivals exited the hall from the docking bay, stacking the odds of finding her against me.

Grimm jogged back to me. "She didn't check in here and my people have been watching the docking bay hallway. She didn't leave that way."

Dammit Irina! Where are you?

I took two steps toward the docking bay and stopped. Three men appeared at the top of the stairs. I pegged the two in the rear as bodyguards, the third man I could have picked out of a lineup while wearing an eyepatch and suffering from glaucoma. Jacob Almora flashed a smug grin and touched up the sides of his spiked hair.

Grimm nudged me with his elbow. "Is that him?"

"Yep." My tongue felt dirty. "That's Jacob."

Another man in a brown jacket passed in front of Jacob. The handoff he performed was natural and nonchalant, but I noticed it.

"Hey!" Grimm pointed at the newcomer. "That was my tail."

Jacob held up a hand and walked forward. The body guards stiffened and stood at a guarded position by the hallway, their chests bulging from the obvious body armor underneath their black suits.

Walking along the path on the far side of the district, Jacob turned his head away from me and engaged in a conversation with no one.

Grimm squinted, trying to get a better view. "Who's he talking to? He's not wearing a comm band and I didn't see an earpiece."

"I don't know, but it can't be good."

At that moment, Jacob stopped and wheeled toward me, the green flash of his retinal camouflage like the eyes of a predator. He stormed around the path, pushing people out of his way. When he entered our side of the district, he picked up his pace. Hatred radiated off him like heat from an oven, building in its intensity with each step.

Grimm crossed his arms, admiring the show. "Someone should have talked to him about disguises. Dishwater blonde doesn't go with that gray suit. It looks like his nose is broken. Is he going for a tough guy look?"

I shrugged. "I'm the one who broke it."

"Heh," he chortled.

Jacob finally arrived. He stopped a few strides short of me. "Nice to see you again, Daniels." The words carried more venom than a rattlesnake. He gave Grimm a quick once over. "Who's this, your bodyguard?"

I ratcheted up a cynical smile. "I don't need bodyguards. This is my friend, Grimm. Friends are great; you should learn to make some." I gestured to Grimm. "Grimm, this is Jacob Almora." I put my hand to my mouth. "Oops, maybe I shouldn't have said that out loud. I mean, you are on EDF Security's Ten Most Wanted list."

He glowered. "I don't need friends, Daniels, I have allies. People with influence; and influence is power. I can handle the heat. And besides, I run the Cartel now and if I wanted friends, I'll just buy them like my father did."

"So you're running things now? What's Daddy and Aunt Ulinda have to say about that?"

"They're in prison. They have no say, no power anymore."

"Your dad had lots of subordinates. They're all going along with the change?"

He shrugged. "They'll come around or they'll stop breathing." Murderous intent flashed in his eyes and he balled his hands into fists repeatedly, anxious to lash out, yet holding back. "It's that simple."

Jacob's ultra psycho vibe sent an unsettling chill coursing through me. "What are you doing here, Jacob?"

"Where is she, Daniels?"

"I'm sorry, who? You need to be more specific."

"Where is Irina, my cousin?"

I chuckled. "You know, you are the third person to ask me that today and I'll tell you the same thing I told them. I...don't...know." The words had barely left my mouth, when I spotted a tall thin man escorting a young woman with white hair on the other side of the district. I focused my attention on Jacob, hoping he didn't notice.

Jacob's brow furrowed; his glare intense. "Do you think this is a joke, Daniels? I know you had something to do with the attack on my family's base. You were working for that Security bitch, weren't you?"

I took a step closer to Jacob, pointing my finger at his face. "Hey! I was hauled out of that place kicking and screaming along with your dad and aunt. Security had an operative inside your organization and she fooled everyone. I endured the same questions, over and over. They learned the truth. I was brought in for a transport job, but it never happened and I was never paid. To them, I was circumstantial. They had their big fish and they cut me loose."

"What about your two friends, the ones who brought an EMP into the base? It disabled everything. How do I know you didn't cook that up with them?"

"Heinreich and Uri were set up, man. Security switched the warheads without anyone knowing the wiser." I shook my head. "I hadn't seen them in a long time and probably not long enough. They were assholes, but they were people, and your aunt tore them apart like day-old bread."

A faint shiver came over Jacob, subtle, but I noticed. He had seen far worse punishment instituted by his aunt. He feared Ulinda.

Hell, I barely knew her and she scared the crap out of me. “Auntie always had a flair for the dramatic.”

“I don’t call vivisection dramatic, Jacob. It’s heinous.” I forced the image of Heinrich and Uri’s deaths from my mind. “What do you want with Irina?”

“That’s my business.”

“Well, I’m making it mine.”

He grinned. “I see she’s got her hooks into you already, pulling your strings like a puppet.”

“I don’t know where you get your delusions, but I’m not helping you.”

“You can either help me, Daniels, or get stepped on.” He threw a disparaging glance at Grimm. “My family only needs one head, one leader, and that’s me. It’s time for Irina to bow out, permanently.”

“You’d really kill family? I thought that was against the rules?”

“I make my own rules now, Daniels. If you stand with Irina, you’re going down with her.” A sick twinkle filled his eyes. “Who knows, once I’m finished with you, I’ll pay your family a visit. Your sister’s name is Gracie, right?” He had the look of the devil contemplating a new sin. He licked his lips, his voice as sweet as cyanide. “A teenager; I’m sure I could teach her a lot of things.”

Whether my arm cocked out of rage or reflex, I didn’t care. I sent my punch speeding toward Jacob’s face. It stopped short.

Grimm’s glove hand held my arm. “Don’t do it, Reese.” He nodded to an approaching Security patrol. “This piece of shit isn’t worth it.”

“Listen to your friend, Daniels,” Jacob waved at the passing patrol. “I’d hate have you locked up in a cell and miss everything that’s coming.”

I struggled against Grimm’s grip, but he pulled me away.

Jacob turned back to the hallway and his waiting bodyguards. “Be seeing you, Daniels.”

Grimm let go and I stomped away, my anger boiling over. After a few steps, I spun, confronting my old boss. “You had no right to do that!”

He folded his arms, tilted his chin down and frowned. "You're an idiot."

"What? He basically said he ordered the hit on Irina and me! He threatened my sister, man!"

"He played you like a violin and you let him."

I stood in shock, trying to piece together what Grimm was telling me. My mind still clouded with anger and frustration, I couldn't grasp what he implied.

He sighed. "Jacob came here for one purpose. To goad you; to make you do something stupid and get you out of the way." He glanced at the hallway. "They're heading up to the promenade. My guess, he's got a team looking for her across the station. We need to get her first and get her off the station before this turns ugly."

"Alright, we're in agreement there. I think I spotted her when Jacob was focused on us." I led Grimm to the other side of the district, passing by the hallway to the docking bay. "She was headed this way with a tall man, blue suit."

Surveying the crowd, Grimm tapped my arm. "Got her. She's almost here."

The couple appeared out of the crowd. I moved close, reaching for the woman's hand. "Irina, we need..."

The woman's dark eyes regarded me with suspicion. She wore the same wig, same clothes, but it wasn't Irina. The middle-aged man with the woman put his hand in front of her, keeping me at bay. "I don't know who you are, Sir, but you're clearly confused." They backed away.

"Reese," a woman whispered behind me.

I spun to find a young woman, her pink hair protruding from the hood of a Martian Landscapes sweatshirt. Confidence exuded from her green eyes and her sly grin was all the proof I needed. "Irina, thank God."

She looked at the couple. "It's okay. He's with me."

They nodded and turned back into the crowd.

I pointed my thumb at them. "Who were they?"

She shrugged. "Old friends of my mother's. They're performers, like she was. I heard a rumor my cousin was on the

station and took precautions.”

I checked her arm. Her comm band was missing. “You turned off your locator.”

Her eyes fell. She didn’t say anything.

A heavy hand slapped me on the back. Grimm pulled me close, gesturing to Irina. “That’s how you lose a tail, son.”

I rolled my eyes. “We don’t have time for this; we need to get Irina out of here.”

Irina gazed up at Grimm. “You must be Grimm.”

“That I am, little lady. Nice to meet you, Irina.” He checked our surroundings. “I’d liked to continue this conversation, but Reese is right, we need to get you safe. There are others looking for you.”

“Where can we go?” Irina asked.

“We’re going to the Hideaway. It’s out of the main transport routes and Kenton keeps a strict clientele. They’re the only people who know where it is. It’s the perfect place to hide until we can figure out our next move.”

I tapped my comm band and keyed in a message to Kenton. *We’re leaving and headed to the Hideaway.*

A few seconds later, Kenton replied. *Excellent. Annie and I are already in transit. See you soon, mate.*

Grimm and I flanked Irina as we entered the hallway to the docking bay. After passing the security checkpoint, a new group of arrivals hurried past, leaving the hallway bare. We continued toward the berths and I checked for anyone tailing. There was no one from the checkpoint or the berths ahead.

“I don’t like this, Reese,” the unease in Irina’s voice matched my growing paranoia.

I squeezed her hand. “I’ll call down the ship and let’s get out of here.”

I approached the berth terminal and several figures exited a dark alcove, forming a semicircle around us. I recognized them. They were the laborers I passed when I first entered the station. Of the seven men, a few held metal tools, another a metal pipe, and the remainder punched fists into empty palms.

Irina took a step back, eyeing the men. “Friends of yours, Reese?”

I shook my head. “I think they work for Vexler.”

“What’s he got to do with this?”

The man in the middle stepped forward. “Give us the girl.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Irina snapped back.

Figuring the toughest opponent was Grimm, and they were probably correct, the two men on the right struck first. The first man swung his wrench in a wide arc aimed at Grimm’s head. The attack took too long to generate, allowing Grimm to duck under the blow. He followed with a straight punch from his cybernetic arm into the man’s midsection.

The man doubled over in pain and collapsed to the ground. His fall prompted the others into action, the three unarmed men fell back allowing their armed companions first swings. The one armed with the pipe tried a diagonal swing at me.

I dropped to the floor, landing on my hands. My assailant's swing overbalanced him and I drove a kick into the knee of his planted leg. The joint bent back with a sickening snap. He screamed, let go of his pipe and rolled on the floor.

Not wanting to be trapped on the ground, I scrambled to my feet and grabbed the pipe. His partner circumvented my downed attacker in two steps and sent his prybar in a vicious downward attack.

I barely managed to get the pipe up in time. When they connected, the two weapons released high pitch clangs, filling the hall. My arms ached from the impact and I staggered back. Unfazed by my parry, the man’s left hook sent me reeling into the wall.

Dazed, I tried to focus, keep moving, and find an opening.

He charged; pry bar over his head.

I waited until he committed and jumped to my right.

Unable to compensate, his momentum carried him into the wall. He turned and I jammed the end of the pipe into his sternum, driving the breath from his lungs. He gasped, bowing his head and I whipped the pipe upward into his jaw. Blood flew in an arc as he fell, tainting the wall. Sprawled on the floor, he didn’t move.

Winded, I grimaced from the pain in my jaw and checked on Irina. She wasn't there and neither were the three other men. Grimm stood over his second opponent, delivering two punches in quick succession and leaving him unconscious. He rushed to my side. On the ground a trail of blood led to the berths.

We ran in pursuit. At the first berth, one of the men lay at the closed door clutching his leg. His lifeblood gushed from a thigh wound that punctured his femoral artery. He struggled with his belt, desperate to create a tourniquet.

Sounds of struggle emanated from another berth around a corner. I sprinted ahead, outpacing Grimm and nearly tripped over another man. Blood oozed from under his arm and neck, creating a pool of crimson.

The last of our attackers circled Irina in the middle of the hall. She stood in a combat stance, holding a long stiletto blade tucked against her right wrist. Fresh blood dripped off the weapon.

The man saw me and then Grimm. He circled her one more time, getting closer to us. He broke into a run, angling around us for escape. Grimm laid him out with one punch.

Irina rested her hands on her knees and took a few deep breaths.

I stared at the dead man on the floor and looked back around the corner. The other man she had stabbed no longer moved, his belt lying loose at his side. "Holy shit!"

Irina walked up to me and touched my face. "You're bleeding," her voice remarkably calm.

"I'm bleeding? They're dead, Irina!"

She folded her arms, giving me a derisive stare. "Yes. Yes, they are. It was either me or them and I chose them." Her eyes widened. "What? You don't believe I could defend myself after living in that house of vipers all my life? Grow up!"

Grimm stepped in between us. "Hey! Security will be all over this in a few minutes. You need to get out of here before they lock down the station."

I checked my comm band for any alerts. Nothing displayed. "You're coming with us, aren't you?"

He shook his head. "Somebody needs to be here to explain things. I got a good rep. I'll be fine."

We went back to the berth terminal and I called for the *Gracie Mae II*. When my ship arrived, Grimm scooted us onboard, not giving any chance for a goodbye.

Ten minutes later, we were out of the pattern and headed toward the surface. Irina placed a Medgel pack on my cut and swollen jaw.

"I'm sorry about earlier." I grimaced; the pain starting to ebb. "I shouldn't have assumed..."

"But you did, Reese." She leaned next to me. "I'm not some flower that will wilt if you don't take care of it."

I nodded. "I guess it's part of you letting me see you."

She kissed me on the nose. "Exactly."

I laughed. "Okay. Strap in, we're headed for re-entry."

Our path to the Hideaway included a pass over the Martian North Pole; the icy surface providing a welcome contrast to the Martian rust colored terrain—even in the darkness before the dawn. I set the *Gracie Mae II* down to the north, closer to the cargo dock. Once we loaded Kenton's special delivery onto a transfer sled, we put on our environment suits.

Irina rubbed the outside of her suit. "Are you sure the suits are okay? The cycle didn't complete."

I grabbed the handle on the sled and opened the cargo bay. "It was 98 percent. We'll be fine."

We left the bay and walked to the cargo dock. I keyed in the access code and waited for the doors to open. "Welcome to my home away from home."

"You spend a lot of time here?"

"Eh. It's well suited when you want to get out of your ship and not have to deal with crowded stations or domes." The doors reached their apex and we walked inside. I opened the access panel and pulled a handle, closing the outer doors.

“Why not go back to Earth?”

“Before I met you, a lot of my work was around Mars and Jupiter. Travel time and fuel costs back home are expensive.” I smiled. “And besides, here I have a functioning shower.”

Irina cupped her arms around me, resting her helmet on my chest. “I love you.”

Her words sent a tingle through my spine. It landed in my heart. I laughed. “You really mean that or is that the shower talking?”

“Get me in that shower and find out,” she purred.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The outer door closed and the pressurization cycle began. A few moments later, the light of the bay turned green. I removed my helmet and a series of lights blinked followed by three short bursts. The pressure door into the station clicked; its magnetic lock engaging.

“Dammit.” I tapped my comm band and opened a channel to Hideaway Operations. “Annie, are you there?”

“Hi Reese. I see you made it.”

“Yeah, we’re here.”

“Oh, I didn’t know there were two of you. Who’s your friend?”

Irina leaned close. “Hi Annie. I’m Janet, Reese’s girlfriend.”

“Oh, lovely. Reese, you didn’t say anything on the station.”

I tossed Irina a wink, rewarding her for a good cover. “Well, it was the spur of the moment thing and I brought her along. Can you open the doors? Something tripped in the bay.”

“Let me check.” Her voice returned after a brief pause.

“Radiation sensor tripped. You must have picked up something. It’s low level, so you won’t need decontamination, but the suits need to scrub.”

Irina giggled. “Told you.”

“Smartass.” We pulled off the suits. I picked up a grip pole from a rack and carried each suit to the station’s scrubber. “Annie, are you sure we need to do this?”

“You know the rules, Reese. Remember the last time somebody trotted in here with a contaminant?”

“Yeah, we had to decontaminate the whole station. Particles got into the air recycler.”

Irina carried her suit with another pole. “What was that like?”

I grunted. “Two weeks of hell.” I closed the scrubber and started the cycle. “Annie, where do you want Kenton’s cargo?”

Annie’s voice crackled over the comms. “Just leave it in the bay. He can come get it later.”

“Where is Kenton? I thought he’d be down here to meet me.”

Annie let out a breath. “Power system in pod two started acting up. It’s been playing hell with the comms too. He’s still working on it. I’ll let him know you’re here.”

The pressure door unlocked and we exited the bay. I led Irina through the station to the pod with my room. Before we reached it, I stopped at a large transparent wall panel in a T-crossing.

She glanced around. “Why did we stop?”

I pointed outside. The other residents call this place the Zone. It’s the only place not covered by cameras or scanners, but it’s also great for this. A distant glow began on the horizon and the creeping daylight enlarged the world.

Irina gawked at the sight. “Whoa!”

“Pretty impressive isn’t it?” We stood together, watching the spectacle. As the dawn progressed, I noticed new features in the landscape. Stacks and stacks of construction materials and vehicles filled the middle distance. “Huh, I guess that must be part of Kenton’s new mining venture.”

“Mining, huh,” Irina mumbled.

“Yeah. He’s in some sort of fight with a rival company about mining rights. He needed to get work going now to legitimize his claim. But with all the new buildings and rigs, it’s going to ruin the view.”

“Oh.” Irina continued to stare outside, her voice dispassionate, almost remorseful.

My comm band chirped. “Good, it’s Grimm.” I opened the channel. “Hey man. Did you get everything sorted out on the station?”

The channel crackled with static. “Not exactly. I’m still sorting things with Security. After Security lifted their hold, two groups left the station. Jacob and his men, then some Certified Labor guys. Both the ships vectored toward the pole. I think they’re coming your way.”

My heart raced and I stared at Irina. She placed her hands on the wall, her breath visible on the thick glass. Safety oozed out of my safe haven like blood from a wound. “How long have we got?”

Concern filled Grimm’s voice. “Ten minutes, fifteen tops. Listen, I re-tasked one of my pilots in the area. He’ll be landing in a few minutes. Leave your ship and he’ll get you clear. I’ll have someone else come back for it. I’m sending you his comms.”

My mouth went dry. “Roger that.”

“Reese, how did they find you so fast?”

“Thanks for the info, Grimm. I’ll comm you when we’re clear.”

“Reese—”

I closed the channel, reflecting on the past day’s events; Vega’s attack, my ‘meeting’ with Greywalker, the run-ins with Vexler and Jacob. The picture started to coalesce.

A metallic click-clack sounded behind me. Not the common pings of the station’s air circulation vents, but the action of chambering a round in a sidearm. Irina spun to face me, her eyes going wide. She raised her arms and I followed suit.

Turning my head to the side, I gained a peripheral of the weapon. “Hello, Kenton. Is that the Ruger LCP-X I bought you for your birthday five years ago?”

Kenton glanced at the grip of his weapon, never changing his aim. “I guess it is. How did you know it was me?”

“Outside of my girlfriend, only one person knew I was enroute to Mars, when I was leaving the station, and that I was here.” I turned slowly, staring at the barrel of his gun. “You sold me out. My friend...tried to have me killed.”

“It wasn’t like that!”

My anger grew and my hands started shaking. It took everything I had to keep from screaming. “Let me tell you what I think. I think you needed money. You were so desperate to see your

dream of having a shiny new mining venture, you reached out to anyone who could supply you with the funds and means to make it happen. Jacob Almora has a grudge against me. So you feed him the intel; he orders a hit and you're rich."

"No..." Kenton shook his head.

"Except, I showed up alive on the station, so you contacted Jacob and your business partner, Harold Vexler. Isn't that right?"

Kenton swallowed. "I needed equipment and labor for the venture. Martian Horizons was already on the move and I had to counter it."

"So you told Vexler I was leaving, and he sent his goons after me."

Irina stepped next to me. "You are in business with Vexler?"

He glared at her, his finger caressing the trigger.

I put my arm in front of her. "So when I messaged you I was coming here, you contacted both parties and now they're coming here."

Kenton slid his aim to Irina. "It wasn't ever about you, mate. I swear! It's all been about her."

"Irina?" I leaned into my question, letting my gambit for the truth play out. "You've never even met her until now. What has she done?"

"She's an Almora, Reese," Kenton bellowed. "She's doing what they always do. They lie, they coerce, they steal and they'll kill anyone who gets in their way. I told you I would do anything to make this dream of mine real—and I meant it."

"She's nothing like her family, Kenton. She's done nothing but help me since I've known her. She's helped my family. Hell, I've grown closer to her than any woman I've ever known. If that's what love is, then I'll take it." I glanced at Irina.

She trembled, tears welling in her eyes. She didn't look at me. She pushed down my arm, stepping forward. "He's right, Reese. I did something terrible. It wasn't what I intended, but it happened."

"What are you talking about?"

She lowered her head. "I'm Martian Horizons, or it's my company."

The final puzzle piece snapped into the place. “What?”

“Ever since you rescued me, I’ve tried to find ways to make a better path, to use my family’s resources for legitimate purposes. A way to atone for the damage they’ve done.” She lifted her head, her green eyes full of regret. “Over the past few years, I researched some of the best enterprises to invest in should I get the chance and mining was both lucrative and supportive to everyone’s needs, especially with the war.”

Kenton stiffened, steadying his aim at Irina. “You expect me to believe that shite?”

“I only offer the truth. I had no idea my dream was impacting yours. For that, I’m sorry.”

Kenton gritted his teeth, frustration playing havoc on his face. He didn’t lower his weapon.

“Kenton, you don’t have to do this,” I interrupted. “There’s still time.” I checked my comm band, time was against us. “Your new friends aren’t what they seem. Jacob may offer you all the money in the world, but he’ll kill you once he gets what he wants. That little psycho, like his father, doesn’t like loose ends.”

I steeled myself, knowing how difficult the next part would be. “Vexler isn’t much better. He gave you what you needed and might have delivered, but there are circumstances standing in the way.”

“Like what?” Kenton shot back. “He stands to make a fortune on this investment.”

“The fact he’s under indictment for racketeering, money laundering, extortion, and about a hundred other crimes Security has tagged on him. He wants Irina to get access to all the Almora Cartel resources, but once he has them, he’s going to trade her to Security for immunity.”

Irina snapped her head at me, her voice suddenly cold. “Did you get all that from your friend in Security, that Sergeant Greywalker?”

I nodded. “She intercepted me when I arrived at the station. She provided me with the details about Vexler.”

She placed her hand on mine. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I sighed. "We've both been a little busy. I couldn't find you on the station and by the time I did, we were running for our lives. Besides, I'm not the only one with secrets I should've shared."

She averted her gaze, biting her lip as the guilt of my revelation took hold.

I looked at Kenton. "Let's end this, Kenton. Let's grab Annie and we'll get out of here before it's too late."

His voice broke. "I can't, mate. If I let her go, Jacob will kill me and if Vexler doesn't get her, he'll do the same. I just need to keep her here, let them fight it out and she'll belong to whoever wins."

"Kenton," I pleaded. "Please don't do this."

Outside, the roar of an approaching ship's thrusters echoed in the station. A transport came into view, landing on the other side of the *Gracie Mae II*.

He watched the ship land. "It's too late. They'll be inside soon."

A cloud of dust swirled around the arriving ship, whipping toward the window. A rock the size of my head struck the glass, leaving a small chip on the outside. Kenton flinched at the impact, his pistol moving upwards.

I leaped into him, my shoulder underneath his arm, preventing him from bringing it toward Irina. A sharp bang filled the hallway as Kenton's pistol discharged. A high-pitched twang followed as the bullet ricocheted off the top of the wall.

Kenton cried out as I bore him to the ground, the pistol falling free. I rose to my knees, my fist high, ready to knock my old friend senseless. Blood spurted from a hole in his neck, painting a scarlet display on the nearest wall.

Irina dropped at Kenton's side, pressing both hands against the bullet wound. Blood covered her hands, arms, and shirt.

Kenton arms flailed at me like a drowning man grasping at his rescuer. He latched onto my jacket, pulling close. "I'm sorry, mate," he coughed, blood oozing from his mouth. "Forgive me; I just wanted to give something nice to Annie. She deserves a better lot than this."

I held him down. "It's going to be okay, Kenton. I'm going to get help. There're supplies in my room." I let go and tried to stand.

He placed a shaking hand on my arm, his lifeblood pooling beneath him. "It's too late," he gurgled. "Bollocks, it's cold. It's so cold..." His hand fell away and the pupils of his lifeless eyes dilated.

I dropped my head, placed it against my friend's shoulder, and screamed.

Irina sobbed. "It's all my fault."

I rose; fought back tears and shook my head. "No. Kenton made his own choice. He wouldn't want anyone else taking the blame for him."

I pulled off Kenton's comm band and placed it on the floor. Standing, I stomped on it. It broke, sending sparks and a puff of smoke into the air.

I extended my hand to Irina. She took it and I pulled her up. Blood covered her arms and soaked her shirt. I took off my jacket and handed it to her. "Put this on."

"Why?"

"We need to get to my room. It's just down the hall, but the cameras will pick up the blood on you. The automated security system will put the facility into lockdown."

She put on my jacket and zipped, keeping her hands inside the sleeves. "Won't that just keep Jacob and the others out of the station?"

"Yeah, for a few minutes, but we won't be able to leave and they'll just blast their way in." I led her down the hall and stopped at my door. I keyed in my code, unlocking the door. I pushed it open and ushered her inside.

Inside my room, video screens from hallway cameras sprang to life when I shut the door. I pointed to a door in the back of my small apartment. "Take off your clothes and go wash any blood from your hands and face. There should be some clothes in the closet. Put them on and get back here. We're leaving."

She unzipped the jacket and pulled off her shirt. "Aren't they coming inside now?"

I removed my shirt, bundling it with her clothes. "That ship is one of Grimm's. It has his corporate logo on it. Jacob and Vexler's people aren't here yet, but they will be soon." I tossed all the blood

tainted clothes into the apartment recycler and hit the incinerate button. "Hurry, we don't have a lot of time."

She ran to the bathroom and I pulled on a fresh shirt and jacket from a wardrobe by the door. When she closed the bathroom door, I pulled Greywalker's encrypted communications card from my pants pocket and inserted it into the apartment's comm panel. The channel opened. "Sergeant, it's too hot. I'm getting her out." I whispered. "I'll send more details once it's safe. Daniels, out." I didn't wait for a reply and pulled the card, ending the transmission.

I tapped my comm band, using the information Grimm provided for his pilot.

"Daniels?" the pilot answered.

"We're heading out soon. Meet us outside your ship. It's time to go."

"Roger that. I'll be waiting."

I closed the channel and my comm band beeped with another call. This time it was Annie. "What's going on, Annie?"

"Have you seen Kenton? His locator isn't working and I can't raise him on comms. We just had a ship land, and two more are touching down right now on different sides of the station. The ships aren't responding to any hails."

I rested my forehead on the wall. "I'm sorry, Annie. I haven't seen him." The lie hit me harder than I could have ever imagined. "I'm sure he'll turn up. If I see him, I'll let him know."

"Okay." Worry filled her voice. "What about the other ships?"

"Can you get to the panic room?"

"Yes."

"Do it. If I find Kenton, I'll send him there."

"Reese, you're scaring me."

"I'm scared too, Annie, but it's going to be okay. Be sure to activate the trouble beacon. I know Kenton doesn't like Security coming down here, but I think it's your best option."

"Be careful, Reese."

"You too, Annie."

The station rumbled again, the arrival of our pursuers at hand. I switched off the comm channel. "Irina, we have incoming!"

She ran out of the bathroom, my old jumpsuit hanging loose on her slender form. “Is it my cousin?”

“Yeah, and Vexler’s group touched down on the opposite side of the dome. Irina, I can’t let them get you.” I took her hands, my voice cracked. “I’ve secured you a way out.”

She held my face, her green eyes pleading. “What do you mean me? I’m not leaving you, Reese.”

“God, I don’t want this to happen, but there’s some value in what Kenton had planned. I need them to come after me and at the same time they’ll be fighting each other. With them distracted, you can escape and whoever is left will follow me.”

“No! We must go together.” She wrapped her arms around me; a hug I didn’t want to end.

Reality backslapped me and I pulled away. “I need to get you to Grimm’s transport. His guy is ready for you. It’s just on the other side of the *Gracie Mae II*. They’ll think we are leaving on my ship.”

Frustrated, she threw up her hands. “What then? Where will I go?”

“I’ll contact Greywalker. She’ll have her people meet you.”

“Reese, you know I don’t trust Security.” Frost coated her words.

I shrugged. “At this point, I don’t think we have another choice. With you safe, Vexler will have to face the music on his own and Jacob is bound to do something stupid. His new friends will probably cut him off or someone else will take his place.”

My perimeter alarm beeped. I checked the camera. Two men in environment suits entered the hall. “Do they look familiar?”

She shook her head. “They’re not my cousin’s men.”

“Well, they’re blocking the hall.” I grabbed a chair and moved to the bedroom. “We can get out here.”

She worried. “How?”

I stood on the chair and removed a ceiling panel. “This is my home away from home, remember? It’s Smuggling 101, Irina, always have a backway out.” I pointed toward the back wall. “There’s a service shaft to the maintenance airlock twenty meters that way.”

I lifted her into the ceiling. She turned. "What about environment suits? Ours are still in the cargo bay." Her expression uncertain, she offered me her hand.

I took it and joined her. "The maintenance areas have emergency suits." She kissed me. Dumbfounded, I didn't react. "Was that for luck?"

"No. It was in case..." Tears streamed down her face.

I took her shaking hand, steadied it, and guided her to the shaft. "We're going to make it, Irina. Trust me."

We reached the shaft and climbed down two levels to the maintenance hatch. I opened the suit locker, pulling out the last two suits. I helped her into one. "When we leave the airlock, run behind the *Gracie Mae*. Anyone watching will think we're both onboard. You keep running to the transport. They'll follow me."

"I can't do this." She sobbed and tightened her helmet.

"Yes you can, Irina." I poured encouragement into each word.

Shouts followed by gun fire echoed down the passageway.

Irina screamed.

I pulled on my suit, a seal patch tangled at my waist. "Damn!"

"You can't go out there like this, Reese." Panic filled her voice.

I put on my helmet and held the patch in place. "I'll be fine." I lied. "Get the door."

She opened the inner airlock door and we moved inside. More shouting and thundering gunfire filled the hall. The battle between Jacob's men and Vexler's drew closer.

The airlock cycled, opening the outer door. "Move!"

We ran onto the Martian landscape, my ship in sight. Five strides out, a tell-tale hiss reached my ears, my helmet HUD flashing a warning.

Oxygen and pressure fading, I glanced at the primary pod. The main airlock began its cycle. "Oh hell!"

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Don't look back, just keep running!" My lungs burned and joints ached, each step harder.

We rounded the *Gracie Mae II*, Grimm's pilot stood in front of the transport waving. "Go Irina!" The words came out strangled;

everything hurt.

She ran on, while I accessed my ship's hatch. The door opened and I fell inside. I crawled into the cockpit as the pressure light turned green. Yanking off my helmet, my burning lungs gulped in air.

Managing to reach my knees, I started the reactor. I had to leave, they needed to follow.

Two men raced out of the main airlock. Another pair rounded the dome, firing shots at the first group. One man dropped; his helmet ruptured.

The thrusters on Grimm's transport ignited, lifting the ship off the ground, and sending tremors in its wake. The main engine fired and the ship bolted away, taking my heart with it. It angled up, arcing into the Martian sky and exploded into a fireball brighter than the sun.

I don't know how I managed to stand, my eyes transfixed on the fiery trails arching toward the Martian surface—molten fragments of my shattered soul. The first ember struck the ground and my body quivered; pain cycling from my heart. A second and a third impact triggered wave after wave of agony. My breath came in gasps.

A high-pitched twang filled the cockpit.

I ignored it. This was my fault. I orchestrated it. My penance was due.

A second twang, louder than the first, released me from my stupor. I turned to face my new agitator. Hard eyes filled with malice glared at me through an environment suit helmet. Jacob Almora stood alone; the bodies of the three other men littered the red soil. He glanced at the falling debris, his widening grin reflecting his satisfaction. He pointed his pistol at me and pulled the trigger.

The round ricocheted off the cockpit canopy, but I didn't hear the twang. It was drowned by my scream. I poured all my pain, all my guilt, all my fury, and every bit of air my labored lungs could muster into it. I jumped into the pilot's chair and triggered the thrusters.

The *Gracie Mae II* surged from the ground. I spun her around, putting her stern toward Jacob. A satisfying thump vibrated her hull.

Angling her bow at a forty-five from the ground, I edged her throttle and triggered the bow thrusters at the same time. The main engine engaged, but the ship didn't move.

My eyes drifted to the aft camera. Sprawled on the ground, Jacob Almora struggled to stand.

I added more power to the engines, matching the thrusters to keep the ship in position. My ship vibrated with the strain of the opposing forces. The wash of the engine hammered Jacob to the ground; his suit blackened and melted away.

Again I increased power to the engines and thrusters. The vibration increased, threatening to throw me from my seat. An alarm klaxon filled the cockpit, the ship's computer warning me of potential structural damage. Jacob no longer moved, his blackened body disintegrating. I let out another scream, disengaged the thrusters and the *Gracie Mae II* rocketed into the Martian atmosphere.

Deep Space

Tuesday, November 8

Earth Year 2140

I woke with a bitter taste in my mouth and kicked the empty container of bourbon out of bed. My head pounded and my hands and arms ached. Blood smeared the wall of my cabin, outlines of my fist prints in crimson swirls left a pattern of frustration, anguish, and regret.

Cuts marred my swollen knuckles. I tore pieces of bed sheets and wrapped them while I staggered to the cockpit. A light flashed on the communications console; a message waited.

I flopped into my chair, still hungover and too tired to stand. I pressed a button on the console and a single text message flashed. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry...Greywalker."

The auburn-haired security officer had warned me of consequences, but I had been too prideful, too stubborn, too

arrogant to listen. Caught up in my own sense of payback for what Greywalker had put me through with the Almoras, I missed the obvious dangers. The fuses were lit on that bomb the minute I decided to help Irina and I just stood back and watched them burn.

I flipped through my list of contacts on the console until I found the one I needed. I opened a channel and a few seconds later, Jax appeared.

“Reese?” She stared at me, her expression grave. “You look awful. What happened to you?”

I bowed my head. “She’s gone, Jax.”

“What are you talking about? I heard there was a ship explosion at the Hideaway.” She gasped. “Oh God! Reese, I’m...I’m so sorry.”

“My fault,” I whispered. “I shouldn’t have let her go.”

She shook her head. “I wish I had words to provide some comfort, Reese, but losses like this are just plain hard.” She stiffened, holding back a question before letting it out. “What about Kenton?”

“Kenton’s business aspirations got the better of him. He’s the one who fed intel to Jacob Almora about our locations. He did the same with Vexler, leveraging both to get Irina out of the picture. He was so threatened by potential conflict with Irina’s secret venture to start up mining on Mars, he thought it best to eliminate the competition. Unfortunately, that meant me too. It didn’t go his way.”

Jax pressed her lips together and her eyes distant. Knowing Jax, she was deep in processing the risks of losing a client and potential exposure of her business. “That was a big play for him. He’d always been content to sit in the shadows and run the Hideaway. Did you know she was investing in mining?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Not until it was too late. There were signs, but she covered them. I knew she was securing parts of her family’s holdings and turning them into a legitimate business was the right thing to do. But she didn’t trust me with that either. Given her family life growing up, I can’t blame her.”

“Speaking of family, have you figured out what to tell Gracie?”

A sharp pain flooded my chest, cold, and unforgiving like an icicle in the heart. Irina and Gracie had become more than friends. In the short time Irina had spent with Gracie on Earth, she had become part of the family, almost the sister Gracie never had. Explaining her death would crush her. I thought losing my parents had prepared me for that kind of loss. Love changed that.

Romantic relationships for me didn't work out and feelings created complications. I kept my distance, guarded myself, knowing that whatever time I spent with someone would be brief. Ending them without feelings meant little need for damage control. Well, at least on my end. Irina brought out something in me I had never expected.

I stared at the screen, trying to remain calm. "I'll need to talk to her in person. Telling her over the comms won't help either of us."

Jax gave me a comforting smile. "That's probably best. You should take some time, too. Clear your head; mourn."

I gripped the sides of my chair, using the stress in my knuckles to bury my feelings. "Thanks, but if it's all the same to you, I'll deal with this in my own way. Is that job you mentioned a few days ago still available?"

Jax leaned back. "The deep transport run?"

"Yeah. That one."

"Reese, I told you those guys gave me the creeps, and I work with thugs, murderers and people who would sell their own mother for a credit on a daily basis. Trust me; you don't want any part of that mission. I'll find someone else. Someone with less turmoil in their life. Besides, you need to focus on you and your sister."

"No. What I need is a job, Jax. Is the job still available or not?"

"It is."

I glanced at the co-pilot's seat. Irina's image appeared, her hair tucked over her ears and her green eyes welcoming my stare. Her disarming smile wrapped me in her world and begged me not to leave. I closed my eyes and shut out that world. My words came out hard, hissing like an angry oath. "I'm in."

BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

[The Epherium Chronicles: Embrace](#)

[The Epherium Chronicles: Crucible](#)

[The Epherium Chronicles: Echoes](#)

[Smuggler's Valor](#)

[Smuggler's Guilt](#)

[The Expanding Universe Volume 10](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.D. Wilson was born in 1968 in Troy, Ohio and has been an avid fan of science fiction and fantasy from a very young age. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering and has supported the systems and networks in several of the largest Supercomputing data centers in the world. His early thirst for adventure in reading began as he explored many of the great stories of Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. As his reading scope expanded, Mr. Wilson was fascinated by strange new worlds from the magical of Middle Earth and Narnia to the far reaches of space in Star Trek and Babylon 5. As a science fiction author, he strives to integrate a realistic flavor to his worlds by providing his readers a feel for the real science in science fiction. A topic he loves to discuss with his friends and readers. Mr. Wilson still lives in Ohio with his wife and their two sons.