

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For a minute, I forgot all about Alexei. I stood, stunned as Nix reached for me, but before his elegant fingers could touch my cheek I took a step back. His signal came in strong, cut by hesitant stops like he couldn't control it, which felt strange because he'd always been cool, and a little distant. This felt intense. It left me staring, with the cigarillo dangling from between my parted lips.

"I thought you were dead," I said. "All this time."

"No. Not yet."

Nix approached again, his boots clacking on the graviton plating. The closer he got, the stronger the feeling grew. It felt as though he had something bottled up inside, some pressure building that he didn't know how to release. Up close, it made me a little nervous. It felt like, at any moment, he might snap.

"Nix, what's wrong with you?"

A gust of wind blew his smell over me, a dank, sour smell that tingled in my nose. I felt his hunger, even as he fought to control it, and the pulses of desperation that bled through in the wake of it. Beneath it all, I felt his fear.

"Nix," I said. "Hey . . ."

His footsteps rapped to a stop on the plating and he stood, his draping suit fluttering in the wind like a cape while his sunset pink eyes watched me.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come before now," he said. "I've been cut off."

I didn't know what he meant, but I could see something had gone wrong.

"It's okay." I waved him closer. "Sit down."

He did, but still his body trembled. I sat down in front of him, and took one of his hands. I could feel

it shaking.

“Nix how are you alive? Where have you been?”

Behind the serene glow of his saucer eyes the main mass of his brain shifted, pushing the smaller one underneath back deeper.

“I’ve been on the ship.”

“No,” I said. “You couldn’t have been. I looked back through the gate, and I saw you get caught in the fire.”

“When I began to burn, I was gated back to the ship,” he said. “The interior of the structure contains an advanced form of perfluorocarbon, an oxygen-rich liquid which we breathe while inside.”

I remembered, after gating back with Sillith’s remains, waking up to the blackness inside the ship. I remembered the terror I’d felt when I first drew the cold fluid into my lungs.

“I very nearly died, but it kept me alive until I could regenerate,” he said, his voice box flickering in the dark.

“You told me they’d exiled you, because you didn’t kill me like they wanted. You said they’d kill you.”

“I believed they would. However, when they examined my memories and saw the true extent of my newfound individuality, they decided to study me, rather than send me back to the vats.”

“Study you? Why?”

“We aren’t like you,” he said. “We are a much closer to what you might describe as a hive society. We share all info, all concerns, burdens and workload. I am a deviation from a long established norm. Your influence has changed me in a way that they hoped, I think, might be used as a bridge between our species. I can not be certain, but I think they even considered me for the position of female.”

“But you said...” I trailed off as what he’d said registered. “Wait, what?”

“When our population reaches a certain threshold, we divide the populace into two distinct regions, and create a new female for the new group,” he said. “We’ve never reached that point on your planet, and so you have only ever witnessed a single female. Typically the need is anticipated and the female is grown,

but any male can take the role of female, once the right trigger is administered.”

I ran my fingers through my hair, wondering how the day could get any weirder. “I don’t think I can get my head around you being a female,” I said.

“If they ever truly considered it, then they decided against it.”

“So then they let you go?”

“No,” he said. “She kept me in stasis for a time, until they could reach a consensus regarding how to handle me.”

“Who did?”

“The current haan female, Ava, and—”

“Ava?” That surprised me. “But she helped you. She helped all of us when Sillith came.”

“It is not personal,” he said. “When I didn’t cooperate, it constituted a significant breach in our way of doing things. I presented her with a difficult challenge.”

“I guess.” I watched him shake. The thin stream of terror that still bubbled over through the cluster told me that personal or not, he’d been shaken bad. Even when Hwong had tortured him, I’d never felt anything like it. “She seems different, now, I guess. Even on TV.”

“Ava had not, at the time, taken her place as the new haan female. Once Sillith died, she did. She has merged, since then. Her perceptions are not what they once were.”

“Merged? Merged with what?”

“She has all of the memories of every haan female to precede her. They are present in her consciousness as virtual personality sums.”

“Even Sillith?”

“Every female. She is, but is not, the Ava you knew. The benefit of so much history and experience comes at a cost. She is well aware now of all the evils both men and haan alike have done. She knows what Sillith and Hwong tried to do, that they conspired to wipe out the Pan-Slav Emirates. It colors her perception of your race.”

“Then she knows what Sillith did, too, before she died.”

I wondered if he would deny it. He paused, and I watched his brains shift in their soup as he struggled with it for a bit.

“Yes,” he said. “She knows. She knows that humans are being converted.”

“Nix, tell me—was that the plan all along?”

“No.”

“Sillith had to have been working on that for ages. You’re telling me no one else knew?”

“What Sillith did was not part of some greater plan,” he insisted. “She acted alone.”

I looked at him warily. He seemed to be telling the truth, but he’d lied to me before.

“We do not intend to change you,” Nix said. “We would never try to make you something other than what you are.”

“I wonder sometimes if you know what that is, Nix,” I said.

“You have the potential to change us more so than we do you,” he said. “When the time came, Ava did not package my memories for distribution throughout the hive, but they were shared among a select group. When they realized my bond with the humans had altered my perception, they decided to explore my memories in greater detail.”

“Explore them?”

“By extracting them, and, most likely, growing clones to run simulations on—”

“So they did plan to kill you?”

“Eventually. I knew I had to escape, if I was to avoid that.”

“I thought none of you were afraid to die,” I said.

“As I said, my perceptions have been altered. When I felt my life begin to slip away, I discovered that I was afraid. I didn’t know what to do. I panicked, and killed the scientists in charge of my handling. I killed . . . many more as I fled the ship.”

As he recounted the story, I could sense a renewed surge of anxiety from him. Anxiety and guilt bled through, flaring up through an undercurrent of misery.

“Hey . . . it’s okay, Nix.”

He reached out and touched my arm, and when he did I jumped.

“Let me see,” he said, gesturing at my left arm. He’d spotted the bond tattoo there.

“Wake up Alexei.”

“Not yet. Let me see.”

I let him take my arm, and felt the warmth coming off of him as he scooted closer, until our legs were touching. I held it out next to my right where the bond bands for Dragan, Vamp, and Alexei ringed my biceps. He compared the band on the left side to them, tracing the name with one long finger.

“That’s my name,” he said.

I pulled my arm back and looked at him, crossing my arm over my knees and resting my chin there.

“I didn’t intend to get attached to you,” he said, “but I did.”

“Me, too.” In spite of it all, I realized that I’d missed him. He stared back at me, shivering in the summer heat. “Wake up Alexei.”

“I have to tell you something,” he said. “I know what you’re planning to do.”

“How can you know—”

“One of Sillith’s creations, what you call the haanyöng, has learned. In tracking you down, I obtained the information via a scalefly-transmitted memory payload.”

I felt my eyes go wide. “Do all of the haan know?”

“No,” he said. “Not yet. The new haan still retain their human identities, at least for a while. They often don’t understand how to forge a symbiosis with the scaleflies at first. Those that do, however, have the potential to receive these memories. They will learn who you are, and what you intend to do.”

“And what about what the haan intend to do?” I asked.

“My people are aware of what Sillith started, and what will happen if it is found out before we can stop it.”

“Can you stop it?”

“We will try—”

“But you don’t know if you can.”

His eyes flickered.

“I’ve come to try and make you see reason,” he said. “I promise you that a worst case scenario has been studied, and a response prepared. Whatever it is—”

Something boomed from across the city, loud like a crack of thunder. I turned, and saw a fading flash in the distance.

“What was that?” Nix asked.

Another bright flash came, and then another followed a beat later by two more loud booms.

Transformers, I thought. Blown power transformers. The test . . . Vamp’s power cut. It’s started. . . .

I looked around, trying to spot the Zun-Zhe district when the first flicker of light drew my eye. I watched as a whole block went out, then another. The rest rolled fast after that, the blackness spreading out until the brilliant lights of Hangfei had a single dark patch off in the distance.

Even with all that had happened, I felt a smile creep onto my face. It had worked. Vamp had somehow wormed his way into the system, and his cascading failure idea worked. He’d shut off the power to hundreds of thousands. Not for long, and in an area where there wouldn’t be any haan, but he’d done it.

For me.

“Sam,” Nix called, “what have you done?”

“It’s just that one spot,” I told him. “It’s just a test to see if—”

Another boom sounded, and then more lights flickered somewhere else, somewhere outside of Zun-Zhe. The Gong district, maybe? Another dark patch appeared in the sea of lights, a city block gone black. Some of the lights dimmed, then several more blocks went out.

“What was that?” I asked under my breath. “Was that supposed to happen?”

Vamp, I called. Vamp are you there?

The 3i connection dropped. Then, like a tidal wave, the darkness began to spread out from the two blacked-out sections.

Even as more booms rolled through the city, a strange sound began to swell. A low hum rose in pitch, then became an angry electric buzz. It broke into overlapping tones, a shrieking, dissonant chord that

drowned out everything else.

The darkness moved across Hangfei, winding between lit sections in patterns that looked random. I could still make out the distant movement of cars, pinprick headlights streaming through the dark as it picked up speed, and began to rush toward Ginzho.

“Something’s wrong,” I whispered. “This isn’t supposed to happen like this. We have to get off the building. Now.”

The electric screech continued as one by one the surrounding blocks went dark, cascading all the way to Ginzho until the buildings around the tower winked out one by one. Streams of traffic slowed as they suddenly lost connection to the airway guides.

I turned back toward Nix as a wave of dizziness came over me and sent me staggering to one side.

“Sam, get on the rigging. . . .” I heard Nix shout, but his voice seemed far away and his voice box was cutting in and out.

The last of Ginzho’s lights blinked out. I had never seen the city dark like that before in my life, and the sight of it scared me.

Dizziness turned to nausea that made me double over, hugging Alexei close. I struggled to see as bile crept up in my throat. The lights were still on in some parts of the city, but far away. In Ginzho, only the tower and the buildings surrounding it still had power.

“Sam,” I heard Nix shout, “get on the—”

His voice cut out, overlapped by a low, raspy whisper. The sound was deep, resonating in my head along with a series of clicks like the creeping legs of an insect.

Haan speech. I remembered the sound from Shiliuyuán Station, when Sillith had crept closer to me in the darkness of the tunnel. The sound came from Nix. I could hear Nix’s true voice.

The blackout . . . the field is failing. . . .

The lights directly ahead flickered, and the tower, having held out as long as it could, went dark. As soon as it did, my body began to feel lighter. My feet began to come up off the ground underneath me. I felt Alexei’s body begin to peel away from the wall and start a slow slide away from me.

The graviton plating. With the power gone, the field had scattered. We were going to fall.

I pushed myself back up onto my feet as true gravity took over and the whole world flipped. I spotted the washer rigging ahead to my left, a direction quickly dropping away to become one story below. I lurched forward and grabbed Alexei's arm, hauling him up as he began to stir.

As the last of the power drained from the plates, I hooked one arm around Alexei's waist and ran for it, stumbling as the floor underneath me dropped away and turned back into the wall that it was. As I pushed off with one foot and the sole peeled free, the cigarillo came loose from my mouth and began tumbling down the building face end over end.

I lunged, feet peddling in the air as the last of the graviton emissions faded. Alexei panicked and began to flail as we fell down toward the street eighty stories below. I managed to keep my arm around him as the momentum of my leap sent us sailing down onto the washer rigging, and I struck the metal railing that surrounded the platform. My stomach hit the bar, forcing the air out of me as my head pitched down toward the deck and I went ass over end to crash down on my back next to Alexei. A bucket of cleanser and squeegees toppled over and went sailing down toward the street below.

I rolled over, pain pulsing through my ribs as I crawled across the platform to Alexei. Off to the side, something big and dark whooshed past, one limb cracking against the rig's railing before it sailed by.

"Nix!"

I looked over the railing in time to see a dark shadow in front of a honeycomb flash of light, like a sunspot, before Nix plunged into the gate he'd created and was gone. I blinked, and the light disappeared.

"Alexei," I hissed in his ear, still seeing the afterimage of the gate as I shook him. His eyes swam, and blood trickled from his nose. "Alexei, are you okay?"

"I'm okay," he moaned, waving me away.

The electric racket stopped, its echo rumbling off into the night sky. Through the railing I could see the dark city blocks sprawled out in front of me far below. The grid hadn't failed, and the haan ship still had power, but big sections of the city had been completely knocked off the grid. I looked out over the dark section, and saw one island of light off in the distance in the middle of it.

My GPS was off but I didn't need it to know where that was. I could see the big central tower, and the electric lanterns from the protesters at the outskirts. The light came from Xinzhongzi. The tower, where the gonzos had set up shop, still blazed with bright electric light.

I looked and saw that the 3i connection had come back up. I used eyebot to take a snapshot, and sent it to Vamp, along with a message.

Vamp, what happened?

I don't know.

What do you mean you don't know; I thought this was supposed to be just a test?

It was. This shouldn't have happened. Our calculations couldn't have been this far off.

It spread all the way to Ginzho. You have to shut it off.

We're trying. It's cascading out of control.

Xinzhongzi still has power.

Xinzhongzi? They shouldn't.

Check the picture I just sent you.

I stood, leaning against the rail for a better shot, when something moved down below. Something big. I saw it more in the way that it covered the lights of the traffic streams below than I saw it directly, a long, undulating shadow that cruised over the streets below about twenty stories down. I squinted, straining to see in the dark but before I could make out anything more it snaked around the corner of Ginzho tower and disappeared out of view.

“What in the hell . . . ?”

“What?” Alexei said. He sat up, wiping the blood out from under his nose.

“Did you see that?” I asked.

“See what?”

Another wave of nausea hit and I doubled over. The air rippled in front of me for a second, growing stronger until I clenched my teeth, and swallowed bile back down.

The rippling stopped. The nausea stopped too, just as abruptly, and I found myself staring down at the

rigging's deck.

"See what?" Alexei asked again.

"Nothing." I looked back down over the city.

Light flickered and one of the city blocks got its lights back. The towers lit up again, and then one by one the blocks surrounding it came back to life. Within seconds the cascade reached Ginzho, and the district blazed back into brilliant, bright color. The graviton plates hummed back to life, tugging the edge of a stray rag in one of the rig's buckets toward it.

Vamp, the power's back on.

I see it. We don't have full control yet, though. Get off the street and get inside.

"What happened?" Alexei asked, his eyes wide. "What was that?"

I didn't answer him. I just stared out over the city, watching as it came back to life. The sound of overlapping horns and squealing car alarms drifted up for a minute, before easing off, and shifting back toward the reassuring blanket of urban white noise that was only marred by the odd siren.

"Come on," I said.

"What?" Alexei asked. "Back on the wall?"

The power's back. We can't stay up here all night.

He nodded. I gave him a few moments, then opened the gate in the railing and stepped out onto the plates on the other side. I closed my eyes as my center of gravity changed again, feeling a nervousness as I crouched there that I hadn't felt in years. When the shift was complete, I stood, and waved for him to come out with me.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go."

I took his hand, and coaxed him back out onto the plating. He squeezed my hand tightly as I guided him back toward the gate, and the chaos down on the ground below.