

CHAPTER TWO

“...where close to fifty of this generation’s hottest film and music stars are gathering for a huge fundraising event aimed at providing aid for the refugees who have streamed in from Ypsilanti over the past decade. Actor and political activist Philip Cho has been quite vocal as of late regarding the so-called ‘shameful’ treatment of the reabsorbed squatter population, as well as a vocal critic of Cerulean Holdings, who he has publically likened to ‘Imperialists’ ...”

– Billie Xander, EXO Entertainment News

Red lights flashed as an alarm began to sound, blaring down the halls of the airship. Through the window, I watched the pieces of the escort jet tumble end over end, trailing long streams of smoke as they made their way down toward the city below.

"What the hell was that?" Greta gasped.

Dad didn't answer but I had to give him credit, he stayed calm as he sat back down at the console and began working the keypad. When his phone chimed he answered, his voice steady.

"Yes," he said, still working keys. "Tell me what's happening."

He listened for a few seconds, and then glanced at us. The drunkenness had gone, and the color had begun to drain from his face.

"Alice..." Cody said. His teary eyes were wide with shock, and he stepped in place like he wasn't sure what to do. He was looking to me, but I didn't know what to do either.

"Come here," Greta said to him. He looked at me, not sure if he should, but his fear won out and he went to her. She knelt down, and put her arms around him.

"One of the escort jets was just shot down," Dad told us, his voice tense. "Don't worry, the second escort is targeting the source of the-"

Something whooshed outside, and I saw a dark shape headed toward us. I flinched as it whipped past with a loud, high-pitched shriek and then turned in time to see a contrail appear through the opposite window. It curved, changing course sharply as the missile rocketed up out of sight and then there was a second explosion. The airship's wing reflected a wave of rolling flame, and a loud whistle of air began to drop in pitch ominously.

Pieces banged against the hull as smoke trails crawled past the window outside. Both of the fighters accompanying us over the zone had been destroyed, and the airship itself had now begun to shake. The engines whined as the floor suddenly dropped, forcing me to grab onto the table for support. The floating pen slipped out of the suspensor field and rolled across the polished surface before falling over the edge. Dad got his footing back and snapped his fingers at us.

"All of you, let's go," he barked. "We're leaving, now."

"Leaving?" Greta blurted. "We're ten thousand feet up!"

"The escape pods."

"Escape...?"

"We're abandoning the ship! Go! Take the kids!"

She was still staring, aghast, as dad ran to the storage cabinet and used his thumbprint to unlock it. He heaved open the hatch and dragged a heavy metal case out from inside. Something banged into the ship, and smoke began to blow past the windows to my right, orange fluid

spraying through the trail. The pitch of the engines changed, and something sputtered. The floor dropped under my feet again, making my stomach lurch.

We're crashing. This is really happening. The airship is going to crash...

"Yuric, what are you doing?" Greta called. He'd unlatched the case and was on his knees in front of the computer console. He removed the metal panel there and threw it aside before dragging a set of cables from the case and fitting the connectors inside.

He grabbed the black book off the table, and then thrust it into Greta's hands.

"If for some reason I don't make it," he said. "Use it to bury her."

"What?"

"Just go, I'll be right behind you!"

"But-"

"Get my children out of here!"

Greta snapped out of it then. She grabbed my wrist and her cold hand clamped down hard. She was stronger than she looked, almost pulling me off my feet. Cody stumbled, and she hauled him back up.

"Through there," she said. "Stay ahead of me where I can see you!"

She ushered us through the exit, and I looked back to see Dad working the contacts on a panel mounted inside the metal case. He was staring at a small screen there intently, not looking

up even when the ship bucked again and sent the glassware from the wet bar crashing down across the floor.

“Keep us in the air as long as you can!” he shouted into his phone. “I’m securing the data now, then-”

Greta slammed the door shut behind us as we moved through the glass tube that connected one end of the ship to the other. Passing through it when we first arrived had been exhilarating, but now it was all I could do to keep my legs from giving out. Above the sky tube whole sections of hull had sheared off to expose the metal framework and mangled mechanics underneath, while a thick blanket of black smoke poured out from around them. When I looked down, the earth seemed to spin far below as pieces of the ship and escort jets sailed toward it.

"Move!" Greta shouted.

Tracers from somewhere below flashed through the air and rounds began to punch through one of the airship’s wings, popping off aluminum plating as they tracked across the length of it. One of the engines flashed so brightly I saw spots and then it exploded with a blast that I felt in my chest. The chassis blew into pieces and the huge metal ring broke free from the far end. It spun past, nearly shattering the sky tube as it went.

"Go, go!"

The airship tilted, and sent us staggering toward the inner curve of the tube as the city down below rose up to fill it. I fell onto my hands and knees on the glass, staring through to the sprawl far below as Greta ran past.

I grabbed Cody's arm and dragged him after me through the tunnel toward the hatch at the far end as Greta hauled it open. As we passed through the other side of the skyway, a section of the ship broke loose and punched straight through behind us. Air whistled through the hole as a crack rumbled down the tube's length in a thick, white ribbon.

The tunnel sheared in half and broke away as Greta heaved the door shut behind us, cutting off the sudden rush of wind. Ahead, crewmen stormed past through a connecting corridor and we went after them.

The ship shook again and we stopped short as the floor erupted in front of us, rounds blowing through the ceiling above then booming through the interior of the ship. When the noise stopped we ran blind through the thick smoke, Greta screaming as we passed through a searing pocket of air.

"Dad!" Cody screamed. "Dad!"

Greta shouldered through the door ahead and we spilled into an open hangar. Immediately the roar of wind drowned everything out and I squinted into blue sky as my hair whipped and stung my face. As the rush of air pulled at me I saw the silhouettes of the crewmen against the distant clouds, screaming faintly as they fell.

I looped my purse strap over my head to keep it from flying away, and looked around. We were in a corner of the shuttle bay, in front of a bank of doors that led to each of the emergency drop vehicles. Fifty yards from where we stood the deck just ended and I was looking out into the open air. The rest of the bay was gone, with only snapping lengths of wire and loose deck plating to mark where it had been.

I sucked in a breath, feeling as though I were suffocating even as the cold air filled my lungs. I couldn't breathe. The current threatened to drag all three of us across the floor and send us out into the blue, and it was all I could do to keep my footing.

Greta gestured toward a row of drop ship hatchways ahead that were still intact, screaming something I couldn't make out. A sheet of plastic webbing used to secure cargo flapped in the breeze there. She pointed again, and shouted.

“There!”

She crouched, and then lunged for it.

She made it about halfway before she lost her footing and began to slide across the deck. As she tumbled past she managed to grab onto the webbing, and hold on as the deck tilted underneath us.

Loose equipment and debris snapped free and slid down the slope as Cody and I hung onto the hangar door. A heavy crate went end over end and clipped Greta as it passed, knocking her back and tearing her hands free from the net.

She went sliding down after it and Cody screamed. She almost went over, but managed to grab onto something and stop her fall as the crate flew off the edge and plummeted into the sky beneath her.

She started pulling herself back, but she wasn't going to make it. Not in time. The ship tilted again, evening out the slope of the deck, and I grabbed Cody by one wrist.

I dragged him along after me as I pushed toward the rippling plastic web. Halfway there one foot slipped, but I managed to keep from falling. As the rushing air threatened to pull me away, I grabbed the flapping mesh and pulled Cody into the net with me.

“Hold on to me!”

The drop ships were just ahead. I got one arm around Cody’s waist and he held on in a death grip as I made a run for the closest one. I collided with the metal hatch as more debris went flying past behind us. There was a support bar along the wall next to it and I hooked one arm through, reaching with my other arm while Cody clung to me.

I spotted a red button next to the hatch and I slammed my palm down onto it. The door sprang open, and as soon as the way was clear I heaved him through. He fell back into the chair there, his eyelids beginning to flutter. I strapped the harness down over him and pulled the straps as tight as I could.

“Alice,” he called. “Alice I-”

I pulled the launch lever, and backed out as the hatch came back down.

“Alice!”

The door sealed with a thud I felt through the floor.

Steam puffed out in a ring around the seam, and then, with Cody still screaming silently through the glass port, the pod dropped down the tube and was gone.

I pulled myself toward the next hatch in the line, but black spots swam in front of my eyes and the strength was going out of my body. I was losing oxygen, and blacking out. When I reached out and hit the button I could barely feel my hands anymore.

The hatch opened, and I could see the inside but couldn't reach it. I pulled myself toward it, but my muscles wouldn't respond. My fingers began to slip.

A hand grabbed the back of my waistband and pushed me forward. I managed to curl my numb fingers over the lip of the hatch and pull myself in. The black spots in front of my face began to merge together as I spilled into the seat.

Hands grabbed my shoulders and spun me around, pushing me firmly back into the chair. It was Greta, white hair rippling crazily around her face as she climbed in with me to pull the harness down.

It felt strange, but at that moment everything seemed to slow down. The chaos around us grew distant, as if it were happening somewhere else, or only on a movie screen. At that moment it was Greta that became real to me. Her face looked so pale, so much paler than usual even, and there were dark purple lines under each of her eyes which had turned bloodshot but what really struck me was the determination that I saw in them. Only minutes before I'd thought of her in the best of times as an affable, if stupid, trophy for my father. In the worst, I'd thought of her as a vapid, gold-digging parasite but whatever else she might be she clung on in the face of certain death to make sure I was strapped in, and only when she was sure that I was did she pull the launch lever.

She started to back out and I grabbed her. "Wait!"

She leaned forward and pushed the black book to my chest until I took it. She kissed me on the cheek, and then ducked out under the door before it closed with a thud.

“Greta, wait!”

I saw her one last time through the port. She looked through, her big blue eyes terrified but there was something else in them as well. Relief, almost. She put her palm to the window.

My stomach fell as the ship dropped. Greta disappeared down the end of a long tunnel and then with a whoosh and a bang the world began to spin around on the other side of the glass.

CHAPTER THREE

“...moving now to entertainment news, the controversial reality program *In the Zone* has been officially renewed for a third season on cable network ABS. The news has been met with mixed reactions from both fans and advertisers in the wake of controversy surrounding the death of contestant Alex Ackerman. Ackerman, a strong favorite to be last man standing during the four-month stint inside Ypsilanti’s borders, went missing during one of the challenges in episode eight. His remains were later found, and it seemed he’d been killed and eaten...”

– Andrea Rhodes, WDBX News Network

I awoke to the sound of wind huffing softly against the walls around me. Somewhere a light was flashing, turning the insides of my eyelids pink, then black again at regular intervals. Something dug into the crooks of my shoulders, and when I tried to lift my head I felt wet strands of hair across my face.

What happened?

When I tried to move I winced. My back hurt. Everything ached, and my head felt heavy, like I'd been asleep for days. The last thing I remembered was Greta's face - the white witch staring at me with big, blue, bloodshot eyes as I dropped down a well and into oblivion.

Something tickled my cheek and I pawed at it with one hand. My fingers were numb but I felt wetness on my face and lips as I wiped it, and tasted salt on my tongue. When I cracked open my eyelids, I saw my other hand dangling in front of me along with my purse which still hung from my neck. My fingers were stained with blood and the panel behind them had red spots tracked across it. The flashing light came from the panel.

I gasped suddenly and jerked fully awake, pain pounding through my head as I lifted it to try and orient myself. I was strapped into a chair, but the chair was facing down toward the floor.

The harness was holding me in place with my head dangling down, and the blood had rushed to my face.

I forced myself to shift position, taking the pressure off of my right shoulder until the circulation began to return and I felt pins and needles in my fingertips. When I could move them again, I found the harness buckle, and felt for the release catch. The buckle sprang open, straps clattering to either side of me and with nothing to hold me in place I fell forward and crashed down onto the panel. My forehead struck the corner, making my eyelids flutter.

Struggling, I put my palms on the surface of the console and managed to push myself back until I was squatting in front of it. I leaned back against the seat behind me, and took a deep breath.

"The drop ship," I whispered to myself. I was inside one of the airship's escape pods. I could hear wind outside that peppered the hull with sand.

Rubbing my eyes I tried to block out the pain throbbing at my temples and at the back of my head. I remembered arguing with Dad, then the attack. The jets were shot down, and then whoever did it went after us. We'd still been over the bloc when the ship was attacked, but where? How far along were we?

Not far enough. I knew it without having to check. I fumbled in my purse until I found my phone, and held it in my shaking hands. It still worked. Chammy's furry canine face gazed back from my wallpaper, her long tongue hanging out as she smiled her doggy smile.

"Call Mom," I croaked. It went to put the call through, paused, then flashed red.

No signal

“Damn it...”

I looked around me. The ship was an emergency escape craft; it had to have a radio or something in it. I looked over the console. Some of the contacts glowed weakly, while others flickered on and off. The flashing light was labeled EMERGENCY BEACON.

Okay, good. So some kind of signal had been going out ever since the crash. It was possible that Cerulean had picked it up already, and help was on its way.

No light shone through the drop ship's one window, and in the glass I could see the reflection of my own face, smeared with blood. A dark shiner had already begun to form under my left eye, and a gash at my hairline above the eyebrow oozed blood. I checked the console again, forcing myself to go slowly until I found the radio controls. When I swept my finger across the contact there, it lit up, flickering from yellow to green.

"Hello?" I said, my voice hoarse. I cleared my throat before leaning closer and trying again. "Hello?"

No one answered. No static, even, just dead air.

"Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

Silence. I took a deep breath and let it out.

"My name is Alice Walshe," I said. "My father is Yuric Walshe of Cerulean Holdings. We were travelling over the Ypsilanti Bloc when our airship was attacked. We..."

My voice trailed off as I realized that I didn't know for sure if anyone except for me had gotten down safely. Cody, maybe. I'd gotten him into the drop ship and launched it, but I never actually saw Greta, or Dad, get on any of the escape crafts.

"I need help," I said. "I don't know where I am, and..."

My throat closed up, and I began to cry. It made my head feel like it was going to split open, but I couldn't help it. I bent over and hot tears filled my eyes and rolled down my cheeks as I placed my forehead on the cool plastic of the console.

Had they gotten off the ship? I hated that woman...I hated her so much, but when I thought of the look on her face as she watched me go it made me feel terrified that she hadn't gotten out. I remembered how she'd kissed my cheek before she left and felt suddenly like maybe I hadn't been fair to her. Did she get away? Or did she fall? Had Dad...?

"Please," I said into the radio. "We need help. Someone say something. Please..."

There was a pop of static, and for a second I perked up as I thought I heard a voice. I couldn't make out what it said, but I was sure it was a voice.

"Hello?"

The static popped again.

"...initiate the blackout," a woman's voice said. It sounded far off, like she was somewhere across the room on the other end.

"Hello?"

The radio crackled, and then the green light went dark. A second later, the flashing beacon light did a double blink, and then it went dark too.

I swept the contact again but it didn't light back up. The whole console seemed to have suddenly gone dead.

"What the hell..?"

The tears started welling up again but I stopped them, wiped my eyes, and forced myself back under control. Crying would do nothing to get me out of this mess. I had to focus.

Feeling along the edges of the console I found a compartment that contained a folded, laminated flier. It contained pictures of the ship's interior, explaining in different languages where everything was. One diagram showed a man removing a case from under the seat.

I reached underneath and found what looked like a small metal suitcase, colored yellow with black stripes. I put it on the console in front of me, undid the latches and opened it.

Inside were five sheets of food tablets, a sheet of water purification tablets, and a first aid kit. The first aid kit contained gauze, bandages, antibiotic gel, a suture kit, and three syringes containing bone knitter, an antiviral battery and pain killer.

I checked my phone again. Still no signal.

"The booster," I whispered. I reached into my purse, digging around at the bottom for the emergency signal booster. Did I still have it, or had I left it on the ship?

"Please be there, please be..."

Something moved outside, and I froze.

I listened, my heart starting to pound as I strained to hear over the wind. Something moved again, a footstep maybe, then there was a thump against the ship's hull.

"Told you," a girl's voice said, muffled, but close by. Right outside. She had a thick accent that I couldn't place.

"Yeah, yeah." A guy's voice that time. He had the same accent.

"Pay up, dog."

"Pay up. My ass, pay up."

I shrank back, trying to make myself as small as I could while the two circled outside the ship. I could hear their footsteps crunching on pavement or concrete as they went around, one on one side, one on the other. Every so often, one of them would tap the outside experimentally with something hard.

"Right where I said, dog. Pay up. Half the pack."

"Dig out that cell, I give you two, maybe."

She snorted. "Half the pack."

"Three."

"I got that cell, dog dick. Half the pack."

I cringed as boots clanged against the hull outside. One of the two climbed up, and I heard footsteps clomp above me.

"Watch it," the boy warned. The girl sounded unimpressed.

“They dead.”

One of them fiddled with something up there, a loud pop made me jump. A wheel or handle squealed, then with a heavy thud I saw a thin crescent of light appear in front of me. Whoever they were, they were coming in.

I groped for the emergency kit, and opened it back up. Scrambling, I grabbed the food and water purification sheets then stuffed them into my purse. As the footsteps shuffled in front of the hatch, I took one of the antibiotic packs and swallowed it. They were time-released and would keep the gash and any other wounds I might get from getting infected for a good couple weeks. I took the pack of syringes and a fistful of bandages from the first aid kit, and stuffed those into my purse along with the sheets before closing the kit back up and stowing it back under the chair.

"Move it, chica," the guy said, nudging the girl so he could see in.

I looked around desperately but there was nowhere to go. I was stuck in a cabin big enough to hold the chair, the console, and me.

He grabbed the handle of the hatch and gave it a tug. The hinges crunched, and flakes of something sifted down on the other side of the door, falling past the crescent of light. I could see his shadow, now, and heard heavy, metallic clicking as the shape of a rifle with a curved magazine moved past the opening.

"Wait!" I called.

The hatch had just begun to move when it stopped just as suddenly. No one on the other side spoke. I sat scrunched behind the console as best I could, and held my breath as I waited.

The seconds ticked by, then the hatch moved again, less sure this time.

"I'm not armed," I called out. "Don't shoot."

The door groaned as it flew open suddenly and I squinted into the circle of light. A dark shape squatted in the middle, and I could see the barrel of his rifle pointed directly at me.

"Please," I said again, holding up my hands.

"Who there?" the girl called. The shape watched me for a minute.

"A girl," he called back.

"What?"

"Ten-six," he called, his voice hard and unfriendly.

"W-what?"

"Your name, dog."

"Alice," I said. As my eyes adjusted to the light I was able to see his face. He had dark skin, and a head of thick, wavy black hair. His eyes were dark brown and shone like marbles as they stared down at me. His thick lips showed no sign of humor.

"You a toy?" he asked.

"What?"

"For the bosses?"

I realized he was asking me if I was brought on the airship to service the executives, and frowned. My head throbbed.

"No," I said. "I...was travelling with my father."

"You Cerulean?"

I wasn't, at least, not yet, and while I hoped to still be one day I decided I'd better keep that to myself.

"No...He and my mother are divorced," I said. My hands were still up between us like I could somehow ward him off, but I couldn't stop them from shaking. "He was just...taking us to her, dropping us off. That's all."

His eyes narrowed.

"Us?"

"My brother and me," I said. When he didn't respond, I added, "My father, and his assistant. Along with a crew of four."

"Crew gone," he said.

"They might have gotten out. Some of them."

"Two ships come down. This one," he said, banging the hull with one hand. "One other. Just one."

I didn't say anything. I just waited, trying not to stare at the gun. If it was true, then Greta and my father had...

He doesn't know, I told myself. He talks like he knows, but he's just some dumb squatter. He doesn't know anything. He...

"Okay," he said. He lowered the rifle.

"Okay what?" I asked him.

"Come on out," he said. He held out one hand toward me.

Hesitantly, I reached out and took it. His hand was warm, and his grip very firm as he closed it around mine. He moved back, helping hoist me out of the inside of the pod as he did.

I stepped out onto uneven, cracked pavement that was covered with scattered sand and gravel. Little blades of green grass had grown up in the dirt between the chunks of blacktop, casting dim shadows. The sun had just begun to go down, and dark, ominous-looking clouds hung in the sky somewhere off behind him where the remains of the city loomed.

The guy looked to be about my age, and only a few inches taller than me but sinewy and tough-looking. Bands of sweat-sheened muscle stood out in his shoulders and his arms, which were covered in tattoos. He had an expressive face, with big eyes, a broad nose, and wide mouth. His automatic rifle hung from a strap across his chest now, and I could see an extra magazine duct-taped to the stock. For the first time in my life, I found myself face-to-face with a real, live squatter.

He didn't look quite like the ones you usually saw on TV or, more recently, in Cody's card game. He was dirty, sure, and a little on the scrawny side, but he didn't look like a zombie or dress like he found his clothes in the garbage. The bright green t-shirt he wore looked almost brand new.

The girl with him looked to be about the same age, and might have been pretty if her face hadn't been so hard. She was a lighter shade of brown than him, with a short shock of kinky black hair held back by a bandana. Her nose looked like it had been broken at some point, leaving it crooked, and the top half inch or so of her left ear was missing. Her abs stood out underneath the frayed bottom of her half-shirt. She had a rifle, too, and stood with her hands draped over it as she leaned against an old telephone pole and stared daggers at me.

I looked past them, and for a moment I could only stare. From the air the sprawl had looked ugly, but on the ground it was something else entirely. The street had warped, sank, and split over the years leaving deep pot holes and sections where grass poked through. Ahead, the curb had been obliterated by IEDs that must have been set back during the first eviction, leaving two craters in the road where scrubby bushes were now struggling to grow. Paper trash, some so old and degraded it was no longer identifiable had accumulated along the curb on either side and the sidewalks were piled with garbage and old, weather-beaten furniture and appliances. They formed a landscape of rusting and rotting hulks stacked higher than my head in places. The buildings that towered up behind the dumping grounds had their windows boarded up, the brick, concrete, and plywood covered in spray paint and faded remains of old government notices. Ahead on my right, a fire had gutted half the block leaving only burned out shells behind. Entire buildings, each maybe twenty stories tall, gone.

I turned back around and saw the drop ship had actually bashed through the corner of one of the buildings down the street before it crashed and skidded to a stop where it now lay. Fallen bricks and concrete rubble had shattered the ancient garbage and old vehicles rusting below, and through the gaping hole left behind I could make out racks and bins of old clothes flapping in the

breeze. Judging by the column of smoke off in the distance, I'd come down a long way from Cerulean's footprint, or whatever was left of it.

"Basilio," the guy said. I turned back around. In the distance behind him, lightning flashed somewhere inside the black clouds.

"Huh?" He pointed to his chest with one thumb.

"Basilio. You can call me Bass. That there's Maya." The thunder reached us, and rumbled through the sky.

"Alice," I said. "Alice Walshe." I held out my hand and he shook it, but when I offered it to Maya she just sneered.

"Glass twat." My face fell, and Basilio grinned.

"You on the wrong side of the wall, dreg," Basilio said. He turned to Maya. "Go on and dig that cell out, I'll make camp."

She glared at him for a few seconds, and then pushed off the power pole with one boot. She stalked past him, snatching up a dented gray tool box as she went, and then climbed in through the drop ship's hatch. Basilio looked me over, and grinned.

"You pure sugar, I give you that," he said.

"What?"

"Sugar," he said again. "A slice. A piece." He leered a little, still grinning, and I got his meaning. I shifted uncomfortably.

“Thank you.”

He reached out and flicked one of my ears with his finger, smiling.

“Don’t,” I said, waving him away.

“Touchy, huh?” He smiled, and shook his head. “Someone gonna come for you, or what?”

“Huh?”

“Come for you. Some Cerulean hand gonna come to take you away or what?”

“I don’t know,” I said. Something about the radio and beacon cutting out didn’t seem right to me, but my head still reeled.

“You don’t know?” Basilio asked.

I checked my purse again and found the signal booster.

“Thank god,” I breathed. I looked up at Basilio. “I think so. I think they are.”

I turned on the booster, keeping it in the purse where he couldn’t see but nothing happened. The LED didn’t come on. I tried it again.

“Come on...”

Nothing happened. The battery was dead. I’d swapped it with the one in my phone so I could keep playing with Cody, so I could keep playing that stupid game, and...

“Damn it.”

I looked down the street, and fear began to prick in the back of my mind. It looked like a war zone.

“Whatchu got?” Basilio asked, nodding at the booster. I dropped it back into my purse. These people used electronics for trade at the border’s recycling centers, I knew. Any electronics that might contain rare earth elements would be valuable and I didn’t want to lose it, or the phone.

“Nothing,” I said. “I should go to the nearest border zone.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing.”

I clutched my purse with both hands.

“Nothing valuable,” I said. “I just-”

“We decide if it’s valuable,” he said. “Whatchu got?”

“Nothing,” I said again, but when the faint grin on his face began to fade, I backpedaled. “A cell phone and a booster.”

“We can trade those,” he said.

“I know.”

His look stayed serious for a few seconds more, then softened again.

“Border zone, huh?” he said.

“I can’t stay here.”

As soon as I said it, especially the way I said it, I thought he might get mad but he didn't. He laughed, instead.

"Closest one's fifty miles," he said.

My heart sank. Fifty miles was a long way, and the sun was already starting to go down.

Basilio shook his head as he hefted his rucksack from up off the ground.

"Come on, glass," he said, waving for me to come closer.

"I'm not a...glass," I said, still not sure what it meant but sure it was an insult. "My name is Alice."

"Yeah, well, we gotta make camp. Help me get a fire going."

I hesitated.

"I need to get to-"

"We camp here," he said. "Night's coming and rain hard on it. You stay with us, or start walking."

I hesitated, looking back down the street until he turned and started to walk away.

"You go off on your own, though," he called back. "You gonna die, for real."

I stood, staring down the street for another minute. Lightning flashed again in the bank of dark clouds, and a cool breeze came that caused trash to skitter across the pavement. From inside the drop ship's cabin, Maya kicked something and cursed.

I turned and followed him into the ruins.