

MONSTERS ALL THE WAY DOWN

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ISBN: 979-8-8645-8032-5

I hope you have as much fun reading this as I had writing it.

Chapter 1

Cid tapped his claws on the screen of the control module in his pocket while he watched Charlie fold t-shirts into crisp little squares. Per protocol, Cid had shadowed the human through its daily routine for two weeks, learning what he could. This was done while cloaked using the spatial disruption function on the control module. Charlie had no clue there was a gray-skinned monster eyeballing him as he alphabetized the tubes and bottles in the medicine cabinet. The human was equally oblivious to Cid's muttered curses as he moved to the kitchen and gave his spice cabinet the same treatment.

Cid gripped the biowave recorder stowed in his other pocket so tight the plastic groaned. This device would sync Cid with Charlie's brain waves so he could, essentially, hear the human's thoughts. So far, Cid wasn't certain if he was dealing with the most boring human on Earth or a potential serial killer, but the prospect of eavesdropping on the internal monologue of either gave him an itchy, need-to-tear-something-apart feeling. He considered closing his fist, crushing the recorder to bits to buy him some time, then he remembered the higher-ups were watching him extra close these days and he released his grip. His last assignment had ended with more screaming and blood than was generally accepted which meant he had to go strictly by the book this time or face the consequences. Cid couldn't remember the last time he'd cracked the spine on "the book" but he'd had a lifetime of experience dodging consequences.

The biowave recorder was already calibrated. Without pulling it from his pocket, Cid felt along the face of the device for the correct button, took a deep breath, and pressed. He watched

Charlie dust the top of his refrigerator, but now Cid also heard, in his own head, an elaborately concocted fantasy where Charlie quits his job in a fit of righteous anger after delivering an eloquent speech condemning corporate greed from atop the conference room table. Applause and cheers and “you tell 'em, Charlies” played in his mind as the human scrubbed the fridge spotless. Spraying cleaner along the door gasket, he bowed to his adoring co-workers; running the rag over the grooved rubber, the receptionist runs up to kiss him on his cheek.

Cid watched and listened from the kitchen doorway, a grin spreading his gray lips tight over his sharp teeth. Not a serial killer, then. Boring, yes, but to a tolerable level. The selection scouts must have known Cid needed a break after his last human assignment and they matched him up with this loser as a kindness. He appreciated the consideration. After a few weeks of him and Charlie lock-stepping to protocol, he could apply to his supervisor for a demerit reduction. Maybe have his access to the entertainment zones reinstated and make living on the base somewhat tolerable again.

However, Cid couldn't resist a tiny bit of insubordination, a slight stretching of the rules. The next step involved disengaging the spatial disruptor function on the control module, revealing himself to Charlie while remaining invisible to everyone and everything else on Earth. His fellow Level Fours tried to make this process as stress-free on the humans as possible. They'd wait until the human was comfortable at home or in some other safe, secluded place, and recite the "I'm not a soul-eating demon from hell" speech straight from the training manual. Cid knew this situation was going to be traumatic to the human no matter what he did, so he preferred to have a little fun with it. Besides, he was sent to do a job, not hold some human's hand. And a healthy amount of fear was beneficial, both to his mission and his ego. Anything to keep the human's brain firing on all cylinders and increase Cid's daily collection rate.

Cid, then, always chose to reveal himself in a public place, with lots of props to play with. Charlie didn't go out often, but his weekly Sunday afternoon trip to the grocery store served Cid's purpose. The aisles of stark, industrial tile, soul-deadening music,

screaming children, and irate senior citizens made Thrifty Acres an appropriate location for Cid to initiate what Charlie would most likely think was a mental breakdown. Cid straightened the lapels of his black trench coat then pulled up the command on his control module that revealed him to the specific human calibrated into the device. He stood by a bin of potatoes, grinning to show as many of his pointed teeth as possible, and waited.

Charlie examined the bananas with an intensity most people reserved for choosing an engagement ring. After selecting an acceptable bunch, he looked up and locked eyes with Cid. His reaction was appropriate for a person seeing a gray, pointy-eared monster standing in the produce section: he released a strangled yelp and dropped his basket of groceries. Then, after a minute of looking around with his hand clamped over his mouth, he realized no one else was panicking. Cid chose that moment to flip the switch so he was invisible again. Charlie took a deep breath and picked up his basket. He then wandered over to the frozen novelties aisle, rubbing his forehead and wondering if he was coming down with the flu.

Cid jogged ahead and leaned against one of the freezer doors while Charlie picked out a box of ice cream sandwiches at the other end of the aisle. Cid made himself visible once again and drummed his claws against the glass door. His head was lowered, black hair falling into his eyes, but he didn't have to look up to know that Charlie had spotted him once again. Before Cid could introduce himself, a pretty woman in a tight, geometric print dress wheeled her cart past and opened the door to the cooler next to him. In the cart was a toddler who kicked his plump legs and chewed on his sausage fingers, drool dripping down his chin. Charlie stood rigid in the aisle and stared open-mouthed.

Time for the real show to begin.

Pushing himself off the cooler door, Cid walked around the cart and held a gray, clawed hand out over the toddler's head. A warning formed in Charlie's mind, but Cid raised a finger to his lips and shook his head. To Cid's delight, Charlie obeyed and remained silent. Cid petted the toddler like a house cat while the child gurgled and grinned, oblivious to the attention. Equally oblivious, the mother emerged from the cooler, placed a carton of

mint chocolate chip into her cart, and wheeled it forward. Cid stepped back, raised one arm, and smacked her ass as she passed. The mother didn't even flinch, but Charlie screamed something along the lines of "What the actual fuck!" in his head.

Cid leveled his black eyes with Charlie's brown ones and stalked forward, his boots squeaking against the tile floor. When Cid was close enough to smell the acid tang of fear radiating off the human, he stopped and plucked the box of ice cream sandwiches from Charlie's right hand and dropped it in the basket clutched in his left.

"So good to see you, Chuck," Cid hissed through a grin. He strolled around Charlie, switching to invisibility mode once he was out of the human's line of sight.

Turning, Cid saw Charlie do a sort of shuddering dance, as if shaking off an unseen cobweb and any potential arachnid residents. His mind was a roiling sea of incoherent thoughts but, like breaching whales, a few surfaced that Cid could identify.

Food poisoning?

Expired medication?

Head injury?

These thoughts coalesced into a pod of reasoning Cid recognized as "Possible Causes for Hallucinations." Charlie, in his orderly, annoyingly rational way, was systematically compiling explanations for Cid's appearance. Everything from the three-day old Chinese take-out in his fridge to a recent tumble from his bicycle was suspect. Convinced he just needed a nap and, possibly, an MRI, Charlie took a few cleansing breaths and walked to the registers.

Cid was not amused. He'd anticipated a full meltdown. Screaming and hair-pulling and rending of clothing; the type of behavior that, in this small town, would make the papers tomorrow. This calm rationalization was not acceptable. Never one to wither in the face of a challenge, Cid cracked his knuckles and stalked to the registers. When he saw the cute checkout girl ringing up Charlie's groceries, he knew exactly what to do.

Mandi--as the name tag above her left breast identified her--flipped her auburn hair over her shoulder and ran a loaf of bread across the scanner. Cid glided up behind her and slid his clawed

hands around her waist. He could feel every delicious inch of her, but thanks to the spatial disruptor, she was clueless to his presence. Her vacant gaze suggested that cluelessness wasn't an unusual state of being for Mandi.

After fumbling through his wallet for his debit card, Charlie looked up and saw Cid. A weak sort of whine escaped Charlie and when Mandi gave him a raised eyebrow, he played it off with a fit of fake coughing.

Cid grinned and dug his claws into Mandi's hips, making an exaggerated show of grinding his pelvis against her ass.

"Plastic okay?"

Charlie was too horrified by the sight of Cid's pornographic ministrations to answer. When Mandi cleared her throat, Charlie wrenched his focus from the monster at her back and said, "Uh, yeah. Plastic's fine." With shaking fingers, he ran his card through the machine to pay and punched in his PIN.

Cid leaned close to Mandi's face, not really caring if Charlie was watching or not at this point, and snaked his long gray tongue out to lick along the delicate curve of her ear. She gave a bored sigh as she dropped lunch meat and cheese into a brown plastic bag then punched a button on the register to print a receipt.

It just so happened that Charlie *was* watching while Cid licked the checkout girl like a lollipop and it was at this moment his brain snapped. Cid actually heard it, a hollow pop as the plug was pulled from the human's rational mind and all his carefully constructed reasonings gurgled down the drain of his subconscious into dark oblivion. With a shaking hand, Charlie snatched the bag of groceries from Mandi and he jogged to the exit. Cid saw him pick up speed in the parking lot and laughed. This was the reaction he'd been waiting for. He thanked Mandi for her unwitting cooperation by cupping her left breast, then strolled out of the store.

Because Cid had Charlie's routine memorized, he knew that the human would take the bus home. After making himself invisible, Cid used his control module to fold space a bit and shift himself instantly to the bus stop on the corner. He sat on the bench and crossed his legs, waiting for Charlie to jog up the block and

collapse on the bench, dropping the bag of groceries between his feet. Cid then made himself visible once again.

Breathing hard from his run, Charlie leaned back on the bench and saw Cid sitting beside him.

"What the hell are you?" Charlie screamed.

"You look real silly talking to yourself, Chuck." Cid brushed some lint from his pant leg.

Charlie struggled with the urge to reach out and touch the creature sitting next to him just to prove it wasn't real, but his hands refused to unclench from the edge of the seat.

"I'm real enough," Cid said, stretching one arm along the back of the bench. "But only to you. Everyone gets their own unique brand of Hordt. I'm yours."

Charlie considered the possibility that he was having a stroke.

Cid gave a dry chuckle. "You're fine. Completely healthy. Everyone is freaked out at first, but you'll get used to it."

Charlie opened his mouth to speak, but shut it again and thought, *Where did you come from?* He flinched when Cid clapped his hands.

"You're a quick learner." Cid grinned in a way he knew was unsettling. "I know you have a ton of questions and they will be answered eventually. All you need to know for now is that this happens to everyone at some point. But no one talks about it." He let the grin melt off his face. "Ever."

Charlie rubbed his palms together and focused on the cars streaming by, the glint of mid-afternoon sunlight reflecting off glass and metal. A warm breeze ruffled his hair and a gum wrapper tumbled into the gutter. Cid could tell Charlie was trying to reconstruct his rational arguments as to why this monster sitting next to him wasn't real, but the pieces ran through his mental fingers like water. At the same time, an amorphous notion deep within Charlie's primitive brain awoke and announced, "Everything is fine! Just go with it!"

The suggestion startled and confused Charlie, but Cid had been waiting for this revelation. Like it or not, humans were evolutionarily programmed to anticipate and accept Hordts into

their lives. Just as Hordts were raised to recognize humans as a valuable commodity. Annoying, but valuable.

Cid released a dry, humorless laugh. "Welcome to the next phase of your life, Chuck."

Chapter 2

Cid gave Charlie a break and didn't molest any unwitting passengers on the bus ride home. Instead, he sat next to Charlie and rode in self-possessed silence like any other passenger. Charlie turned away from him and watched the world slide by the window. Poor idiot had no idea how perfect he was for this arrangement. Just an average guy with a steady job who kept mostly to himself and was in bed by ten o'clock every night. Charlie didn't use drugs, drank only on the weekends and never to excess. He was more likely to read - mostly magazines - than browse the internet. Most importantly, though, he had a healthy respect for authority. This one character trait Cid intended on exploiting to the fullest, after establishing himself as the new, ultimate authority in Charlie's life. When their stop arrived, Cid stood in the aisle and waited for Charlie to scoot out of his seat, then followed him off the bus.

Charlie entertained thoughts of running the fifty-plus yards to his apartment door, but he instead maintained a brisk, yet casual, pace. His mind, however, was running flat-out, thoughts circling wildly like a panicked herd of gazelles. Cid walked behind him, hands in his trench coat pockets, and hummed a little tune. He hummed a bit louder when he heard Charlie scream, *Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!* in his head. Charlie's grip tightened on his plastic bag of groceries and he walked a little faster.

After unlocking his front door, Charlie opened it only far enough to allow himself to slip inside, then slammed it shut. Cid heard the lock engage and shook his head with a sigh. Pulling the control module from his pocket, he cloaked then shifted into the

apartment. Still invisible, he watched as Charlie pulled the loaf of bread from the grocery bag and set it on top of the microwave, careful that it didn't hang over the side. Cid rolled his eyes and sat on the counter, uncloaking himself again. After filing the rest of his groceries away in their proper slots in the fridge, Charlie turned to throw the bag in the trash can.

"You really should recycle that," Cid said from his perch next to the sink.

Charlie managed a startled squeak in reply. He shoved the bag into his jeans pocket and stomped out of the kitchen into the living room where he collapsed on the couch, hands clutched in his hair. There he sat, slowly rocking forward and back, trying to remember if his insurance covered mental health treatment.

Cid trailed after him. "You're going to be okay." He unbuttoned his trench coat and settled on the couch. "Chuck. Stop that. You look ridiculous."

Charlie halted his rocking and loosed his fingers from his hair. He turned and stared at the source of his anxiety. Cid followed Charlie's eyes as they appraised his gray skin, pointed ears, and sharp features. He smiled--without showing his pointed teeth this time--not even trying to feign humility. He knew he was a handsome rogue.

Devil elf was the description Charlie came up with.

Cid's smile vanished. "You aren't much of a looker yourself, you know."

Then Charlie laughed. It was hysterical and desperate, but a laugh nonetheless. His breath hitched and caught in his throat, the laughter morphing into messy, hiccupping sobs. Cid had seen this type of behavior before. All he could do was cross his arms and wait it out. Charlie eventually got a grip on his emotions and wiped tears from his face with the hem of his T-shirt.

"Are you finished?" asked Cid.

Charlie whined, "Are you going to explain what the hell is going on?"

Cid took a deep breath. "I already told you. This is normal. Think of it like a second puberty. Or early menopause, if you were a real woman and didn't just bawl like one."

Fragments of half-baked retorts to the insult flashed through Charlie's thoughts, but he wisely chose to just continue the conversation. "You called yourself something earlier. What was it?"

"Finally, we're getting somewhere." Cid straightened up a little, tugging on the lapels of his trench coat. "I am a Hordt."

"Is that your name?"

"What? No. Aren't you listening?" He shook its dark head. "It's like my species."

"Do you have a name?" Charlie adjusted on the couch so he was facing the Hordt.

"What is it with people and names? It's always one of the first questions, second only to, 'oh god, oh god, are you dragging me to hell?' I mean, would a name make me more real?"

"It would help," Charlie said. "Besides, it hardly seems fair. You know my name."

Cid unleashed a full, spiky grin. "Oh, I know more than your name, Chuck."

Charlie did a shorter, sitting version of his cobweb shiver from earlier. "So, you know how much I hate that nickname."

"I know the reason you hate that name is because in the fifth grade, Kevin Mullins would chant 'Chuck, Chuck, what a fuck' every day during recess."

And, just like that, Charlie's mind flooded with images of a red-faced Kevin Mullins taunting him on the playground while his classmates watched from a safe distance behind the monkey bars. A strangled moan escaped his throat and the sound seemed to snap him back to the present.

"Kids can be so cruel," said Cid with as much fake sympathy as he could muster.

Charlie rose and walked to the kitchen, retrieving a bottle of vodka from the freezer and a small glass from a cabinet.

"I'm Cid," said Cid when Charlie returned to the couch. "But there's no reason why you would ever need to call my name. I'm not going anywhere and you can't talk to anyone about me." He slid his right hand into his jacket and curled his fingers around the biowave recorder in preparation for what he knew was coming next.

"But why?" Charlie asked as he poured a drink. "How am I supposed to keep this a secret? I have to talk to some--" The rest of the word was lost in a scream. Charlie dropped his glass and the vodka bottle to the coffee table and pressed his palms to his temples as he wailed.

Cid had dialed up the biowave recorder's "pain incentive" function to just below the halfway mark. Even at this low level, he was certain the agony coursing through Charlie's brain was unlike anything the human had ever felt, unless he'd previously had roughly one-third of his synapses manually fired at once. Cid dialed down to zero and the screaming stopped.

Barely breathing, Charlie dropped his hands to his lap and looked at Cid, who leaned in close and locked his eyes with Charlie's.

"Remember that pain. It will return if you utter one word about me." Cid settled back on the couch.

Charlie swallowed hard. "Why? If this happens to everyone, then why can't we talk about it?"

"Self-preservation."

Charlie shook his head, brow furrowed.

Cid sighed. "If we let people talk about us, eventually they would try to figure out a way to get rid of us. And we can't have that now, can we?"

Chapter 3

The old alarm clock made a small noise, like an electronic throat-clearing to prepare its circuits, before releasing a chorus of beeps. Charlie slapped the alarm off and groaned, tugging the covers tight under his chin. He tried to remember how he got to bed, but the act of thinking was akin to driving a pickaxe through his skull, so he stopped.

To prevent throwing up all over himself, he kept his eyes closed and felt his way to the master bathroom, peeling off his T-shirt, jeans, and underwear as he went. When the water streaming out of the showerhead was sufficiently hot, he stepped under the spray and let it pummel him into consciousness.

Showering and shaving left him feeling almost human. Wrapping a towel around his middle, he picked up his discarded clothes and deposited them in the hamper, wincing at the pulsing pain in his head. Why the hell did he get piss drunk on a Sunday night? Stressing about Monday mornings wasn't unusual, but never before to the point of inebriation. He chased a couple ibuprofen with several cupped handfuls of water from the bathroom sink and cursed his lapse in judgment.

After making the bed, he shuffled to the kitchen. He added water and ground coffee to the machine and while it brewed, he poured himself a bowl of cereal with milk. Eggs would be better for his hangover, but that was way more effort than he was prepared for at the moment. When he swallowed a spoonful of cereal and was confident it wouldn't make a return trip up his esophagus, he took another bite and stepped into the living room. What he saw there made him drop the bowl with a yelp.

Cid sat on the sofa, flipping through a Popular Science magazine. "Good morning to you, too." The Hordt had removed the black trench coat and it was folded neatly across the arm of the sofa. He wore a black wife-beater and black pants and boots, like the day before. He was about the same size as Charlie, but if his arms were any indication, the monster was ninety-five percent lean muscle.

Charlie stood in a puddle of milk and cornflakes, clutching a spoon in one hand, the other clamped over his mouth. The night he had tried to erase with alcohol seeped back into his consciousness like blood through fabric. He remembered asking questions in between shots of vodka and getting few straight answers. He also remembered his head transforming into an eight-pound ball of pain when he threatened to talk about the Hordt.

After clearing the wreck of his breakfast from the hardwood floor, and pouring himself a mug of coffee, Charlie returned to the living room and sat down on the opposite end of the sofa from Cid. He turned on the television and settled in to watch a few minutes of news before he had to get dressed and go to work.

"The silent treatment? Seriously?" Cid tossed the magazine on the table.

Charlie sipped his coffee and feigned interest in the traffic report. After a moment he picked up the magazine Cid had discarded and slid it on top of a stack of other magazines on the table, aligning the corners.

"I can hear them, you know. The questions you want to ask. You're screaming them at me even with your mouth shut." Cid crossed his legs and leaned closer to Charlie. "You couldn't ignore me if you tried."

An acrid yet sweet smell surrounded Cid. Like burnt chocolate; something good gone wrong. Even without a hangover, the smell turned Charlie's stomach. He set his mug on the table and smoothed a hand over his damp brown hair. "How the hell am I supposed to go to work with you taunting me all day?"

"Aw, don't worry, Chuck." Cid straightened in his seat. "I'll be good while you're at work. We can't have you distracted while you're telling someone their precious Saab was destroyed beyond repair because they failed to yield during a right turn."

Charlie barely tolerated his job as a claims adjuster and hearing Cid mock his profession set his teeth on edge. "We can't all be neurosurgeons, okay? Besides, what do you do that's so fucking great, huh?" He punched his fist into the sofa cushion. "Is driving people crazy a noble career?"

Cid held up a hand. "Calm down, Chuck. I forgot you're such a sensitive bitch when it comes to your job."

"Forgot?" As it had many times in the past eighteen hours, confusion replaced Charlie's anger.

Cid waved off the question. "I'm not here to drive you crazy. I'll admit that I can be a bit abrasive at times. That's just how I am. But you'll be surprised at how quickly you get used to me."

Charlie let loose a single bark of a laugh.

"It's true," said Cid. "Of course, when Hordts and humans first . . ." he seemed to search for the right word, "interacted, it was very awkward for everyone. We tried to be diplomatic, but humans can take paranoia and panic to unbelievable levels." He raised an eyebrow and grinned, but Charlie only returned a blank stare.

"Anyway, eventually everyone got settled and now you're hardwired to accept my presence." Cid smiled as if he had just told Charlie he was getting a puppy, however his sharp teeth ruined the effect.

Charlie remembered sitting on the bus stop bench the day before. Even then, when he was certain he had suffered some sort of psychological break, a small kernel of knowledge buried in a primitive corner of his brain cracked open. A part of him had been prepared for the arrival of this sarcastic, grinning monster. He'd felt it then and he felt it now, sitting on his sofa in a towel while the weather report droned on in the background.

"So, if you are real, actually alive, where did you come from? Are you some kind of evolutionary branch we don't know about?"

Cid threw his head back and laughed. "Branch? Try a whole new tree in a forest about three hundred thousand light years away."

The thought that the creature sitting on his couch was not from somewhere on Earth had never occurred to Charlie. Sure, the Hordt looked weird, but not extraterrestrial. "You're a god-damned

alien."

"Technically, so are you. Look, I'm bored with this game of twenty questions." Cid stood and unfolded his coat, shaking it out before slipping it on and buttoning it. "Besides, you're going to be late for work."

Charlie felt the buffeted air caused by Cid's movements. He needed one more answer before he could completely resign himself to this new existence. He stood and made sure that he clearly thought what he wanted because he couldn't bring himself to say it.

Cid turned to Charlie and smiled, no teeth showing, so it looked somewhat friendly, then held out a thin gray hand. Charlie stepped forward and extended his own hand to grip Cid's. That he could touch the creature at all was a bit of shock, but he was also surprised that the Hordt's skin was warm and dry and felt as real as his own. The Hordt wrapped long, clawed fingers around the human's hand and shook it as if the two had just closed a business deal.

True to his word, Cid was well-behaved while Charlie worked. There weren't any claims calls that morning, so Charlie used the time to catch up on paperwork. Cid sat in the corner of Charlie's cubicle, on the floor, and either napped or looked out the window across the hall. Occasionally, he would leave to explore the rest of the office.

After returning from one of those excursions, Cid leaned against the desk and asked, "Do you get to pick what color shirt to wear?" He was referring to the office uniform of khaki pants and polo shirts with the company logo embroidered on the front. "Some people have green, others blue. Yours is white."

Charlie almost turned in his chair to answer him, then remembered how that might look to anyone walking by. He continued pecking at his keyboard and thought, *Yes, we get to pick the color of our shirts. Why?*

"And you chose white. How boring." He plucked a pad of sticky notes from the desk organizer and ran his thumbnail along the edge.

It's easy to bleach out stains, Charlie thought before he could stop himself. He heard Cid sigh. What about you? You look like a reject from a death metal video.

"Oh, please. You know I look cool."

Eager to change the subject, Charlie glanced at him and asked how many of his co-workers had a Hordt following them.

Cid cocked an eyebrow. "I can't tell you that. Seriously, you should know better." He tossed the sticky notes on the desk then walked off down the hall in the direction of the ladies' restroom.

Charlie returned the note pad to its slot in the organizer and continued working, but curiosity goaded him. He opened a new browser tab and typed "Hordt" into the Google search box. He clicked through dozens of pages, but the entries all either referred to someone with the surname of Hordt or a small town in southwest Germany. He was studying a map of the country when he felt a presence behind him.

"Planning a vacation, Chuck?" Cid leaned over his shoulder to get a better view of the monitor.

Charlie closed the window and turned around, feeling like a kid caught rummaging through his dad's porn stash.

Cid crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Charlie with his dull, black eyes. "I should punish you for that, you know."

Remembering the searing pain in his head from the day before, Charlie paled and mumbled an apology.

"Oh, man, you make it way too easy," Cid said with a laugh. He slapped Charlie playfully on the shoulder and sat back down on the floor in the corner. "You really need to lighten up."

Chapter 4

Soon after lunch, Charlie was assigned his first claim call of the day. He loaded his messenger bag with a digital camera and the appropriate forms and signed out keys to one of the white sedans in the company fleet. In the parking lot, he almost unlocked the passenger door, but then he remembered how Cid had appeared in his apartment after being shut outside and left the Hordt to fend for himself. Charlie settled behind the wheel and when he looked in the rear-view mirror, he saw Cid making himself comfy in the back seat. Charlie tried to wrap his brain around how a monster only visible to him could have a reflection at all.

"The physics involved are beyond current human understanding," said Cid.

"If you're so advanced, then why do you need to waste your time following my miserable ass around all day?"

Cid crossed his arms and glared at Charlie through the mirror. "It's complicated."

Charlie shook his head and gave a weak laugh. He'd formed a theory that Cid's cagey answers to direct questions was less about withholding information to maintain the upper-hand and more about being completely full of shit.

The company car came equipped with GPS, but it was rarely necessary. Hastings was the kind of small town that would have died if not for stubborn locals and an influx of rich hipsters with a nostalgia complex. The revitalized downtown boasted a trendy microbrewery and quirky coffee shop, but there was also a hardware store that probably still had a stack of WWII ration stamps disintegrating in some dark corner of a back storeroom. A

twelve-foot granite Monument to Corn, erected in the town square when the Charleston was all the rage, sat directly opposite a modern art mural sponsored by the local PFLAG group.

It was a five-minute drive to the claimant's duplex on a tree-lined side street a few blocks shy of downtown. The claim call was unusual in that it involved both a car and a house. Charlie asked questions as he took pictures of a silver late model hatchback wedged into the corner of a garage, bricks and mortar strewn over the hood.

"You say an animal jumped out in front of you?"

"Yes," said the claimant, a woman in her late twenties named Tracey. She paced around within the garage, her hands thrust into the pockets of her jeans. "I was driving home from the store and had just turned into my driveway when something jumped out in front of me." She pulled one hand from her pocket and fiddled with the end of her long blonde ponytail. "It was a dog or maybe a small deer?"

"You don't know for sure?" Charlie knelt to take a picture of a mangled holly bush jutting out from beneath the driver's side fender.

Tracey didn't answer and when Charlie stood to look at her, she was scowling at the garage wall. He opened his mouth to repeat the question when she snapped her head in his direction.

"Uh, no. I didn't get a good look at it." She walked out of the garage and into a beam of sunlight streaming between the branches of a large oak that stretched over the driveway. Tilting her head up, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Charlie lowered his camera and stepped toward her. "I'm sorry. I know you're still shaken up. I'll be out of here soon." He glanced over at Cid sitting on the hood of the company car parked in the driveway, boots resting on the front bumper, fingers tented under his chin. Charlie felt like he was back in training, when the senior adjuster would observe him on calls, waiting to interject at the smallest mistake.

He turned his attention back to Tracey, who now stood with her hands to her temples, eyes squeezed shut. He considered just taking some more pictures and giving her a minute to calm her

nerves, but she lowered her hands and settled her weary eyes on him.

"No need to apologize," she said. "This is all," she paused, then continued through clenched teeth, "my fault." Waving a hand at the crumbling brick and crushed hatchback, she asked, "Who can I call to take care of this?" She continued her pacing, fists clenched at her sides.

Charlie set the camera on the roof of her car and leafed through his bag. "I have a list of towing companies and contractors you can call." He found the list and held it out to Tracey. "You'll probably want both here at the same time, 'cause if you try to move the car, the garage could collapse." He gave her an apologetic smile.

"Great." Tracey snatched the list from his hand.

Claimants ran the full spectrum from catatonic zombies rocking in corners to blubbering volcanoes of agitation. Charlie had dealt with them all. Tracey fell somewhere in the middle, which was most common, but a note to her post-accident behavior rang off-key.

However, that she might be hiding something from him was also normal. The insurance industry is second only to used car dealerships when it comes to consumer distrust. People do not like paying for intangibles.

At one time, Charlie thought that if he had to work in insurance, being a claims adjuster was the optimal choice. After all, he was the guy who would help get everything back to normal and would prove you weren't paying for nothing. But he soon learned, the one thing that makes people crankier than paying for something they can't see, is having the stuff they *can* see destroyed.

Tracey examined the list Charlie gave her while she paced the driveway. Occasionally, she would stop and look up at nothing in particular, then pace again as she read.

"Is there a landlord that should be notified?" Charlie asked.

Tracey didn't look up from the list. "No. I own the duplex. I rent out the other side to a couple of guys."

"That'll make things much easier," said Charlie as he packed his camera. "I don't have any more questions. Those

companies will bill us so you shouldn't have to--"

"Would you please shut up!" Tracey screamed, hands flying to her head, the list fluttering to the ground.

Charlie blinked at Tracey. He'd thought this visit was going relatively well, but he must have said something to set her off. Either that, or he was dealing with a level of mental instability he hadn't encountered before. He shuffled backwards, in the direction of his car.

Lowering her arms, Tracey looked at Charlie wide-eyed, and shook her head. "Oh my god," she said. "I am so sorry." She stepped toward him, holding out her hands like cornered criminals do to prove they aren't armed. "That wasn't for you." She cast a furtive glance to her left then locked her blue eyes with Charlie's.

The desperation in her stare halted Charlie's escape. He connected with that desperation. He imagined he'd had the same look about him at the bus stop on Sunday afternoon.

"It's okay," Charlie said in a near whisper. "I--"

"Careful, Chuck."

Out of the corner of his eye, Charlie saw Cid hop off the hood of the company car. The hard soles of his boots crunched on the driveway as he stalked forward. "Don't say anything stupid," he hissed into Charlie's ear.

Cid's reaction fueled Charlie's suspicion. He was willing to bet the animal that caused Tracey's wreck looked less like a dog and more like a young, jacked Nosferatu. He wanted to tell her that he understood, that she wasn't going mad. That she wasn't alone.

Charlie inhaled in preparation to speak, but before he could say anything, a dull ache bloomed at the base of his skull. He felt Cid standing at his back, that burnt chocolate smell clouding around him. He knew the ache was a warning.

"Charlie? That's your name, right?" Tracey stood in front of him, her cheeks and neck flushed with embarrassment. "I am so sorry I yelled like that."

"It's okay. I understand." He took a step closer to Tracey, and a step away from Cid's unnerving presence. "This is a very stressful time for you." He enunciated every word, hoping she would pick up on the double meaning.

"Yeah, I'm not acting like myself." Tracey's shoulders slumped.

"That's to be expected. This kind of thing doesn't happen every day." He was practically screaming at her with his eyes that he knew exactly what she was going through. Then he worried his intense stare would only make her uncomfortable, so he looked away.

"Thank you for being so understanding. I guess you must deal with freaked out people all the time, huh?" She bent to pick up the list of contractors and tow truck companies she had dropped.

"Yeah," said Charlie. "I tend to see people at their worst."

Tracey laughed. "Man, if you only knew!"

"Oh, I have an idea," Charlie said half under his breath. He reached into his bag and pulled out a business card. Handing it to her, he said, "Here's my card. I'll be calling you soon to let you know how the claim is progressing, but please, feel free to call me if you need anything."

Tracey took the card. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

He turned and walked to his car, Cid glaring at him from the back seat. He tossed his bag inside then looked up at Tracey standing in the driveway, her cell phone in one hand and the list in the other.

In one last attempt to cryptically express his comprehension of her unique situation, Charlie called out to her, "Don't let that *animal* cause you any more trouble."

Tracey stared at him and raised an eyebrow. "Uh, yeah. I'll try."

Chapter 5

After the hatchback was towed to the body shop and the contractor stabilized the corner of the garage, Tracey poured herself a glass of Merlot and sat at her small kitchen table, staring at Charlie's business card.

Already sitting at the table was a dark female figure in a short black dress and tall black boots. Surrounding her was the cloying scent of overripe fruit--sweet, but on the verge of rotten. She pointed a thin, clawed finger at the card. "He thinks he's so clever. I bet Cid made him pay for that little outburst."

Tracey lowered her wine glass. "So, he *does* have a Hordt."

The dark creature, who'd earlier introduced herself as Lia, tucked a lock of black hair behind one pointed ear. "I've said too much already."

"You aren't very good at this, are you?" Tracey leaned back in her chair.

Lia avoided eye contact. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Tracey laughed. Any fear or intimidation she should have felt toward this unwelcome visitor was diluted by a tidal wave of total ineptitude. "Are you kidding me? You thought it was a good idea to pop out of nowhere while I was driving!" She pointed in the direction of her wrecked garage. "Now I've got to pay to have my car and my house fixed, thanks to you!"

"Your insurance should cover all that," Lia said with a dismissive wave.

"After I pay a thousand dollars in deductibles!" Tracey slammed her fists down on the table, the action toppling her glass,

wine spilling across the scuffed wood and dripping onto the tiled floor. "Shit!" She walked to the sink and unrolled two handfuls of paper towels from the dispenser mounted under the cabinet. "I don't suppose you're going to cough up any money to help, are you?" She wiped up the mess and slid the business card into her back pocket.

Lia looked insulted. "No, we don't deal in human currency."

"How convenient," said Tracey, tossing the wine-soaked paper towels in the trashcan by the back door.

"You have money, anyway," said Lia.

Tracey grabbed the wine bottle off the counter on the way back to the table and poured herself another glass as she sat down. "I don't know where you got that idea."

Lia circled a finger in the air. "This place. It's all paid for. Your car is paid for. You got plenty after your parents--"

"Stop!" Tracey held up a hand. "We're not talking about that." She snatched her glass and the bottle and walked through the wide doorway into the living room. Settling down on the loveseat, she set the wine on the coffee table and picked up her laptop.

Lia followed her and sat in a large striped chair by the front window. "So, what do you want to talk about?" She crossed her legs and clasped her hands over her knee. "I'm sure you have a bunch of questions."

Tracey looked up from the screen, but when she saw the Hordt's saw-toothed grin, she returned her focus to her inbox. "Nope. I'm good," she said as she scrolled through her emails. She heard a huff from the Hordt but paid her no mind. Reaching into her back pocket, she pulled out the business card and propped it up in the groove between the number and function keys.

Now, she did have quite a few questions for this Charlie fellow.

Chapter 6

Myk had a bad feeling about this. He'd watched Rebecca for weeks, as protocol dictated, and was conflicted by what he saw. She was an extremely pleasant third grade teacher who was kind to humans and animals and all that. She was also smart with a bubbly personality; she read paranormal romances and hosted book clubs at her house. It just so happened that she was also very attractive with long waves of red hair and a fabulous figure. Not that anyone would know. She kept her body hidden beneath layers of long, shapeless clothing.

What worried Myk was that Rebecca was a devout Seventh Day Adventist. Even with the neurological conditioning in place, it was often very hard for devoutly religious people to accept the presence of a Hordt. They would take one look at the pointed, gray features and sharp teeth and immediately think they were being hounded by the devil. It could take a week or more of gentle coaxing to get them calmed down to a point where they were prepared to even listen to what a Hordt had to say. The "pain incentive" would have to be administered to the faithful more often than with any other demographic. Some Hordts joked that the Catholics actually enjoyed the punishment.

Myk figured it would be best for Rebecca to see him first at her home. It was a safe place for her. Plus, her house was at the end of a winding driveway and her nearest neighbor was half a mile away. No one would be able to hear if she screamed.

Rebecca arrived home around four o'clock. She dropped her purse on the kitchen counter and hung her jacket on a hook by

the front door as she did every day. She walked upstairs to her bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed to unlace her boots.

Myk sat on a chair in the corner. She hadn't seen him when she walked in, so he initiated the introduction. "Good afternoon, Rebecca," he said in his most nonthreatening tone.

Rebecca whipped her head around, her eyes growing wide when they settled on Myk. She clasped her hands to her chest and made an unintelligible squeaking sound as her knees gave out and she collapsed on the bed.

He held out his hands in a reassuring gesture, trying to hold his claws so they didn't look quite so pointy. "I'm not going to hurt you. I am a Hordt. My name is Myk."

She nodded. Her eyes were still wide with fear, but she dropped her hands to her lap and adjusted on the bed to face him. "I deserve this," she said, just above a whisper.

He came prepared with a list of things to say to help calm her down, but her response rendered his script useless. "I don't understand. What do you deserve?" He was tuned in to her thoughts, but they were a jumble of flashing images, much like when people were asleep. He saw fanged male humanoids, beautiful females striking submissive poses, tongues licking fresh blood from smooth flesh and realized these were concocted fantasies adapted from those books she reads.

Rebecca lowered her head, red hair falling around her shoulders. "I deserve whatever punishment you deem necessary. I know I've been bad." With that last word she kept her head bowed but raised her green eyes and stared into his dark gray ones.

Myk didn't like the direction this was headed. "I'm not here to punish you. I know what I must look like to you, but--"

He was interrupted by the sight of Rebecca pulling her sweater over her head and laying it on the bed. She sat there in her white cotton bra, not looking nearly as scared as she had a moment ago. "I tried to be good, but I can't help myself." She stood and unzipped her skirt, letting it fall around her feet.

Myk hooked a claw into the neckline of his black T-shirt and tugged, swallowing hard. This type of situation wasn't covered in training. He was taught to adapt to human behaviors, assessing what level of information he thought they could handle and how to

dole it out. He was even told to have fun with it, seeing as how a Hordt/human relationship could last for decades. Somehow, he didn't think this was what they had in mind.

"Look, Rebecca," he said as he stood. "It doesn't work this way. Why don't you put your clothes back on, okay?"

Rebecca stepped out of the puddle of her skirt and walked toward Myk, her hips swaying a bit more than he thought should be natural. Standing in front of him, she had to tilt her head back to look at his face; he was at least eight inches taller than her and about twice as wide. The size difference didn't seem to make her nearly as nervous as it did him.

She laid her palm flat against his broad chest. "Please, demon."

"It's Myk." He added an edge to his voice in an effort to regain some control over this conversation.

Rebecca inched closer. "Please, *Myk*. I must be punished."

This is just some sort of game to her. "You need to stop this so we can talk." He grabbed her wrist and yanked her hand away.

Rebecca doubled the momentum of his action and stumbled backwards, throwing herself across her bed. She landed with her arms stretched above her and her legs spread wide. "Take me, demon!"

Myk sat back down in the chair and rubbed his temples. He wondered if it was too late to ask for a transfer.

Chapter 7

The week progressed normally for Charlie. He was accused of being a heartless bastard by a balding man with an oak tree partially imbedded in his roof, called an idiot lackey by the attorney of a woman with a missing Land Rover and an absent ex-husband, and had to explain to a hysterical old woman that garden gnome vandalism was not covered under her homeowner's policy. Dealing with the ever-present Cid was, to his surprise, the least stressful part of his day. As Cid promised, Charlie had become somewhat accustomed to having the Hordt around. There was still an itchy, tight feeling between his shoulder blades that came with the knowledge that he was being monitored around the clock. He assumed even that would fade eventually.

Friday morning, while eating cereal in front of the television in his boxer shorts, Charlie turned to Cid, sitting beside him on the sofa. "What do you do while I'm sleeping?"

The Hordt thumbed through an *Entertainment Weekly*. "I lick all your silverware."

Charlie examined his spoon and swallowed. "If you can't tell me, you could just say so."

"Where's the fun in that?" Cid shrugged and grinned.

As he finished his cereal, Charlie realized he'd slept better the past few nights than he could remember sleeping since childhood. At no point did he remember waking up to roll over or readjust his pillow.

"Side-effect," said Cid.

Charlie set his empty bowl on the coffee table and waited for Cid to elaborate.

The Hordt closed the magazine and turned to Charlie. "Among other things, it takes a lot of brainpower for you to see me. The result of that extra effort is blissful slumber." Cid smiled. "Just one way in which our arrangement can be mutually beneficial."

Charlie shook his head. "You never did explain to me exactly what benefit you get from our," he raised his hands and gave the air-quotes gesture, "arrangement."

Cid stretched one arm along the back of the sofa. "You're right. I didn't."

"Okay, at least tell me how it is that you speak English."

"I also speak Chinese, Spanish, and Farsi."

"Seriously?"

"En serio."

Charlie didn't know if he should be impressed or annoyed that Cid could be an ass in four different languages. "But you also have your own language, right? Alien speak?"

Cid's dramatic eye-roll was punctuated by a loud sigh. "Of course we do. Our civilization is millennia older than yours. We've evolved to the point where our whole planet has only three major dialects."

"Can I hear some of it?" Charlie perched on the edge of the sofa, excited that Cid was so uncharacteristically forthcoming with information.

"You already know quite a few words of my language, actually. After generations spent living in such close quarters, it's only natural that we influenced how you talk, among other things." Cid curled up his lip in a sneer. "As you, unfortunately, have influenced us."

"Us simple humans had a measurable effect on the evolutionarily superior Hordts?" Charlie didn't even try to contain his glee.

Cid raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, kind of like how dogs have trained you to cater to their every bowel movement and compelled you to develop cable channels solely for their entertainment."

Charlie's smile melted. "God, did we learn sarcasm from you or did you learn it from us?"

"It's a universal constant."

The cell phone rumbled on the coffee table, giving Charlie a welcome excuse to ignore Cid's self-satisfied smirk. When he saw the name of the caller on the screen, he almost stood up to answer the call in another room, then he remembered how useless that would be.

"Hi, Mom," Charlie said into the phone.

"Good morning, sweetheart," came a sing-song lilt from the other end of the line.

Cid rolled his eyes and resumed reading the magazine.

"I didn't catch you running out the door, did I?"

"No, I'm still at home." Charlie made his way to the kitchen. "Just finished breakfast." He set the cereal bowl in the sink and leaned against the counter.

"Good. I think talking on cell phones in public is rude." In the background was the sound of running water and the dull clink of silverware. "I was just calling to make sure you're still coming to dinner tomorrow." There was a clatter that Charlie recognized as plates being loaded into the dishwasher.

"I'll be there," said Charlie.

"Your brother said he and Claire would be here early, around four, so you just come over any time."

"Okay, see you then."

"Love you, sweetheart. Have a nice day at work."

"Love you too, Mom." He ended the call and looked into the living room.

Cid was turned around, elbows perched on the back of the sofa, his pointed chin resting on his interlocked fingers. "So? How are Sandra and James?" he asked, raising his dark eyebrows.

Charlie groaned. Until that moment, he hadn't considered the ramifications of sitting through his father's birthday dinner with Cid as his invisible plus one.

At work, Charlie phoned Tracey to update her on the status of her claim. She answered on the fifth ring, with an irritated, "Hello?"

"Hi, this is Charlie, the claims adjuster."

After hearing his voice, Tracey's tone brightened. "Yes, Charlie! I've been wanting to talk to you."

"Sorry it's taken me longer than I thought to give you a call, but the good news is that your claim has been cleared and all repairs to your house and the car should be paid for. You were able to get a rental car without any problems, weren't you?"

There were shuffling sounds from Tracey's end of the line. "Hmm? Oh, yes. I got a rental. My car should be out of the shop next week."

"Good," said Charlie. "And the contractor was able to get everything fixed up?"

"Yeah. He should be finished tomorrow." There was a pause, then she said, "Hey, Charlie, could I have your email address?"

"Did you misplace my business card? It's--"

"No," Tracey said. "A personal email. Not work-related."

"Oh." This surprised him, but not nearly as much as what she asked next.

"Could I have your cell phone number, too?"

"Uh, um. Why?" Charlie glanced around, but no one was near enough to see how red his cheeks had grown.

Except for Cid, who sat on the floor cross-legged, slowly shaking his head. "Real smooth, Chuck. A woman wants your phone number and you ask why?"

Charlie ignored him.

"Well, you were so nice to me the other day and, I don't know." She was silent a moment and when she spoke again her words sounded carefully chosen. "I've lived here for a couple of years, but I still don't know many people. You seem like, maybe, the kind of person I would like to know."

While this was a nice boost to Charlie's ego, he tried to keep this turn of events in perspective. He and Tracey had something in common, a problem that recently reared its grinning gray head. This had to be the reason for her interest in him.

"Yeah," he said. "I'd be happy to give you my cell number and email."

"Great! You have my email address, right? It was on the paperwork I filled out."

Charlie pulled up her file in the agency's management system. "Yes, I have it."

"Could you just send me your number in an email?"

She sounded so genuinely pleased that Charlie couldn't help but feel excited. No matter what her motive for asking, he was giving his number to an attractive woman. It had been months since this last happened. "I'll send it over right now," he said, mimicking her cheery tone.

"Thank you, Charlie. I'll be in touch."

After ending the call, Charlie pulled up his personal email account to send Tracey his cell number and closed the message with what he hoped was a casual sounding, "Hope to hear from you soon!" At some point, Cid had stood and was peering over his shoulder as he typed.

"That woman's up to something," the Hordt said, claws digging into the cheap padding of the office chair.

Charlie sent the email and turned around. *What could she be up to? We can't talk about you, so what's the harm in getting to know one another?*

Cid released his grip on the chair and stepped back. "Yeah, what's the harm." He pivoted on his heel and walked away.

Charlie knew better than to ask where he was going. The only thing more disturbing than one of Cid's lies was when he told the truth. Like the other day when he said he would be sitting under the receptionist's desk.

Returning to his work, Charlie felt a vibration in the pocket of his khakis. He pulled out his cell phone and saw he had one new text message.

Chapter 8

Edd leaned against Wendy's kitchen counter and watched as she collapsed on a chair and wiped her overgrown bangs out of her eyes. This assignment would be his last, but due to retirement or something much less voluntary was uncertain. He made it a habit not to think too much about the future.

I must really need some sleep, she thought. These long shifts are screwing with my grasp on reality.

Edd felt bad for her. He knew what it was like to have a job that worked you to the bone. Add one alien with an agenda and it was enough to make anyone question their sanity. "You do need some sleep," he said. "But I'll be here when you wake up."

"Stop reading my mind!" Wendy pulled her bodily-fluid-speckled scrub top over her head and threw it at him.

Catching the top against his chest, he chuckled. "Sorry. Can't be helped."

He'd considered waiting until tomorrow to reveal himself to her; she had the day off and would be well-rested and have plenty of time to adjust. Then he figured after a sixteen-hour shift in the E.R. she'd be so mentally fatigued that his sudden appearance wouldn't be quite as jarring. For the most part, he'd been right. In the twenty minutes since he'd made himself known, Wendy had been shocked, definitely, but also curious. The mind reading portion of their "relationship" bothered her more than anything, as her half-hearted attempt at violence had shown.

Wendy squared her shoulders, still clad in a white T-shirt, then eased herself off the chair. "So, you're totally real." She

crossed the few feet across the kitchen until she was only inches from Edd.

He held out her scrub top and nodded. "As real as it gets."

She grasped the top and dropped it to the vinyl floor behind her. The steely look in her hazel eyes might have made a younger Hordt nervous, but Edd welcomed her defiance. He straightened his posture and met her steady gaze.

Wendy lifted her hand and poked Edd in the chest with her index finger. Finding him solid, she flattened her hand and slid it up to grasp his shoulder. She kneaded the joint, prodding with her fingers, until she found an especially sensitive spot with her thumb which made Edd wince and jerk away.

"Hey," he said. "That hurts."

She didn't acknowledge his comment and slid her hand down his arm, pausing at his elbow before continuing to his hand. "Your anatomy is similar to ours," she said as she ran her thumb over his knuckle joints.

"We have a lot of physical--ow!"

Wendy had bent his index finger back over his hand far enough to test the limits of his tendons. He snatched his hand from her grasp and shook it, giving her his most stern look.

She just giggled. "You have a low threshold for pain, though."

Edd narrowed his eyes. "I could show you pain."

Her answer was another laugh and a shake of her head. "Yeah, okay. Let's talk about it in the morning. I'm tired." She turned away from him and walked to her bedroom.

Edd grinned and followed her. He'd asked for a challenge and it appeared that's exactly what he'd been assigned.

Chapter 9

The satisfaction of slamming the apartment door in the Hordt's face had worn off by the third day, so now Charlie held it open for Cid, who closed it behind him. As usual, Charlie shuffled to his bedroom to change into shorts and a T-shirt and Cid removed his trench coat before settling on the sofa.

Charlie focused on acting natural. The cryptic text from Tracey earlier weighed on him, but he forced himself to think about his excitement caused by her apparent interest in him. He'd learned that there were limits to the Hordt's mind reading abilities--he had to think about a specific image or words--but he didn't want to push his luck any further than he already planned. After changing, he grabbed his phone and some headphones from his nightstand drawer and, once the cord was detangled, placed the buds in his ears. Tracey said to listen to something loud, with lots of lyrics. He scrolled through his playlists until he found the Beastie Boys and pressed PLAY.

Head bobbing to *Pass the Mic*, he walked through the living room and waved at Cid, who didn't even look up from his magazine. Prior to the Hordt's arrival, Charlie was planning to cancel some of his subscriptions to save money, but if they kept Cid occupied, then they were worth the extra cash. In the kitchen, he opened cabinets, pretending to search for something to eat. Keeping Cid in his peripheral vision, he sent a text to Tracey.

I'm wired for sound.

While he waited for her reply, he got a beer from the fridge, twisted open the top, and took a long pull. He was humming along to *Hey Ladies*, when he felt his phone vibrate. He looked at the screen.

**Music hides your thoughts.
Can talk about them & they won't know.**

He glanced at Cid, who was still enthralled with the latest exploits of some young walking disaster of an actress and twitched his thumbs over his phone's screen.

When he was thirteen, Charlie crashed his bike jumping a hastily constructed ramp and broke his ulna. He'd heard people talk about not feeling any pain due to shock, but that hadn't happened to him. He felt it snap and the nauseating grind of bone when he tried to move his wrist. His world became the white-hot pain radiating from his arm. Passing out would have been a blessing, but he endured a bumpy station wagon ride to the ER and fifteen minutes in the waiting room before he was finally knocked out with pain meds while the doctors set his arm.

Charlie would gladly break his arm again rather than endure even a few moments of the brain melting pain that Cid promised to deliver at any mention of the Hordts to others. Now, he was staring at a text that, if discovered, would bring that pain down upon him.

He took another swig of his beer and rolled the cool bottle over his forehead. The phone vibrated again.

R U there???

He confirmed that Cid was still occupied and tried to concentrate on the music blaring through his headphones before replying.

Yeah. This is dangerous.

She must have had a text ready to send, because barely a moment passed before her next message.

**They can't kill us. They need us.
Pain thing just a deterrent.**

One hell of a deterrent, thought Charlie. He thumbed out his reply.

How did U figure this out?

He glanced over at Cid while bobbing his head to the music, not quite believing that this was working. To be safe, he deleted their texts as soon as they were read.

Accident. My hordt is an idiot. Yours?

He laughed to himself.

Idiot, no. Asshole, yes.

Cid adjusted on the couch and Charlie's blood turned to ice. When the Hordt only stretched and resumed reading, Charlie relaxed and drained the rest of his beer.

They meet when we're sleeping.

Jesus, thought Charlie, *she's really made this a mission.*

How do U know?

**Had insomnia, now sleep like a baby.
Not a 'side effect.' They make us sleep so
they can meet and discuss us. Makes sense.**

Before Charlie could reply, Tracey sent another text.

**Figure out how not to sleep,
can talk in person.**

Charlie would blame the beer and the endorphin rush from "breaking the rules" for his next text.

**Would like to talk in person
anyway. Not about them.
Coffee?**

He felt like a tool the second he sent it, and her response only added to his embarrassment.

**Head in the game mister.
Others must know music trick.
Need to contact them. Learn more.
R U in???**

As much as he would like to blame the beer and endorphins, Charlie only had good old-fashioned curiosity to thank for his reply.

Yeah I'm in.

She didn't answer right away, so Charlie figured the conversation was over. He grabbed another beer and had just taken a sip when his phone vibrated.

**I like coffee. Tomorrow 10 am?
You know where I live.**

Charlie was mentally high fiving himself for his successful date proposal when he remembered that he didn't own a car.

Chapter 10

Tracey would be the first to admit she was a bit of a control freak. At five years old, she'd insisted on picking out her own clothes to wear and later terrorized high school counselors with her numerous demands to change her class schedules. She'd snatched scissors out of stylist's hands to show them how to cut her hair and she'd been known to give cab drivers turn-by-turn directions.

But she never told other people what to do or how they should live their lives--unless they asked.

Until now.

She tried to justify dragging Charlie into her plans to rid themselves of the Hordts. She was saving him, wasn't she? He was better off not being a pawn in whatever game the Hordts were playing. Right?

The hard truth she couldn't quite admit was that she didn't want to fight her battle alone. Charlie was the only person she knew who had a Hordt, and he'd figured out the same about her. He was clever and nice and, okay, kind of cute in an awkward way. That he appeared interested and willing to follow her lead was just sprinkles on the cupcake.

Tracey walked into the living room, buttoning her cardigan as she went. Lia sat in the chair by the window, picking at her claws, but she looked up as Tracey passed through on her way to the kitchen.

"Is that what you're wearing?" Lia called after her.

Tracey kept walking until she reached the counter by the back door where she always tossed her purse. She clenched her jaw when she heard the click of Lia's heels on the linoleum.

"You were a wreck the first time he saw you." Lia stopped by the sink and waved a hand in Tracey's direction. "I'd think you'd want to impress him a bit more. This is a date, isn't it?"

After their clandestine text conversation, Charlie had made a show of calling Tracey and inviting her out to coffee. She was quite impressed that he'd thought of it. Otherwise, they would have had to explain to their Hordts how their date was set up.

Tracey plucked her sunglasses from her purse and slid them on top of her head. Turning to Lia she said, "We're having coffee. Do you think I should wear a ball gown?" She snatched up her purse and stomped back into the living room, cursing Lia for making her rethink changing her jeans for a skirt. She was crouched to sit on the sofa when she heard a knock on the front door.

"He's early," Lia said. "Eager beaver, huh?"

Tracey opened the door to Charlie standing on the landing with a bashful smile, his hands behind his back.

"Hi," Tracey said. "I didn't hear you pull up." She noticed his cheeks were flushed and his hair was damp at the temples. Was he that nervous?

Charlie looked down at his loafers. "Um, yeah. About that."

When she stepped out onto the landing, she saw a bicycle leaned up against the railing. "You rode your bike here?"

"Yeah, I don't own a car." He straightened his arms and she saw a bike helmet clutched in one hand. "I didn't even think to mention it earlier."

Lia had stalked up behind Tracey and snorted at Charlie's admission. "Oh, man, what a dork."

Tracey just nodded her head and said, "I don't blame you. Being in your line of work and all."

"Well, I wrecked my car a while back and found that I didn't really miss it all that much." Charlie shrugged a shoulder and his big, brown eyes looked up at her through his lashes.

That puppy-dog look didn't usually work for her, but on him it was disarming, and she smiled in spite of herself. "If I didn't work over in Battle Creek, I really wouldn't need a car, either." Tracey closed and locked the door, tucking the keys into her purse. Following Charlie down the steps to the walkway, she

tried to figure out how his Hordt would have traveled with him on the bike. Did he ride on the handlebars? A high-pitched laugh made her jump.

"She thinks you rode on the handlebars," Lia managed to choke out through her laughter.

Tracey slid her sunglasses down off her head and over her eyes so she could watch Lia without Charlie noticing. The Hordt had walked around to stand just in front of Tracey and was giggling and pointing at something over Charlie's shoulder. Tracey was going to tell Lia to cut it out when the Hordt's demeanor changed abruptly and she propped her hands on her hips, scowling.

"You don't have to be such an ass," Lia said under her breath.

"What do you do?" Charlie asked.

"Huh?" Tracey turned her attention back to Charlie. "Oh, um." She separated out a small section of her hair and flicked the ends with her fingers. "I work for an agency that finds jobs for people with mental disabilities."

"Wow," Charlie said. "That's awesome."

She shook her head. "I didn't seek out this job, I mean, I don't have a degree in this type of thing. I worked for a temp service years ago and they placed me as the secretary for this agency. Well, one thing led to another and now I work directly with the clients."

"Beats insurance," Charlie said with a laugh.

Tracey smiled. "Yeah, I suppose it does." She motioned toward the street. "The coffee shop is only three blocks from here. Want to walk?"

They chatted as they strolled down the tree-shaded sidewalk. At one point, Tracey glanced back to see Lia walking behind them. She wondered if Charlie's Hordt was walking there as well. Would the two monsters talk to each other?

Lia huffed. "Talk to that jerk, are you kidding?"

At the coffee shop, they sat outside on a small patio surrounded with hanging baskets of ferns. Lia leaned against a tree next to the entrance like a demon chaperone in knee-high boots. A

cheerful waitress brought them water and took their orders of coffee and fresh-baked blueberry muffins.

After the waitress left, they sat in silence while arranging their silverware on the checkered oilcloth and looking around at nothing in particular. Tracey panicked and asked, "Does your family live nearby?" She usually avoided raising the topic of family.

Charlie appeared grateful for the question. "Yeah, my folks live in town and my brother, Jimmy, and his wife live over in Delton. As a matter of fact, I'm going to see them all tonight. We're getting together for my dad's birthday."

"Oh, that'll be nice."

Charlie only nodded and took a sip of water.

Tracey wrinkled her nose. Maybe family was a sore subject for him, too. "You don't get along with them?"

"My folks are great. It's just that my brother tends to make family gatherings . . ." he scratched his head. "Stressful."

"How so?"

"Everything's a competition with him."

The waitress returned with their coffee and muffins. Tracey poured enough cream into her coffee to turn it the color of wet sand. Charlie sprinkled a packet of sugar into his cup then folded it in half and set it aside. He added a splash of cream and used his napkin to soak up a few drops that spilled on the tablecloth. After stirring his coffee, he laid the spoon on the folded sugar packet.

Tracey suppressed a giggle. Charlie's wrinkle-free slacks and his pressed Oxford shirt suggested he was fastidious, but now she could see he was borderline compulsive.

After swallowing a bit of muffin, Charlie asked, "What about your family?"

Tracey took a sip of her coffee and set the cup down, wiping her lipstick from the rim with her thumb. She willed herself to just spit it out. "My parents died about a year ago. In a boating accident on Lake Michigan."

"I'm so sorry." Charlie folded and unfolded his napkin.

"Thank you." She took another sip of coffee. "It was hard at first, but I'm in a good place with it now."

Charlie didn't reply, just took another bite of muffin.

"Nothing like dead parents to stop a conversation cold, eh?"
Tracey smiled, feeling sorry for the poor guy. "So, seen any good movies lately?"

Charlie grinned. "No, actually. The movie theater doesn't have a bike rack." He lowered his head and looked up at her through his lashes again.

Damn if that look wasn't getting to her.

They talked for over an hour and during their conversation, Tracey almost forgot all about the slender gray figure leaning against the tree. It helped that Lia seemed preoccupied. Possibly with Charlie's Hordt. But, really, she was having too much fun talking with Charlie to even notice any snide comments or eye rolls from Lia. That was until during their walk back to her duplex and she found herself wishing that Charlie would take her hand. A singsong "Aw, ain't that sweet" from her second shadow was all it took to douse any further romantic notions.

"This was nice," said Tracey as she fished her keys out of her purse.

Charlie stood close to her on the landing, hands in his pockets. "Yeah, I had a great time. Um, I'd like to do it again. Maybe we could graduate to lunch next?"

She unlocked the door as she laughed. "That sounds great. I'll see when I'm free next week and give you a call. Or I'll text you."

She regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth. Unbidden, memories of her previous text conversation with Charlie flashed in her mind. The cloyingly sweet scent that could only come from Lia surrounded her. She felt a hand circle her arm and claws dig into her bicep.

"What have you done?" Lia spat into her ear.

Tracey forced a smile for Charlie's sake, but she could tell that his thoughts had betrayed him as well. His smile was as strained as hers and he stumbled his way down her front steps.

"That sounds great." After a few tries he unhooked his helmet from the handlebars of his bike. "I look forward to it."

She wrenched her arm free from Lia's grasp and reached out to Charlie. "I'm sorry," she mouthed more than said.

Charlie winced and spoke through gritted teeth. "It's okay."

Tracey watched as he mounted his bike and she would have run after him if a lightning bolt of pain hadn't erupted in the base of her skull and dropped her to her knees.

Chapter 11

Nel sat cross-legged on the floor of the dark closet feeling very much like a cliché. Her slim, gray fingers toyed with the laces on a small sneaker as she listened to the voices through the closet doors.

"It was just a dream, sweetie."

"Mom, it's only nine thirty, I wasn't even asleep yet."

Poor kid. Nel had tried not to scare him, but there's no subtle way to tell a child they are being followed by a monster. Which is one reason why Hordts don't normally reveal themselves to humans under the age of twenty; usually they are much older than that. This nine-year-old was a special case, however. Nel cursed her luck for getting chosen for this assignment, but then remembered circumstances were much worse for the kid.

"Do you want me to check the closet again?" The mom sounded worried. Then again, she always did.

"No, it's okay," said the kid, Norman.

Earlier, Nel had escaped to the closet after Norman had screamed at the sight of her. His mom had flung open both bi-fold closet doors, but, of course, hadn't seen the Hordt ducking amongst the hanging shirts and pants. Nel had held up her clawed hands and told Norman that she wasn't going to hurt him. To his credit, he had stopped screaming, although his face had lost all color and his blue eyes were wide with terror. That's when his mom slid closed the doors, leaving Nel to sit on the floor and listen as she comforted her hysterical son.

"Can I get you anything?" asked the mom.

"I'm fine," said Norman, sounding convincingly calm.

After a few more moments of fussing over her son, the mother left the room.

Nel stayed very still and listened. Norman was silent, but his mind was a swarm of panicked thoughts. The Hordt took a deep breath to steady herself.

"Hey, kid." She could feel him flinch in her mind. "If I come out, do you promise not to scream?"

She heard a whispered "Yes."

Nel slowly pushed open one of the bi-fold doors and peeked around a pant leg at Norman. He was curled up under the covers, knees to his chin, eyes wide and unblinking. She wrapped her clawed fingers around the edge of the other door and slid it aside, revealing herself fully to the frightened child. True to his word, he didn't scream. He lowered his knees and leaned forward a little to get a better look at the monster in his closet.

Nel resisted the urge to smile, fearing what effect the sight of her pointed teeth would have. She also tried to keep her hands to her sides, so he wouldn't see her claws.

"I'm going to stand up and walk out of this closet, okay?" she said.

Norman answered with a nod.

Nel uncurled herself from the floor and eased her way into the room. She slipped her hands into the pockets of her long black jacket and stood at the foot of the child's bed. His eyes were wide, and his hands clutched at the covers, but he didn't turn away. What Nel had often observed with idiots, also appeared true for children: Curiosity trumped fear.

"I know I look scary," Nel said. "But I promise, I am not here to hurt you."

Norman relaxed his grip on the covers and looked the Hordt over. As he took in her shoulder-length black hair, glassy black eyes, and ashen complexion, a thought formed in his mind. A thought that dropped Nel's jaw.

"What did you just call me?" The question came out harsher than Nel intended, making Norman wince and pull the covers up to his chin. "Hey, I'm sorry. It's okay. I'm just surprised, not mad." She stepped to the side of his bed and carefully lowered

herself to sit at his feet. Pulling one hand from her pocket, she held it out to the child. "I'm Nel."

Norman lowered the covers once more, staring at the strange hand being offered to him. To Nel's surprise, he only hesitated a moment before firmly grasping her hand and giving it a shake.

"I'm Norman," he said in a small voice.

Nel smiled. "I know. I know all about you."

Norman nodded and the thought that shocked Nel earlier shot through his mind once more.

"Why would you think that?" she asked. When he only raised his eyebrows and stared, she elaborated. "I can read your thoughts. You called me an . . ." Nel didn't know why she found it difficult to form the words. "An angel."

The child tilted his head, sandy hair falling across his brow. "It makes sense, I guess."

A sharp laugh escaped Nel. "Sense? Kid, look at me." She spread her arms wide. "Do you see a harp or white wings?"

Norman lowered his gaze to his fingers, which outlined one of the rocket ships printed on his comforter. "I read somewhere that the angel of death would look different. Darker." He looked up at her, the fear in his eyes replaced with a solemn resignation that looked alien on his young face.

Nel rubbed her palm against the back of her neck and sighed. She glanced at the oxygen tank standing by the headboard like a sentinel and then at the array of prescription bottles on the nightstand. She should have expected this. Norman had long ago replaced childlike fears of boogeymen and monsters with the very real threat of the Grim Reaper. It was the whole reason for her being there. A kid with a failing heart doesn't have much time left on the meter. Hordts couldn't wait until he's older to harvest him for what he's worth, they had to get what they could now. Nel had balked at the idea of using the pain incentive on a child, but her superiors convinced her that tool wouldn't need to be utilized. The kid could try and blab about the Hordts all he wanted. Who would believe him? The adults in his life would simply think he had an overactive imagination, one fueled by a cocktail of colorful prescription medications. She was also told that just "being scary"

would be enough to keep him in line. It was a “win-win,” they said. She didn’t have the energy to explain to them how “win-win” wasn’t really the correct idiom in this circumstance.

“So?” Norman sat up straight, looking Nel in the eyes. “Are you taking me or what?” His voice was steady, but tears welled up.

“I’m not taking you anywhere, kid.” Nel stood and unbuttoned her coat. “I’m not an angel, of death or otherwise.” She took off the coat and tossed it over to the toy chest under the window.

“You’re not?” Norman wiped at his eyes with the heels of his palms.

“Nope. I’m a Hordt.” She lowered herself on the bed, folding her legs under her and leaning on one hand. “We’re going to spend a lot of time together. Not because you did anything wrong, just because that’s how it is. Okay?”

Norman nodded. “Okay.”

“There are a few rules you need to learn. Are you up for that now, or do you want to get some sleep first?”

“I’m not tired.” He settled back against the headboard, appearing to relax a little now that he knew he wasn’t going to die right at that moment.

“Good.”

Before she could begin reciting her well-rehearsed list of rules, Norman sat up and snapped his fingers. “Hey! Do you want to hear a joke?”

The Hordt couldn’t help but smile. “Sure, kid. Tell me a joke.”

Chapter 12

If Charlie hadn't been clutching his intact head with his hands, he would have sworn his skull had split apart like drifting tectonic plates, and his brain had turned to molten lava and was oozing through the cracks. He laid where he'd collapsed on the floor of his entrance hall, legs spasming, heels drumming against the hardwood floor. The searing pain devolved his speech into primitive howls and whines. Breathing would have been hard enough anyway, but it was even more difficult because Cid had straddled Charlie and was sitting on his diaphragm, hands braced on his shoulders.

The Hordt leaned down so his icepick sneer was inches from Charlie's reddened, tear-streaked face. "It's a good thing your neighbors aren't home to hear your racket. They'd probably call the cops."

Charlie wailed and unclenched one hand from his hair to grasp at the lapel of Cid's trench coat. The Hordt slapped his hand away and dug his claws deeper into Charlie's shoulders, adding another layer of pain to the agony.

"You had enough, Chuck?" Cid growled.

Charlie managed to nod his head, which warbled the pitch of his ongoing scream.

Cid pushed off Charlie and stood, pausing to deliver a sharp kick to the writhing human's ribs before walking away.

The geologic disturbance wrecking Charlie's head ground to a stop. He sucked in a lungful of air and held it, not trusting that the torment was really over. After a few moments, during which he confirmed the only pain he felt was from Cid's kick to his side, he

released his hands from his hair and sat up. The front of his oxford shirt was damp and clotted with chunks of partially digested blueberry muffin. Pulling it away from where it adhered to his skin, he tried to remember when he'd lost his breakfast.

He stood and unbuttoned his shirt as he walked into the kitchen. He tossed the vomit-soaked shirt into the sink and turned on the water, cupping handfuls and splashing them on his face and chest. Drying off with a dish towel, he saw that Cid sat in his usual spot on the sofa, but from this angle he could only see the back of his dark head. Charlie hung the towel on the hook next to the sink and took tentative steps toward the Hordt. The memory of the pain that the dark creature unleashed was enough to make his stomach clench. He stopped and stood against the back of the sofa, his arms wrapped around his middle.

Cid had removed his trench coat. The lean muscles under the Hordt's gray skin flexed and rolled as he rubbed his palms up and down against his thighs, claws furrowing faint lines into the black fabric of his trousers. He didn't look at Charlie as he said, "I could get in deep shit, you know."

Charlie walked around the sofa and perched on the edge of the cushion close to the armrest. Cid gnawed on his lower lip, pointed teeth worrying the flesh. Charlie wondered if Hordt's could bleed.

"You didn't even think about that, did you?" asked Cid.
"How your little stunt could affect me?"

Charlie knew how hard it would be if he got fired from his adjuster job. He flinched when Cid laughed, loud and sharp.

"This isn't just a job. This is my life. This is what we *do*."
Cid turned, pointing one claw at Charlie. "You need to play along, just like everyone else."

And what if I don't? The thought sounded petulant in his head, and Charlie was grateful he didn't say it out loud.

A dark expression clouded Cid's gray face. His voice was low and scarily calm as he said, "I'm with you until the day you die, Chuck. If you don't cooperate, that day could arrive very soon."

The sudden constriction in Charlie's chest made breathing difficult. He squeezed his eyes shut, praying that when he opened

them again he'd find himself in a hospital bed and the past week with Cid would evaporate from his memory, being nothing more than a fever dream. But even if Charlie couldn't see Cid, the Hordt's burnt chocolate scent remained as confirmation that the present situation was all too real. Charlie opened his eyes but didn't look at the creature next to him. Focusing on his khaki-covered knees he said, "I don't understand. None of this makes any sense."

"It doesn't have to make sense. Not to you."

"But it does!" Charlie clutched at the cushion beneath him. "I might be more willing to put up with your bullshit if I knew what was going on. If I knew what was so important that you'd kill me just to keep me quiet."

Cid mumbled a curse and Charlie watched him rake his claws back and forth through his hair, leaving it a mess of black swirls and spikes. "I don't make the damn rules. I just have to enforce them." He leaned back on the sofa with a huff. "Just trust me that there is a lot at stake. And I wouldn't kill you. We got specialists for that."

"Oh, that's reassuring." Charlie kept his grip secure on the cushion, trying to slake his urge to punch the Hordt in the jaw.

"One thing is certain," said Cid. "You're not seeing that Tracey bitch again."

The protest that Charlie prepared to utter was cut short by the flash of raw anger in Cid's eyes. Charlie nodded and held up his hands. "Okay, okay." The words, *I'm sorry*, scrolled through his mind, but he couldn't say them. Even thinking the sentiment betrayed a fundamental truth he'd held that his life was his own to steer as his will dictated. While he still may stand at the helm, Charlie now knew that Cid would always be there with a torch, ready to set his sails ablaze. This monster's will outranked his own. He was a slave.

"Naw." Cid cracked his knuckles. "More like cattle."

Charlie wasn't sure which was more difficult, listening to his parents ooh and aah over his brother's promotion, or watching Cid molest his sister-in-law.

"You brought this on yourself," Cid said as he stood behind Claire's chair and cupped her breasts with his clawed hands. "I would have been good if you had." The Hordt buried his nose in Claire's chestnut hair and inhaled.

"Would you like some more?" Charlie's mom pointed to the half-eaten German chocolate birthday cake in the middle of the dining room table.

"No. I'm good. Thanks."

Charlie knew he had to last through at least twenty minutes of small talk in the living room after dessert before he could feign a headache and escape home. Normally, he would stay through multiple cups of coffee well into the night, but nothing was normal about this evening. Except for his brother, Jimmy, bragging about his promotion at his investment firm. It wasn't enough that Jimmy was the first born, James Jr., but he had to one-up Charlie in every other way, too. Getting a Master's degree, marrying a beautiful woman, landing a successful career. Any second now, Claire would announce she was pregnant, which would make his parents collapse with joy seizures.

And then there was Cid, enacting his own brand of revenge. Thankfully, the Hordt had left his mother alone after some initial pelvic grinding while she set the table for dinner. His continued attentions to Claire, however, were more than enough to put Charlie off his pot roast. Plus, seeing Cid's dark presence against the butter yellow and powder blue backdrop of this childhood home was disturbing on a weirdly specific level. Like a stranger stalking up and whispering your birth date in your ear.

"Your job going well?" asked Charlie's father as he wiped frosting from the corner of his mouth.

"Yes," said Charlie more as a reflex than anything. "I'm getting more cases every day."

"Good." James leaned back in his chair. "Got a special lady, yet?"

Charlie glanced at Cid as he said, "Actually, I just had a date today with someone I like a lot."

James nodded in approval while Cid lifted his gaze from Claire's cleavage to glare at Charlie.

"Yeah, she's *real* nice," said Charlie. "Works with mentally disabled people. Finds them jobs."

Sandra, Charlie's mom, stopped clearing away dishes and clutched Charlie's shoulder. "Oh, what a noble way to make a living. She sounds wonderful."

"Oh, she is, Mom." Charlie returned Cid's gaze head on. "I think you'd like her."

"I'd love to meet her," said Sandra. "Why don't you bring her for dinner one day?"

Cid circled the table like a caged animal until he stood beside Charlie.

"I'll invite her," said Charlie. He had no idea if challenging Cid like this was a streak of bravery or stupidity, but he liked feeling as if he had regained some control over his life. However temporary.

Cid growled. "You think you're clever, don't you?" But he didn't retaliate.

Riding this little wave of confidence, Charlie addressed Claire across the table. "So, when are you and my brother gonna pop out a kid?"

Claire blushed and Jimmy rubbed her arm before saying, "We're working on it."

After dessert, the family moved their conversation to the living room where they sipped coffee from the same mismatched mugs his mother had used for decades. His father settled into his leather recliner and tuned the television to The Weather Channel, adding his own commentary regarding the forecast at regular intervals. Charlie sat on the bright, floral patterned couch with his mom; Jimmy and Claire shared the matching loveseat. Cid roamed the house. Charlie prayed that he didn't rummage through his mother's underwear drawer or, at least, if he did, he wouldn't talk about it later.

Charlie mentioned how well he'd been sleeping just as Cid wandered back into the living room. "I've slept like the dead for weeks," said Jimmy, casting a sideways glance at Claire. "Clean living, I guess." He hiccupped a short laugh before clutching his wife's hand.

Charlie suppressed a groan. *He has one.*

Cid chuckled and crawled his way across the back of the loveseat. "Yeah. Your brother got one first. But you should be used to that."

What about Claire?

"We need a bit more to work with," said Cid as he craned his neck to look down Claire's sweater.

Chapter 13

After the dimensional bubble popped around him, Cid inhaled the stale air of Portal Dock 3 and was surprised at how relieved he felt to be home. The Portal Dock was buzzing, as always. A couple hundred Level Fours elbowed into queues to get synched with a bio-wave recorder at stations located along the perimeter of the cavernous room. Cid stood in the middle of the room on a raised circular platform a hundred feet in diameter. The floor of the platform was made of heavy metal grating and an orange glow from safety lights illuminated it from beneath, earning it the nickname "The Grill." The platform was one access to the dimensional portal – not that you could tell by looking, since it was invisible – which was how the Hordt's traveled to Earth and back. The portal, theoretically, could be used to travel to any number of other planets, but the Hordt's had their hands full with the two alien civilizations they already had contact with.

Cid weaved through the other dimensional bubbles forming and popping around him, the pneumatic hiss of air drowning out all other sounds and whipping his hair and coat around. He stepped down off the platform and made his way through the throng. When he reached the exit doors, he pulled the bio-wave recorder, full of Charlie's digitized brainwaves, from the pocket of his trench coat and dropped it into one of the metal receiving bins stationed there for Level Fours returning from work on Earth. He exited into the long, arched hallway, and taking the elevator up a floor, he turned left down the dim corridor to his bunk. All he wanted to do was clean up and grab some sleep. He'd managed to toss his coat on his

cot and turn on the faucet of his small metal sink, when he heard a voice at his doorway.

"Hey, man."

Cid looked up from the handful of water he was about to splash on his face to the large figure casting a shadow into his small room.

"Hi, Myk. What's up?"

Myk scratched at the stubble on his chin. "We're wanted at a meeting. You know the drill."

Cid sighed. "Yeah. I was hoping I could avoid this one."

"No such luck," said Myk with a chuckle before walking away.

Cid turned off the faucet and followed Myk down the hallway. After a few turns, they entered a small, brightly-lit room with half a dozen metal folding chairs arranged in a semi-circle before a simple desk.

Myk took the first chair on the right and Cid sat beside him. After a moment, Nel and Lia walked in and sat down. Cid cut his eyes at Lia who was too busy examining her nails to notice. He then looked over at Nel who also appeared preoccupied, but by something much more serious than her manicure. He leaned back in his chair and reached his arm behind Lia to tap Nel on her shoulder. When she turned and raised her eyes to him, he asked, "You okay?"

She gave a weak smile, but before she could answer, the supervisor strolled into the room and leaned against the edge of the desk in front of them.

Saf had been Cid's supervisor for only a few months, but she'd already turned in a dozen discipline orders on him for minor insubordinations; pranks, really. Her rigid demeanor and zealous adherence to the rules was like a match to Cid's short fuse. It didn't help that she had absolutely no sense of humor whatsoever.

Saf crossed her arms over her chest and regarded her team with wide-eyed intensity. Cid guessed her expression had less to do with their performance and more to do with the fact that her black hair was pulled into a bun so severe it arched her eyebrows. The creases in her starched gray suit were honed like a knife edge and the toes of her glossy black pumps could pierce your ears. The

only thing about Saf that didn't appear specifically designed to cause bodily harm was her voice. She spoke in a soft, silky tenor that stirred conflicting emotions in many of her male co-workers.

"Myk," she said. "Let's start with you. Your human has finally adapted to you, hasn't she?"

"Well, she isn't begging me to screw her senseless anymore, if that's what you mean." Myk gave a shaky laugh as he scratched his chin.

Saf moved on without comment. "Nel, everything is progressing normally with your human?"

Nel rubbed the back of her neck and trained her gaze at a point on the floor by her feet. "Yeah. He's a good kid."

Cid had forgotten that Nel was assigned to a child. A dying child. No wonder her eyes were so haunted. He had little love for humans in general, but he didn't know how he would handle a sick kid. He liked kids. They were honest and called things as they saw them. He could appreciate that.

"And, Lia," said Saf, "your reports have all been positive as well."

Lia flipped her straight, black hair over her shoulder. "Yeah. Everything's great. No problems at all."

Cid nearly came out of his chair. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Lia flinched away from him. "What's your problem?"

Saf stepped forward and pointed a claw at Cid. "You've been warned about your language. Do you have an issue with Lia's report?"

"Yeah, it's complete bullshit."

"What the hell do you know, Cid?" Lia scooted her chair closer to Nel.

"A fuck-ton more than you, that's for sure." Cid sneered and dug his claws into his knees, imagining they were wrapped around Lia's neck.

Saf slammed a fist down on the desk. "Cid! Do you want to lose all your access privileges, not just to zones four and five? Be consigned to your bunk?"

Cid sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. "No."

Saf crossed her arms again. "Then control your tongue and speak like you're civilized. What is the problem?"

"Her human, Tracey, knows Charlie." Cid didn't dare look at Lia, lest it make him lose his temper again. "That bit-, um, that *woman* is putting ideas in Chuck's head. She's trying to find ways to talk about us. Meanwhile, Lia has her head up her . . ." Cid took a breath. "She's not watching her human close enough."

"Is this true, Lia?" asked Saf.

Lia huffed and picked at the hem of her skirt. "Tracey is just curious, that's all. She tried to pull one over on me, but I got it under control now. It won't happen again."

Cid opened his mouth to retort, but Saf held up a hand and fixed him with a cold glare. He grumbled but obeyed.

She turned her attention back to Lia. "This is very serious. Has she tried to talk with anyone about us, other than Charlie?"

Lia shook her head. "No. Just him. I'm sure of it."

Saf sighed and leaned back against the desk. "We can't afford to lose any humans. We aren't harvesting as much lately, and we're having to be a bit more unconventional in our methods."

Nel released a small laugh. "Tell me about it."

Saf continued, "If this Tracey tries to contact one of the opposition groups we know are out there, we will be forced to eliminate her. You need to do everything in your power to prevent this."

"I know," Lia said, her head bowed. "I will."

"Cid, what about Charlie?" Saf asked. "Will he cooperate?"

"Yeah," Cid replied. Truth was, he didn't know for sure if Chuck would try to contact Tracey again or not. He'd terrified the guy tonight, that was certain, but Chuck had a stubborn streak that Cid found kind of admirable. In fact, even though he was annoying, the dork was growing on him, which caused a big problem. The more he liked Chuck, the harder it would be to call in the kill order. Cid wasn't sure if he had the stomach to go through that again.

After the meeting, Cid fell into step beside Nel in the hallway on the way back to his bunk. Her gray button-down shirt

was untucked and her hands were buried in her trouser pockets. She stared at the scuffed metal floor as she walked.

Cid was no good at this kind of thing. He supposed he should just keep his mouth shut rather than risk saying something insensitive, but restraint wasn't one of his strong suits. "What's your kid's name?"

Nel looked at him through a curtain of hair that had fallen into her eyes. "Norman. His mom calls him Normy. Drives him nuts." She gave a hollow laugh.

"Is he really . . . I mean . . ." Cid struggled to find the most delicate phrasing he could. "Can he get out of bed at all? Like, play and stuff?"

Nel raised her hands from her pockets and tucked her hair behind her ears. "He's still pretty healthy. He does get tired easily and can't run around a lot, but he goes to school and has friends over. It could be much worse. It will get much worse."

They turned down another hallway and Cid tried to think of something to say to change the conversation. For the past week, all he'd been reading were Chuck's magazines so unless she was interested in the new fall line-up on HBO or the latest innovations in humankind's pathetic excuse for space travel, he was bereft of anything interesting to say. Then he felt Nel nudge him with her elbow.

"So, Lia's kind of an idiot, isn't she?" The corner of Nel's mouth curled up into a sly grin.

"That's an understatement," said Cid, rolling his eyes. "And Saf just lets it slide. I get barred from the entertainment zones because my vocabulary is too vulgar for sensitive ears, but Lia almost tanks her whole mission and doesn't even get a written warning." He flexed his fingers, his claws itching to tear something apart.

Nel's grin widened. "I think Saf's harder on you because she lusts after you and doesn't want to be accused of playing favorites." She bit her lip, but it did little to stifle her laughter.

Cid growled, but seeing the life back in Nel's eyes extinguished any anger behind the sound. "That is not funny," he said through clenched teeth.

They had reached Nel's bunk and she slid aside the metal door. She was still laughing when she turned around to face him. "Aw, come on." She poked him in the ribs with a finger. "It's kinda funny."

Cid braced a hand on the doorway and leaned over her, enjoying how she had to tilt her head up to look him in the eye. "Even if it were true, I'd never go anywhere near that battle-ax. I don't care if she'd reinstate my access privileges."

"That's a shame." Nel released an exaggerated sigh and propped one hand on her hip. "The gang has missed you at our card games in the lounge."

"The *gang* has, eh?" Cid slid his hand down off the door frame and edged closer. He inhaled the sweet, smoky scent of her and a buried knot of tension in his gut uncoiled and vanished.

Nel nodded. "Uh, huh. Edd and Bev, especially." She smiled and widened her black eyes in mock innocence.

Cid hooked a claw into the front pocket of her trousers and pulled until she was standing flush against him. He leaned down so his lips were close to her ear and whispered, "The lounge isn't the only place where we can have fun, you know."

Nel arched away to look him in the eye. "Oh, no. My bunk is way too small for us to play cards." She took a step back so she was out of the doorway and fully inside her room. "We'll just have to make do without you until you get your access reinstated." She pulled the door out of the slot in the wall. "Be good, Cid," she said with a smile and a wink as she slid the door closed.

Cid hung his head and groaned then turned on his heel and walked to his bunk. He should have known better. Nel would flirt with him all day if he let her, but it always ended the same. She had point-blank told him she was only a friend. She claimed she wouldn't get involved with anyone who was a Level Four or lower, but he'd never seen her "involved" with anyone, regardless of level.

He entered his bunk and slid the door closed behind him. After kicking off his boots, he stretched out on his narrow bed and rolled his shoulders, feeling the joints pop. He stared up at the familiar shadows cast on the ceiling by the dim emergency light above the sink. If he were a Level Five, he'd have a window.

Cid was offered a chance to move up a level, but administration wasn't his style. He liked being in the field, being part of the action. And even though he could get caught up in the drudgery of his job, like everyone else, he did still get a tingle of thrill from traveling to an alien planet every day. Earth was fascinating and frustrating and so incredibly *different*. The pull of their gravity, the smell of their air, the refraction of their star's light through their atmosphere were exhilarating in their otherness. He just wished that one day life would sort itself out in such a way that he could feel the press of many other worlds against the soles of his feet, fill his lungs with exotic atmospheres, and bathe in the light pulsing from constellations of alien suns.

Chapter 14

A series of low beeps woke Cid and he cursed himself for not turning off the volume on his terminal before he went to sleep. He stretched and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of his bed to rest his bare feet on the cold metal floor. Squinting at the digital read-out on his workstation, he saw he'd been asleep for five hours--only two and a half hours Earth time. Twelve more hours until he had to punch the clock for another day with Charlie. Combing his claws through his sleep-tousled hair, he shuffled the four feet to the workstation nestled on the wall opposite the sink and plopped down on the stool. He rested his chin on one hand and with the other touched the terminal screen imbedded in the wall to read the new message.

When he saw Saf's name in the "From" field, he groaned and rubbed his face, stubble from his cheeks scratching his palms. The message was short: "Cid, meet me in instruction room 12 at 0900."

"What the hell did I do now?"

He pushed away from the workstation and contemplated returning to bed, then thought better of it. Rather than giving Saf the satisfaction of seeing him bleary-eyed and freshly tumbled from bed, he'd use the time he had to clean up, fill his stomach, and get his wits together. Gathering his shaving kit, boots, and fresh clothes from the drawer under his bed, he left for the showers.

Since everyone's schedule was different--depending on where on Earth their human lived and what time they slept--the halls of the barracks were never empty. Cid greeted familiar faces as they passed, but he noticed the number he didn't recognize was

growing every day. And they were getting younger, too. His mind flashed with an image of a whole division of Level Fours as incompetent as Lia and he cringed.

The showers weren't crowded, so after grabbing a towel from the bin at the entrance, Cid retreated to a quiet stall in the back corner. He dropped everything on the bench just inside the frosted glass door and undressed while the water warmed up. Or reached boiling point. He liked his showers hot. Probably hotter than was healthy, but he didn't care. When he emerged from a shower, he wanted to feel like he was starting over with all new skin. Skin that was tougher than the layer he'd sloughed off down the drain. He didn't need the division-appointed analyst to tell him that this little delusion was probably the reason for some of his self-destructive behavior. It got him through the day, that's all that mattered.

After dressing in his clean gray tank top, black trousers, and boots, he dropped his dirty clothes and shaving kit off at his bunk then took the elevator up to the ground level. Mid-morning sunlight splashed across his face as the elevator doors slid open. He blinked to get used to the natural light and turned left toward the cafeteria. The corridor's East wall was mostly windows through which Cid could see the other five barracks buildings surrounding the wide, rocky courtyard, and the vast, white Gon Desert beyond.

Entering the cafeteria, Cid was hit with glorious smells of food: cooking meat, frying eggs, and coffee. The one import from the human world that Hordts coveted the most was coffee. Human liquor made Hordts violently ill, cigarettes were beyond comprehension, and chocolate was barely palatable. But coffee . . . Starbucks would quadruple their profits in one month if franchises were allowed on planet Odt.

Cid snatched a tray and fork from the front of the buffet and made his way through the line. Ignoring anything that wasn't mostly protein, he filled his tray then finally stopped at the coffee station. From the metal urn, he filled a large mug with the black, steaming liquid, then searched for an empty chair. Myk's waving arm caught his eye and he walked over to his table where Edd and a newer guy named Fin also sat.

"Hello fellas," said Cid as he slid into a seat and lifted his fork to dig into breakfast.

Edd set down his coffee mug and grinned, wrinkles creasing the corners of his eyes. "Are you allergic to sleeves or something?" He motioned to Cid's tank top.

Cid shoveled a forkful of eggs into his mouth and looked around the table at his friends, all dressed in T-shirts of various shades of dark gray. He swallowed and said, "I don't want to look the same as all you assholes."

Myk laughed and tilted back, his chair creaking under his bulk. "Yeah, you want to look like a completely different kind of asshole."

Fin giggled, but kept his mouth shut, which is one reason why the guys allowed him to hang out with them.

Cid chased a mouthful of steak with a swig of coffee. "Just letting the ladies see the goods." He flexed his biceps, a fork in one hand and mug in the other.

Edd shook his head. "Always a pissing match with you two. I wouldn't be surprised if one day at breakfast you both whip out your—aw, dammit." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a control module, its screen blinking red. "I gotta run. My human's on call, which means I am, too. See you later." He stood and lifted his jacket from the back of his chair before sprinting out of the room.

Fin blew on his coffee. "I'm glad Jason keeps regular hours. I don't know how Edd does it, never knowing when his human is going to sleep or not."

"He's been doing this longer than any of us," said Myk. "Got it down to a science." He lifted his coffee mug, but finding it empty, he set it back down on the table.

Fin said, "I can imagine things will only be worse by the time I'm his age."

Cid continued to eat, only half-listening to the rest of their conversation. He figured that he'd be close to Edd's age when he completed his assignment with Charlie. Who knew what awaited him after that.

Breakfast finished, it was still forty-five minutes until he had to meet with Saf, but he decided to show up early. He took the

elevator back down to sub-level 2 and wound his way through the halls to room 12. Cracking the door open, he peeked in to see an auditorium filled with recruits, Saf standing at the front like a general while she lectured in that spun silk voice of hers. Cid slipped through the door and took an empty seat in the back row.

"During the latter human twentieth century, we experienced what we now call the Media Anomaly," said Saf to the room. "Human dependence on electronic communications like television and, more importantly, the Internet, reduced the level of beta wave emissions that we were able to harvest. Even with our presence as an influence, some humans consistently operate at levels of 18 hertz or below. We need a near constant beta wave stream of 20 hertz or more for at least five straight hours for a viable harvest. The increase in distractions that reduce brain wave frequency has made our selection pool of humans shallower and shallower. We've had to resort to staying with humans later in life and, as difficult as it is, following human children."

Saf paused to scan the auditorium for any signs of inattention. Her eyes briefly locked with his, then she continued.

"Since discovering how to access the dimensional portal between the human's world and our own over a thousand Earth years ago, we've never experienced a crisis such as this. Our only saving grace is that humans breed at a much higher rate than we do. However, we can't rely on this statistic forever. At some point, we will need to devise a way to harvest more beta waves or risk surviving on reduced levels. Research continues on the development of remote-activated biowave recorders that could be planted on the human without them even being aware of our presence. We are also working on increasing the range of the recorders so that, possibly, a tower of recorders could be constructed to collect the brainwaves of a neighborhood, or even an entire town."

Cid yawned and propped one boot on the armrest of the seat in front of him. The female recruit occupying the seat whipped her head around, black ponytail flying out over her shoulder, and hit him with a piercing stare. He grinned and winked at her but didn't retreat. The recruit rolled her eyes and returned her attention to Saf, who was now droning on about preparations for a live drill

next week. Cid tuned her out and drifted into a pleasant daydream involving him wrapping the pretty young recruit's ponytail around his hand, pulling her head back, and using his lips and teeth and tongue on the tender gray flesh of her neck to make her eyes roll in a completely different manner.

The thunder of boots tramping up the aisle broke Cid away from his fantasy. Recruits filed past him looking as lecture-weary and bored as he remembered being all those years ago. He wanted to tell them that shadowing a human was no Discovery Day Carnival, either, but they'd figure it out on their own soon enough.

Cid eyed Ms. Ponytail as she shrugged on her jacket and waited for a break so she could join the flow of traffic streaming out of the auditorium. He could tell by the set of her shoulders and the stiff line of her jaw that she knew he was watching her.

He bent forward to rest his forearms on the back of her seat and said, "I suppose I should thank you."

Ponytail spared him a quick glance and pulled her jacket tight around herself. "What for?"

His gray tongue snaked out to wet his lips. "For helping me pass the time."

She turned her head to him and cocked an eyebrow. Cid took advantage of her full attention and eased back into his chair, raised his arms, and laced his fingers together behind his head. He tracked her eyes as they scanned his flexed arms, his chest, and then slid lower.

He couldn't resist a small chuckle, which snapped her eyes back to his face, then quickly away toward the now empty aisle. With a huff, she turned and jogged out of the auditorium, ponytail swaying back and forth. Cid craned his neck to watch her leave.

"CID!"

He dropped his arms and looked around to see Saf standing on her platform at the bottom of the auditorium, hands on her hips.

"Stop antagonizing my recruits and get down here." She pointed to the floor at her feet for emphasis.

Again, Cid flashed back to his recruit days, being reprimanded by his instructors for not paying attention or for playing with firearms stolen from the Human Artifacts room. Just as he would back then, he stood, shoved his hands deep in his

trouser pockets, and stomped down to Saf, collapsing into a chair on the first row.

"This is not a disciplinary meeting," Saf said, anticipating his first question. She stepped down off the platform and sat in the chair next to him, smoothing her black skirt over her knees.

Cid sat up straighter and narrowed his eyes, trying to think of just what this meeting could be about if he wasn't in trouble. Nel's joking words from the night before echoed in his mind and the breakfast in his gut churned.

Saf clasped her thin hands in her lap and settled her large, black eyes on Cid. "I need your help."

Cid was too shocked to laugh.

"Despite your surly attitude and your disrespect for authority. . . " She cleared her throat as if the words she needed to say next were choking her. "You are very good at your job."

Cid did laugh at this, an exaggerated barking sound that reverberated through the auditorium. He made a show of bending over and clutching his sides. Sucking in a large breath, he sat up and exhaled slowly, wiping imaginary tears from his eyes. "Oh, that's funny, Saf. A real knee-slapper as they say." He raked his hair back from his face with his claws and grinned. "Now, why don't you tell me what you really want?"

Saf crossed her legs, the three-inch heel of her right shoe edging uncomfortably close to Cid's shin. "Cut the crap. I'm being serious, here." Her black eyes were even more humorless than usual. In fact, they looked tired and, if it were possible, vulnerable.

Cid rested an elbow on the armrest of the chair and leaned in toward Saf, still suspicious, but willing to listen. "Okay. What do you need?"

Saf edged her elbow next to Cid's, but didn't lean in. Instead, she smiled. "I need you to do what you do best."

To Cid, that could be one of a dozen different things, so he shook his head and twirled one claw in the air. "You're gonna need to be more specific than that."

Saf's smile melted and her black eyes narrowed. "I need you to be the annoying bastard I know you can be."

Cid's laugh this time was low and short.

"I need you to keep an eye on Lia." Saf rocked her leg, her heel slicing through the air. "You said that Charlie and Lia's human, Tracey, know each other. So, encourage that interaction. I need you to observe Lia with her human at every available opportunity. Make sure that no protocols are being breached."

Cid would have felt vindicated if he didn't also feel a crushing sense of responsibility. He knew that Lia was a liability and needed to be tracked, but he didn't want to be the one to do the tracking. That should be left up to someone with more authority or experience or desire to please. He edged away from Saf and rubbed his palms up and down his thighs, against the coarse fabric of his trousers. "Fuck me," he mumbled under his breath.

"Language," said Saf as she stood. "So, I have your cooperation in this?"

Cid looked up at her. "Don't suppose I have a choice, do I?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"Not really. No." She stepped back up on the lecture platform and turned to face him. "I have another class coming in ten minutes and would like a few moments to prepare before they arrive." She crossed her arms under her chest and gave him a tight smile.

Cid groaned and hoisted himself out of the chair. As he trudged up the aisle, he envied the recruits that would soon fill the auditorium.

Chapter 15

The door to Nel's bunk was open. Cid leaned in the doorway and watched as she sat on the edge of her bed, rubbing a towel over her wet hair. The soft, clean scent of her soap and shampoo filled the room, and Cid inhaled, the smell relaxing him.

Nel sat up, tossing her hair behind her shoulders, and she let out a little squeak of surprise when she saw Cid. She threw the towel into a far corner. "I told you, my bunk's too small for games." She smiled as she scooted back to the head of her bed and stretched her legs out, crossing them at her ankles.

"No games," said Cid. Nel must have sensed his sincerity because her smile wavered and her eyes narrowed. "You got a minute?"

She nodded and Cid stepped into her bunk, sliding the door closed behind him. She pulled her knees toward her chest to give him room to sit. After settling down and leaning against the wall, he pointed at her legs then patted his thighs. Her smile returned as she complied and rested her legs across his lap.

When Cid was agitated, he needed to occupy his hands, and massaging Nel's feet proved a suitable distraction. Nel allowed him to knead the knuckles of one hand into the ball of her foot while the other wrapped around her ankle. If her soft hums and sighs were any indication, Cid guessed that this arrangement was mutually beneficial.

He'd moved on to the other foot when Nel broke the silence.

"Not that I'm not enjoying the foot rub, but was there something you wanted to talk about?"

Cid answered by pressing his thumb deep into a pressure point on her arch. She squealed a laugh and kicked at him.

Sighing, he resumed his gentle kneading. "I just got thrown into a world of shit, that's all."

He recited his conversation with Saf, embellished with a few curse-laden asides. When he finished, Nel nudged him with one heel, prompting him to look at her.

"So, you babysit Lia for a while. If she screws up, it's on her, not you."

Cid laid his hands across her ankles and leaned his head back against the wall. "Well, I've already forbid Chuck from having anything to do with Tracey, now I'm gonna have to play matchmaker. He's smart. He'll suspect something."

Nel bent forward, wrapping her arms around her knees. "You don't owe him any explanations."

He groaned and pivoted his head to look at her. "But he has the hots for Tracey and will let her drag him into trouble."

Nel shrugged her shoulders and cocked an eyebrow.

She wasn't getting it and Cid knew he would have to drive the point home. He straightened up and turned toward her, locking his black eyes with hers. "I can't lose another one. The first one was bad enough, but if I had to call in a kill order on Chuck . . . "

Nel inhaled sharply, then shook her head. "Are you trying to tell me that you are having a moral dilemma? That you've grown a conscience?"

He pinched his claws into her big toe and grinned at her yelp of pain. "I've always had a conscience, it's just more selective than others'."

She nodded and rested back against the wall. "You really like this Charlie, don't you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. Chuck was alright. He asked questions but was smart enough to be suspicious of Cid's answers. That inquisitive streak could get him into major trouble, but on that level, Cid could definitely relate to him. Plus, Chuck had not only adapted to Cid's presence in record time, he also rolled with the punches from Cid's abrasive sense of humor. Chuck even managed a jab back on occasion.

"Yeah, I like him, but don't tell anyone." He cocked a grin at Nel. "I got a rep to protect."

"You can pay for my silence with more foot rubs." Nel wiggled her toes and smiled back at him.

Cid thought about offering massages to other parts of her anatomy, but he knew her reaction would involve claws and his face. Besides, he didn't want to sour the moment. It had taken him a few years, but he'd come to realize that even if she would never sleep with him, there wasn't much he wouldn't do to keep her friendship.

He snorted a laugh and shook his head, resuming his attentions to Nel's feet.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

He looked into her black eyes and the warmth that bloomed in his chest confirmed what he already knew. "I'm getting soft in my old age."

Nel gave him a broad smile. She lifted her legs from his lap and folded them under herself so she could lean forward close enough to pat Cid's shoulder. "You're not getting soft. You're just finally growing up. Congratulations." She didn't laugh, but her smile was mocking enough on its own.

Cid crossed his arms and cut his eyes at her as he said, "I don't like it."

Chapter 16

Cid gazed longingly at the knives nestled within the block of wood on Charlie's kitchen counter. The biggest blade would be the most efficient, but he wanted to draw the moment out. Savor it. He unsheathed the paring knife from the block and ran the pad of his thumb over the edge. It took considerable pressure before the metal tore into his gray skin, drawing a crooked line of dark blood to the surface. He grinned as he licked the blood away. The blade was dangerously dull, but that only meant more pain for his victim. Gripping the handle tight, he raised the knife and buried it to the hilt within Lia's shocked right eye.

“What are you giggling at?”

Cid shook himself from his reverie. Lolling his head against the lower cabinet door, he looked up from his seat on the floor and settled his eyes on Lia, perched on Charlie's counter, picking at her nails. Dropping his head again, he mumbled, “Nothing,” and traced a claw along the pattern embossed on the vinyl floor.

“Oh, come on,” she said leaning forward, bracing her hands on the edge of the counter. “I'm bored and could use a good laugh.”

He flicked his gaze to her before returning it to the floor where a black-red puddle of blood materialized then vanished with a blink. “I doubt you'd get the joke.”

She crossed her arms with a huff. “I'm not a complete moron, you know. I am a Level Four, after all. Just like you.”

“Not,” he pointed at her and snarled, “like me.”

She withered under his glare and he dropped his hand,

cursing himself for his momentary pang of remorse. As much as he hated to admit it, Lia was in the same leaky, rat-infested boat as him. No, she wasn't a complete moron, maybe just seventy-five percent. But she was new, Tracey being her first solo assignment. She had a lot to learn and Cid didn't have the patience or the desire to teach it to her. Saf's order for Cid to keep a close eye on Lia was making them both suffer. Fortunately for them, Charlie and Tracey were busy learning more about each other than the Hordt's agenda.

Cid looked to the living room where the humans were snuggled next to each other on the sofa, the backs of their heads silhouetted against the flickering television screen. He knew they were still texting each other on the sly. Unlike Lia, Cid was zero percent moron. He'd been able to glean enough from their illicit conversations to learn that they were just chasing their tails. Neither one of them had enough information on Hordts to be of much use and they filled in the gaps with pure speculation. And it was always Tracey who initiated their secret talks. She was a tenacious little pain in the ass and even though she was genuinely smitten with Charlie, it was also apparent she would never give up on her quest for information about the Hordts.

Cutting his eyes at Lia who thumbed at her control module with one hand and twirled her hair with the other, he couldn't really blame Tracey for her single-mindedness. Charlie, on the other hand, was more interested in getting into Tracey's pants than thwarting an alien invasion, and that was his saving grace. Tracey could dig her own grave all day for all Cid cared, but the moment Charlie grabbed a shovel . . .

Cid cursed under his breath and stood. Taking out his control module he said to Lia, "I'm gonna get some air," and shifted from the kitchen to outside the apartment door. Careful not to stray beyond the range of the biowave recorder, he paced the sidewalk, painted in shades of black and dusty yellow from the streetlights filtering through the trees.

Charlie was supposed to be Cid's rebound human—a nice, cushy assignment to ease him back into the swing of things. But after only a few weeks, the situation already looked like another Scott Ogletree disaster all over again.

Scott was an independent, free-thinking artist, which should have caused numerous problems from day one. Over-active imaginations and unconventional schedules weren't normally conducive to a successful Hordt/human relationship. But Scott had the added benefit of possessing an overwhelming eagerness to please. If Scott had been female, Cid would have taken advantage of this character trait nine ways to Sunday, but it was enough that the guy followed orders like a champ. Scott barely earned enough to feed himself, but he considered his day a success if Cid was happy, the idiot.

They did their little waltz, Cid leading and Scott gleefully following, for over nine years, then the needle was suddenly dragged across the record. But it wasn't a woman who cut into their dance, it was an opportunity. A cousin of a friend was starting his own marketing company after working at a huge firm for many years. The cousin wanted a creative person to be an "idea guy," as he described it. After a casual meeting, then an interview, and finally a handshake over dinner, Scott was hired. And wouldn't you know, Scott took to the structure of an eight to five job like a submissive to leather straps and chains. Scott thrived within the corporate world like he never did surrounded by his easels and oils. The steady paycheck didn't hurt, either.

Finally getting his shit together ended up being Scott's undoing. His new-found confidence clashed with Cid's mission at every turn. There were questions, then rejections, and finally down-right refusals to follow the rules. Scott took every opportunity to try and talk with others about Hordts. The "pain incentive" only enraged him and strengthened his resolve. He found a resistance group and began making dangerous connections.

Backed into a corner, Cid called in a Section 10. Being curious as to what exactly was involved, Cid tagged along with the team of three Level Sevens who were dispatched to dispatch Scott. Two minutes into the mission, Cid realized he should have just stayed at home.

Scott was a young, healthy man, so faking a heart attack or some other natural ailment via an injection would raise too many eyebrows. A robbery gone wrong was the scenario the Level

Sevens decided upon. Unfortunately for Scott, this meant he had to be woken up from a deep sleep and take an active role in the staging of his death. He fought back with a fierce bravery he never could have summoned only a few months before, but the physically superior Level Seven operative overpowered him easily, breaking ribs and turning his face to pulp. Two shots center mass from a suppressed nine-millimeter pistol, which would never be found by humans, ended Scott's life. With practiced efficiency, the Level Sevens overturned furniture and gathered valuables to further the robbery tableau while Cid watched the blood pool around Scott's mangled corpse.

He'd followed orders and done his job, but Cid was not a good little soldier; his conscience was not comforted by the cold reassurance of protocol. Scott was just a human, but he had been Cid's human. They'd shared a lot together and Scott, until near the end, had trusted Cid. On top of, and even worse than, the guilt, Cid nearly buckled under the weight of his own cowardice. Because the entire time, as Scott flailed and pleaded for his life while choking on his own blood, Cid had cloaked himself from the human's view. Scott died never knowing Cid was there.

Looking through the window, Cid saw Charlie say something to Tracey which made them both laugh. Lia hovered in the background, leaning against the doorway to the kitchen. Cid resolved right then that no matter what, he wouldn't take the pussy way out again. A part of him also dared to hope that being brave could also mean being right.

Chapter 17

Scrolling through her iPod, Tracey selected the playlist titled: Fuck Off. "Who Made Who" by AC/DC blared through her earbuds as she sat on her sofa and thumbed out a text to Charlie. Lia was curled up in the chair by the window with a pen and a magazine.

Tracey shuddered. She'd learned many disturbing things she wished she could forget after reading Lia's answers to those sex quizzes in Cosmo. Tracey almost canceled her subscription, until she realized the distraction it provided Lia was beneficial. Anything was better than the Hordt trying to engage her in mindless chit-chat.

Not that she hadn't also gleaned important information from Lia during those conversations.

The first such tidbit involved the "sleep side-effect." When Tracey mentioned that her insomnia had been miraculously cured, Lia had said, "You have to sleep. When else are we supposed to get anything done?"

Tracey had let that comment slide without a response, but she'd filed it away to ponder later.

Then there had been the lazy Sunday when Tracey had immersed herself in an Internet wormhole that started with a visit to her Twitter feed, then led to her Tumblr dashboard, and ended up with her searching YouTube for interviews of her favorite actors. Total Internet immersion was a distraction that Tracey rarely afforded herself, but she wanted to focus on anything other than her current reality. A reality that suddenly had to make room for constant surveillance by a vapid gray monster.

After the seventh video of a delightful British actor dissecting the various subtleties of his performance as the villain in a summer blockbuster movie, Lia had stormed over and slapped Tracey's laptop closed.

"Are you going to rot your brain with this trash all day?" Lia stood, scowling with her hands on her hips.

Tracey had a flashback to her childhood. "What are you, my mom?"

Lia huffed. "I'm not going to get anything out of you today if you keep this up. I need more to make all this time worth it."

"More what?" Tracey asked, setting her laptop aside.

The Hordt stepped back and shook her head. "Um, nothing. Just, like, read a book or knit a sweater or something."

Tracey narrowed her eyes. "Knit a sweater? What the hell are you talking about?"

Lia offered no explanation. She just mumbled something under her breath and slumped down in the chair.

The subtext wasn't lost on Tracey, however. She learned that Lia tended to get agitated whenever she indulged in any activity that required little, if any, brain power.

Through this interaction, Tracey figured out how to find others in her same situation. Instead of doing an Internet search for "Hordt," she changed the parameters to include "brain waves" and "gray monster."

She clicked through dozens of pages of hits before she discovered hints at an underground network of people trying to rid themselves of the "Gray Menace," as they called it. She'd already figured out, by complete accident, that listening to loud music jammed the Hordt's ability to eavesdrop on what should be the private monologue within her own head. This left her free to scroll through page after page of various forums populated with people who had compiled a database of information on the Hordts and theories on how to thwart their agenda.

This led to more clandestine text conversations with Charlie.

After their breakfast date weeks before, she wasn't sure if the poor guy would ever speak to her again. Judging by how pale

Charlie had turned on her doorstep and then his hasty retreat, his Hordt had punished him with the same head exploding pain that Lia subjected her to. Lia had forbidden Tracey from having any contact with Charlie and forbid her from conducting any more "research" on Hordts. Tracey didn't respond favorably to ultimatums, even if the creature issuing them could give her the mother of all migraines as punishment. She was prepared to suffer any consequences for the chance to regain her basic human right of privacy.

Then Lia pulled a complete reversal and suggested that occupying her time and energy on dating Charlie might not be a bad idea. Red flags rained down like confetti, but Tracy didn't argue and wasted no time contacting Charlie. A few days passed before he finally replied to one of her emails with an apology for avoiding her. He suggested another date--lunch this time--and she accepted. Then there was dinner the next night. They'd seen each other nearly every day since.

She tried to convince herself the only reason she agreed to see Charlie was to have an excuse to interact with someone who shared her same predicament. That didn't explain why she caught herself grinning like an idiot over her plate of pasta at dinner or why she let him hold her hand while walking home from a movie. They'd indulged in some kisses and over the clothing groping, but the unnerving presence of Lia leering over her shoulder really killed the mood.

Her cell phone vibrated and she saw Charlie's standard text reply whenever she asked if he could talk about their gray friends.

I'm wired for sound.

She hummed along to White Zombie's "Dragula" as she typed.

**Get a big bottle of
melatonin.**

**Why? Last thing I need
is help sleeping.**

It's like giving speed to kids with ADD. Has opposite effect on us.

While she waited for his reply, she glanced up at Lia who was still engrossed in her magazine and chewing on the end of her pen. Shaking her head, she returned her attention to her phone.

Charlie had responded.

You sure you trust this info?

Yes. Multiple forums say same thing. Take handful of melatonin before bed and you won't sleep.

That's a very big risk, T.

Tracey sighed. He was right, it was a big risk, but if it worked it would put an end to this silly texting game. If they could counteract whatever it was that the Hordts used to make them sleep soundly for seven or eight hours straight each night, then they could talk in person. Really talk. Or they could just choose to be alone. Really alone. For so long she had taken solitude for granted. Being able to walk around her duplex in only her underwear or argue with the television without anyone judging her or offering their unsolicited comments. Or to kiss her boyfriend without wondering what an alien species wanted with the signals the synapses firing in her brain were broadcasting at that moment.

Totally worth it.

Chapter 18

During moments of boredom, pre-teen Jimmy would wander over to young Charlie, who'd be playing with his Legos or reading a Spider-Man comic, and whisper, "I'm gonna tell Dad." Charlie would look up, brown eyes wide. "Tell Dad what?" "Oh, you know." Jimmy would point an accusing finger at Charlie then walk away.

The next several hours would bear witness to Charlie wracking his brain, retracing his steps, trying to remember what infraction of the house rules he had committed. Jimmy would offer no assistance, only cluck his tongue, shake his head, and say, "I can't believe you don't know what you did." This would send Charlie into another spasm of anxiety while he searched the house for clues.

Of course, Charlie wouldn't have done anything wrong. He was a victim of his own guilty conscience--a character defect that Jimmy loved to exploit for entertainment.

Now, as he stood in his bathroom wearing only boxer shorts, he stared at the large bottle of melatonin tablets in his medicine cabinet and knew, for a fact, he was screwed. He didn't yet know to what degree, but if the constant seizing of his chest was any indication, his body was prepared for the worst.

For the past several weeks, Charlie had been certain at any moment his extracurricular activities with Tracey would be discovered and Cid would unleash that brain melting agony and, this time, wouldn't turn it off. Every text sent to her while music blared through his earbuds, every email answered while Cid

roamed the halls at the office, and every date was just another opportunity to slip up and say or think the wrong thing.

That was another issue: Tracey. He liked her a lot. More every time they were together. But Cid switched from threatening to unleash his wrath if Charlie even mentioned her name, to encouraging them to spend time with each other. The one-eighty made Charlie dizzy. Cid played it off with a half-baked justification that the more time Charlie and Tracey spent together, the more they would be engrossed in their blossoming romance and less inclined to talk about the Hordts. Charlie was suspicious, but more than that, he feared it was some sort of set up. There are bitter bastards that say all relationships are traps, but his interest in Tracey felt like bait in a very deadly snare.

Charlie was ill equipped to deal with this level of stress. He rasped his palms against the light stubble on his face and groaned. The only respite he got from his situation was eight hours of blissful sleep each night--courtesy of the Hordt--and now he was going to forfeit that in exchange for digging himself a deeper hole.

For more than one reason, he didn't think, he just reached between the Listerine and Neosporin for the bottle of melatonin tablets and tipped it up, filling his mouth. He choked down the pills with multiple paper cups full of water then repeated the process two more times. It felt like he'd swallowed an anvil, but he acted casual as he walked toward the kitchen. Passing through the living room, he saw Cid on the couch toying with a gadget that looked like an old Nokia cell phone of all things.

"What's that?"

Cid grabbed his trench coat from the arm of the couch and dropped the device into a pocket. "Just a tool of the trade." His voice lacked its usual edge and he didn't even attempt a grin.

While Charlie prepared the coffee maker for the morning, he watched Cid stand and shrug on his coat. The action looked as if it required more effort than it warranted. The Hordt then rolled his shoulders and sighed. The emotion revealed in Cid's expression was all too familiar.

Jesus. He looks as fried as I feel.

Cid looked up at Charlie. "While you're frolicking in dreamland, my day's just getting started." He walked around the

couch, never taking his eyes off Charlie. "Don't talk to me about fried, Chuck. You got it easy." He made a sweeping gesture with his arm toward the bedroom. "Speaking of which, isn't it your bedtime, young man?"

"Yeah." Charlie walked out of the kitchen. "See you tomorrow." He'd just stepped into the hallway to his bedroom when he stopped and turned around. Cid was leaning against the back of the couch, head lowered, hands in his pockets. He never thought this arrangement would be as stressful for Cid as it was for him. Until now, Charlie hadn't imagined he'd have anything in common with the Hordt other than reading the same magazines and a shared appreciation of female anatomy.

"Wrong, Chuck." Cid didn't look up as he spoke. "We don't have anything in common."

Charlie closed his eyes and relaxed into the mattress while his breathing evened out. It was then he started counting. This became a routine the fifth night after Cid arrived in order to gauge how long it took him to fall asleep. Every night, he'd count to around thirty before drifting off. This night, after he reached thirty-three, he heard a sound from somewhere in the apartment, like air rushing past an open car window. The sound lasted until he counted to thirty-six, then it stopped abruptly, as if the window closed.

When he reached one hundred, Charlie stopped counting. He called out to Cid in his mind, but there was no reply. Still not believing this stupid stunt had worked, he sat up in bed and yelled Cid's name.

The apartment was silent.

"No fucking way," Charlie mumbled as he climbed out of bed and walked into the living room, turning on the overhead light.

There was no smirking gray monster on his couch.

He crossed into the kitchen, which was similarly unoccupied. Then he doubled back down the hallway to the bathroom and afterward to the second bedroom, where a few boxes

of stuff from his childhood and his bike were stowed. Both were sans Hordt.

An electric sensation spread through Charlie's chest and branched out through his limbs. His fingertips tingled, his ears buzzed. He hadn't felt like this since he was a teenager, when he'd sneak out at night with a couple of stolen beers and lure the quiet neighbor girl out of her room for awkward make-out sessions in the bushes at the end of the cul-de-sac. This was the type of excited you could only experience by engaging in illicit behavior. From breaking the rules. And getting away with it.

A high-pitched hum escaped through Charlie's grin and it grew into full, gasping laughter. He gripped the back of the sofa to steady himself as the laughter doubled him over. For the first time in over a month, he could act like a complete maniac in his own home without a sarcastic comment from a one monster peanut gallery. It was liberating and completely ridiculous at the same time. And it was all thanks to a few mouthfuls of harmless melatonin tablets. Amazingly enough, Tracey had found accurate information on an obscure internet forum.

Tracey!

Charlie ran to his bedroom, dove onto his bed, and snatched his cell phone from the nightstand. Unlocking the phone, he saw he had one missed call and a new text message. Both were from Tracey. The text read, "Hope it worked for you. On my way over!" After replying, "YES!" he scrambled up from the bed and pulled on the shorts and T-shirt he wore earlier that day. He skipped to the bathroom to check the status of his hair and was contemplating brushing his teeth again when he heard pounding on his front door.

He opened the door and saw Tracey, still in her plaid pajamas, standing there sporting the biggest smile he'd ever seen. With a squeal, she leaped into his arms and he managed to kick the door shut before spinning her around and setting her down. He gazed into her smiling face and saw all his elation and relief reflected there.

Since he couldn't think of a thing to say, Charlie bent down and pressed his lips to hers. She eagerly returned the kiss, opening her mouth to his while she pushed him up against the wall and

buried her fingers in his hair. He pulled her tight to him, his hands clutching and roaming down her sides and across her back. All his excited energy was now channeled into using his mouth and fingers to coax delicious little moans and sighs from the woman in his arms.

Coming up for air, he leaned back a bit, wanting to give Tracey a moment to regroup, maybe calm things down a degree or two. She declined his unspoken offer by yanking his head back down and capturing his bottom lip between her teeth. Not one to argue, Charlie kissed her again and slid his hands down to palm her ass. Tracey took this as an invitation and hopped up to wrap her legs around his waist. He stepped away from the wall so she could cross her ankles behind his back and carried her to the bedroom.

Chapter 19

As far as post-coital conversations go, discussing how you beat a couple of invasive, gray monsters at their own game had to rank among the strangest. Charlie wasn't about to complain, however. They lay in his bed and he combed his fingers through Tracey's hair as she, head resting on his shoulder and arm draped across his chest, recounted the information she'd learned about the Hordts.

"They collect our brainwaves with some sort of scanner," she said, idly circling her fingers across his skin.

"Uh-huh," Charlie replied.

"They also have devices they use to make people not see them. Some Dr. Who fans in the forums call them perception filters. That's how you can see Cid and I can't."

"Mmmmm."

"And they've been doing this for centuries. When people start to figure out their game or learn too much, they do the pain thing. But if that doesn't work, they'll kill people, too."

"Ahhh."

Tracey propped up on an elbow and looked at Charlie. "Are you even listening to me?"

He widened his eyes in feigned innocence. "Of course." He pivoted so they lay front to front and kissed her cheek. Running his hand down her back, he whispered in her ear, "Hanging on every word."

She giggled and gave a halfhearted slap to his shoulder. "This is important stuff, mister!" A sigh escaped her when he

nibbled on her earlobe. "You should really, um, learn what they are . . . Oooh."

Charlie was gripping her thigh and sucking on the spot where her neck angled into her shoulder. Encouraged by how his actions halted her ability to form words, he continued his attentions to her neck and pulled her leg up so it wrapped around his hip. He was migrating down past her collarbones with little nibbling kisses, when she grasped him by the jaw and forced his face level with hers.

"Hey!" she said, unhooking her leg from around him. "As much as I'm enjoying what you're doing, we have limited time to talk, here."

With a sigh, Charlie released her and stretched out on his back. "I know. You've done a ton of research." He curled his lip up into a sly grin. "I just wanted to thank you some more."

She nudged him with her knee. "I appreciate it, but if you weren't a freak of nature who doesn't own a computer, you could do your own research."

He laughed. "I had a laptop once, but the hard drive crashed and I never replaced it."

"Just like your car. If your fridge dies are you gonna store your food in coolers?"

"Ha, ha. I can check my email and stuff on my phone. It's all I need." He rubbed his eyes then laced his fingers behind his head. "Besides, how much good is all your info on the Hordts really going to do us?"

Tracey toyed with the ends of her hair. "What do you mean?"

"Well, do we know how to get rid of them?"

She didn't say anything for a moment, just fiddled with her hair and stared at a spot near Charlie's bellybutton. "No. There's no info on that." She flopped over on her back. "We'd need to find a way to get to their dimension, and no one has figured out how to do that yet."

"So what do we do? Just talk about them when they think we're sleeping?" He yawned and reached an arm out, motioning Tracey to snuggle closer to him, which she did. "If we can't get rid of them then shouldn't we just learn how to deal with them?"

"Just give up?" She pulled the sheet further up over both of them. "Resign yourself to being watched all the time?"

"It's not ideal, I'll admit. But obviously people have been doing it for a long time. They've made it work."

She didn't reply and he closed his eyes, taking in the feeling of her warm body pressed against his. He'd almost drifted off to sleep when Tracey broke the silence.

"We need to get one of them on our side."

"What?" He opened his eyes and shook off his drowsiness.

"One of the Hordts. Try to convince them to talk to us."

"You think you could do that with Lia? You did say she was kind of a dingbat."

Tracey huffed out a laugh, her breath tickling his chest. "She is. And she used to be itching to tell me things. Now she's keeping her mouth shut. Especially when I'm around you."

Charlie cocked an eyebrow. "Really?"

She rested her chin on his shoulder, looking at him as she talked. "Yep. I know she doesn't like Cid, but how she acts around him makes me believe he has some sort of power over her. He's the guy we need to talk to."

It was Charlie's turn to laugh. "No way. Cid hates me. More now than ever. He'd explode my brain before he gave me the time of day."

"If only we knew someone else who had a Hordt."

Charlie sighed. "I do."

Tracey leaned up on her forearms, her eyes wide. "Who?"

He hadn't even thought about Jimmy's Hordt until now. They hardly talked to one another except at family get-togethers and the random call when Charlie needed to borrow a power tool or Jimmy needed insurance advice. Charlie had no idea how his brother was dealing with his Hordt and all at once felt guilty for not reaching out to him. He'd always regretted that they had so little in common and now that they shared a life-changing experience, he was keeping the same distance between them.

A finger poked him in the ribs. He focused on Tracey who stared at him like he was a bomb about to blow. "Who?" she repeated.

"My brother," he said.

"Holy shit!" Tracey sat up, the sheet falling around her waist. She must have noticed Charlie's eyes drift down to her chest, because she yanked the sheet up to cover herself. "Your brother has a Hordt? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I forgot."

"What?" She punched his arm. "How in the hell could you forget?"

He rubbed his arm, surprised at the force she put into the hit. "I've had my own shit to worry about, ya know."

She fingered the ends of her hair again and got a contemplative look that made Charlie uncomfortable.

"Hey," he said. "I know what you're thinking and it ain't gonna happen. I'm not dragging my brother into this."

"But why? He could be the key."

"No. I may not be close with the guy, but he's my brother and I don't want him tortured by his Hordt because of some crazy scheme." Charlie rubbed his palms against his face and groaned. "I'll try talking to Cid."

Chapter 20

A dry, warm breeze scattered white sand across the paved walkways cutting through the courtyard in the middle of the barracks buildings. Cid walked over to sit on a black metal bench beneath a skeletal tree, the late afternoon sun stretching his shadow long behind him. He was normally indifferent to fresh air and sunshine but being outside diminished the odds of Saf cornering him to demand a status report. His access to the entertainment zones had been reinstated but visiting them increased the chance of running into Lia and he saw that blabbering bimbo enough Earth-side. He sat on the bench, claws digging into his knees, and stared out between the squat, square buildings at the desert beyond. He idly wondered how far he could trek into that white wasteland before Command sent out a rescue team to drag his tight, gray ass back to base. *If I'm lucky, I'd die of exposure first*, he thought, then groaned at what a drama queen he'd become.

"Suck it up, Cid," he grumbled as he relaxed his grip on his knees and settled back on the bench. Tilting his face up into the sun, he sniffed the breeze and twiddled a fallen twig between his fingers. For him, alleviating stress usually involved some sort of violent activity like sparring with Myk or even a drunken card game with the guys in the lounge. Sitting there in the sun relaxed him in a way he hadn't anticipated. Although, he still wouldn't turn down a cold, stiff drink.

A figure strolling his way caught his attention. He recognized the pretty face and swaying ponytail from Saf's lecture weeks ago. He gave a low whistle and grinned when the female recruit slowed then stopped in front of him. If he played it right,

maybe he'd get to indulge in an even more effective stress relieving activity with little Ms. Ponytail.

"It's Cid, right?" She placed one hand on her hip, the action opening her short black jacket to reveal the tight gray T-shirt underneath.

He rested one arm on his lap and stretched the other along the back of the bench. "I'm flattered you know who I am."

She huffed a laugh. "Don't be. Saf uses you as an example of what not to do in her disciplinary protocol lectures."

He laughed. "I'm notorious. I can live with that." Lowering his voice a little he said, "But I'm at a disadvantage. I don't know your name."

She narrowed her eyes at him, then looked out over the courtyard as if weighing her options.

Come on, Cid thought. Just tell me your name, sweetheart.

Looking back at him, she dropped her hand from her hip and adjusted the strap of the satchel hanging from her shoulder.

You know you wanna. I can tell. You like the bad boys, don't ya? He flashed her a smile that was seventy percent charming and thirty percent predatory.

"Val," she said at last.

He patted the bench seat beside him. "Well, Val, why don't you sit and we can discuss the pros and cons of disciplinary protocol."

Her lips curled up into a slight smile.

Come on, baby.

"I suppose I got some time," she said as she sat next to him.

Jackpot.

Within minutes she was giggling and playfully slapping his knee. He'd edged a little closer to her, his arm resting on the back of the bench behind her. As she talked, her ponytail brushed against his arm and he resisted the urge to wrap his hand in her hair and bury his nose in the sweet scent of her.

"You're the reason bringing human pharmaceuticals through the portal is now a Class Three offense?" Her big, black eyes regarded him with a mixture of humor and disbelief.

"I got a raw deal on that one," Cid said. "How was I supposed to know that aspirin gives us severe intestinal distress? I was only trying to help my Supervisor get rid of his headache." He shrugged his shoulders.

"But you ground the pills up into his coffee!" Val said with a laugh.

"Well, I knew he wouldn't just take them outright. For some reason, the bastard never did trust me." He widened his eyes and shook his head, feigning innocence.

"You're awful!" She poked at his thigh with a claw.

Cid leaned in close to whisper, "I happen to know of other common human drugs that act quite differently on us. In a good way."

Val turned her head more toward him. "Really? Like what?"

He shifted his hand from the back of the bench to rest it on her shoulder. "There's B12. They take it for energy or something. A vitamin, they call it. But it will get us higher than a carnival lantern."

"No way." She tilted back so she could look him in the eyes again.

"Yep." He moved the hand in his lap to fiddle with the zipper on her jacket. "It's like porry seeds here, but without the crash the next day."

"Oh, that crash is the worst," she said, shaking her head.

You are a bad girl, Cid chuckled to himself. "I think I still have some B12 in my bunk." He smiled and trailed one claw along her shoulder and across her back. When he reached her ponytail, he twirled a few strands around his finger.

Val raised an eyebrow and slipped her bottom lip between her teeth. "Mmm, I don't know . . ." But her eyes widened in excitement, giving her away.

He bent closer and whispered, "It's okay. You won't get caught. Trust me."

She giggled and laid her hand across his knee. "Well, I could sneak away for a--"

"Hi there, Cid!"

Both Cid and Val sat straight up and turned to stare at the interloper who stood over them with a cheery grin.

Cid sighed and pulled his arm from around Val. "Hello, Tod." Of all the possible assholes he could run into, of course the guy assigned to Charlie's brother had to stroll up and say hi. And just when he was blissfully distracted from work.

"Funny running into you, huh? I never see you around." He thrust his hand out to Val. "Hi, I'm Tod."

Val slowly lifted her hand from Cid's knee and held it out to Tod who grasped it and shook enthusiastically. "Um. I'm Val." She wrenched her hand back from Tod's grip.

"I'd thought we'd see more of each other, but Jimmy and his brother don't hang out much, eh?" Tod gave a jittery laugh and rocked back on his heels.

"Yeah. That's a tragedy." Cid had to give a medal to whoever matched Tod up with Jimmy. Those two losers were a perfect pair.

"It is, isn't it?" Tod brushed a hand across his short-cropped hair. "We should really try to get those fellas together more often. I know we aren't supposed to interfere, but, come on, they're brothers!" He held out his hands and raised his shoulders.

Cid fought back a groan. "It is what it is, man." He remembered the last, and only, time he and Tod were together on the job. They were at the birthday dinner for the father, James. When he'd performed his signature grind and fondle on Claire, Tod nearly had an aneurysm. Then, throughout the evening, he'd flailed his arms and contorted his face in what could only be interpreted as suggestions to stop what little fun Cid was having. But Claire had an impressive rack on her. How could he ignore it? And Jimmy, the dolt. He'd never suspected a thing. Just kept right on chewing his pot roast. Cid had to hand it to Chuck. The guy was quick on the uptake. He'd realized both Tracey and Jimmy had Hordt companions right away.

Charlie. Damn. Exactly the guy he didn't want to think about.

--in a few, huh?"

Tod had been talking this whole time. Cid had no idea what he'd said but played it off. "Yeah, man. Maybe I'll see you around?"

"That would be great! Bye!" Tod gave a little wave and trotted off across the courtyard toward wherever a spaz like him spent his free time.

"Are you okay?"

Val had her hand on his shoulder. He'd almost forgotten she was there. He wondered about her question until he realized he had his knees in a death grip, his claws almost piercing the fabric of his trousers. Relaxing his fingers, he rubbed his palms against his thighs. "Just dandy," he said.

She leaned in close. "So, are we going to your bunk or what?"

Cid turned his eyes to the willing young thing at his side, biting her lip and looking oh so delectable. Any other time, he'd have her half-way to undressed against the wall of the elevator on the trip down to his bunk. But he wasn't feeling it now. In a few short hours he'd have to deal with Charlie and, possibly, that bitch Lia and all the pressure that came with trying to prevent something disastrous from happening. Until now, he didn't believe there was much that could temper his libido. Turns out, responsibility was one hell of a cockblock.

He patted Val's leg. "Not today, sweetheart. I gotta be on duty in a bit."

She pouted but nodded her head. "Okay. Some other time, though?"

"Yeah. Some other time." He bent to pick up her satchel from the ground as he stood. Handing it to her he said, "See you later, Val."

He walked toward his barracks, resigned to spend the next few hours alone in his bunk preparing for another shift with Charlie.

Chapter 21

Cid pulled on his trench coat as he walked through the hallways to Portal Dock 3. The nap he'd squeezed in after talking with Val had improved his state of mind. And maybe he'd get lucky and not have to deal with Lia's idiocy today. He'd been such a good boy lately, he figured he deserved a reward.

While he waited in line to get synched with a biowave recorder, Cid checked his control module, which Charlie had thought looked like an early model cell phone. The module had changed many times over the centuries and was specifically designed to resemble a mundane or obsolete human gadget. This camouflage was effective in preventing humans from learning about the Hordt's advanced technology. Well, that and the remote-activated self-destruct feature.

Along with being a sleep and location monitor, the module was equipped with a spatial disruptor set at a frequency to cloak the Hordts from everyone except their assigned human. The disruptor didn't work on Hordts, at least not in the same way. The technology was developed by a Central Government engineer named Lob who had lofty intentions of altering the density of iron ore so it would weigh less without losing tensile strength. As is often the case when governments get involved in matters that have little to do with governing, the device was a complete failure. It was successful at sending an unpleasant jolting vibration through Hordt soft tissue, making it a popular prank at parties. By complete accident, a private laboratory discovered how the disruptor affected humans and, after a few tweaks, it became standard issue equipment to all Level Fours. Unfortunately, by that time, poor

Lob's name had secured a place in the lexicon as a synonym for "overpaid and under qualified."

Data scrolled down the screen of Cid's module, confirming that Charlie currently slept in his bed, and Earth time in his zone was five forty-five in the morning. He had thirty minutes to get through the portal before Charlie's alarm woke him up. Just as he was about to clear the screen, he noticed the timer had clocked under four hours of sleep time for Charlie. It should be counting down to eight hours. Cid slapped the back of the module a few times with his hand and frowned when the timer didn't change. *Damn thing needs to be re-calibrated, he thought. Great, now I'll have to schedule an appointment with one of the techs. Those guys give me the creeps.*

"Next!"

Cid looked up to see he had reached the head of the line. Behind a narrow counter sat an old prune with white streaks in her black bob who motioned for Cid to hurry his ass up. Cid stepped up to the counter and she snatched a bio-wave recorder--designed to look like a small calculator--from a bin behind her. She punched a few keys and then held it up toward Cid's forehead. He couldn't see the screen, but he knew that a red zero would flash for a few moments until it was synched with his brainwaves, then a green nine would flash. When he got Earth-side, he'd do the same to Charlie before he woke up. The recorder not only, well, recorded, human brain waves, it also made it possible for Hordts to read their human's thoughts. Much like the spatial disruptor, the mind-reading feature of the bio-wave recorder was an accidental discovery by a tech named Jac, who's name became slang for "lucky son of a bitch."

The prune handed the recorder to Cid, who said, "Thanks." She replied with a scowl. He dropped the recorder into a pocket of his coat and walked to the closest set of stairs leading to the portal platform. Pressing a button on his control module brought up the portal manipulator function. The coordinates for Charlie's living room were one of the presets and he selected it from the list. With the portal manipulator he could jump fully into the Earth's dimension or just skim along the edge once he was there. This let

him shift from one location to another, like from outside a locked apartment to the kitchen inside.

Cid stood on the platform with dozens of other Level Fours who, one by one, winked out of sight within a bubble of rushing air. He pressed the execute key on his control module and his own bubble formed around him, whipping his coat against his legs and swirling his hair. The portal dock vanished with a pop and for sickening fraction of a second, Cid was nowhere, suspended in the void between dimensions. With another pop, Charlie's living room appeared around him, illuminated by the golden sunrise filtering through the window blinds. He picked up a cushion that had blown off the couch, leaving the magazines in disarray on the coffee table because it drove Charlie crazy.

Walking to the bedroom, he dropped the control module in one pocket and retrieved the bio-wave recorder from the other. *So begins another day in paradise*, he thought as he stood over the bed and held out the recorder to synch with Charlie, who was sprawled out on his stomach, drooling into his pillow. As the red zero flashed, an uneasy feeling surrounded Cid. It was palpable, to the point he could almost see it swirl around his head and wrap around his limbs. By the time the green nine flashed, he realized the source of his unease.

It was a smell.

Cid ripped the sheet away from Charlie then leaned over the bed and inhaled, rage coiling within his gut. Just then, the alarm sounded. Before Charlie could slap the snooze button, Cid grabbed the clock radio off the nightstand and threw it against the far wall where it squawked and shattered into a blizzard of plastic and circuitry.

"Jesus Christ!" Charlie screamed as he flipped over and scrambled to a sitting position. He turned on the lamp next to his bed and when he saw the Hordt glaring at him said, "What the hell, Cid?"

"She was here," Cid growled. He flexed his fingers, claws digging into the air. He considered tuning up the bio-wave recorder, which caused the excruciating pain in Charlie's head, then thought doing things the old-fashioned way would be much more satisfying.

Charlie blubbered an excuse, but Cid was beyond listening. He gripped Charlie by the shoulders and yanked him out of bed, throwing him to the floor. "You and that bitch couldn't leave well enough alone," he said as he stalked toward Charlie, shedding his trench coat and dropping it behind him.

Charlie tried to back away on his hands and heels, blood dripping from the claw marks in his shoulders. "Wait. We just--" his voice hitched. "We just wanted to be alone." His eyes were wide with fear, mouth drawn back into a grimace.

Cid kicked Charlie in the shin and when he sat up to clutch his leg, Cid leaned over and clocked him in the jaw with his right fist hard enough to send Charlie flying back against the carpet. "You just wanted to fuck your girlfriend in peace, eh?" Charlie clutched his jaw, moaning. "You didn't talk about us at all?" He stepped over Charlie and knelt so he was straddling his chest. "Didn't exchange any more secrets?" Grabbing Charlie's wrists, he yanked them away to the floor and pinned them down with his knees. "You figured out how to get around the sleep-side effect, clever bastard." Cid delivered a left punch to Charlie's face, leaving a gash on his cheek and his nose gushing blood. "What else do you know?" He yelled to make sure he was heard over Charlie's wheezing and gurgling.

Charlie groaned and shook his head. *Nothing!* he screamed in his mind. *Just that you need our brainwaves. I don't know what for.* He coughed, spitting blood into the carpet. *There isn't much info. Just tricks to sneak around you. That's it!* "That's it," he said aloud. "Please."

Cid leaned forward, his quivering claws close to Charlie's throat, breath huffing through his clenched teeth. He stared into Charlie's wide, watering eyes. As he listened to Charlie repeat *I'm sorry* over and over and over in his mind, Cid's rage morphed into an unfamiliar emotion. He didn't get scared. Not him.

Are you going to kill me?

Cid sat up straight. "What?"

Charlie swallowed hard. "Are you going to kill me?"

Well, that was the question, wasn't it? "Dammit," he grumbled as he raised his knees from Charlie's wrists and stood. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he rubbed his palms against his

thighs and tried to calculate exactly how fucked this situation was. If he were to follow protocol, he'd jump back through the portal right now and report to Saf, who'd issue a Section 10. Within an hour, two Level Sevens would be dispatched through the portal. Sometime after, Charlie's body would be found, the apparent victim of some sort of violent crime or, possibly, a hit-and-run bike accident. As much as Cid enjoyed not following protocol, if he didn't report this breach and was caught, the repercussions would be much more severe than losing access to the entertainment zones. He'd be brought up on charges and left to rot in the brig until he was white-haired and senile. Unless they decided to execute him, of course.

But the thought of calling in a Section 10 on Charlie made Cid's guts feel like they were crawling with beetles. He rationalized that his unease was due to the inquiries, the hearings, and his possible suspension due to this being the second time he'd had to initiate a kill order. That was bullshit, of course. The main reason Cid couldn't bring himself report this incident was simply that he didn't want Charlie to die.

He saw Charlie, a T-shirt held to his bloody nose, walk on his knees to the nightstand and grab his cell phone, yanking it from the charger. Cid leaned over and snatched the phone from his hand. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Gotta call Tracey," Charlie said, his voice nasally and muffled. He reached for the phone, dropping the T-shirt, and clawed at the bed to get at Cid.

"Don't you think you've talked to her enough?" Cid stood, pocketing the phone.

Charlie scrambled to his feet. "No!" His eyes were already purpling from Cid's handiwork, tears mixing with the blood on his cheeks. "Please! I have to know if she's okay. If Lia knows."

Lia wasn't anywhere near as observant as he was. Cid would bet that all was status quo at Tracey's. But if it wasn't . . . "What are you going to do if Lia is turning Tracey's brain to Jell-O right now, huh?" He took a quick step forward and Charlie flinched. "Yeah. Nothing. There's nothing you can do. So just sit down and shut up so I can think." He pointed at the bed and

Charlie complied, first picking up the T-shirt from the floor and holding it to his nose once again.

It would be better for everyone if Lia didn't know about Charlie and Tracey's little tryst. If she knew, she wouldn't hesitate, and Tracey was already as good as dead. That would mean Cid had no choice, he'd have to report to Saf. If Lia didn't know, it would give him some time. Time to think of a solution where no one had to die, or get demoted, or molested in prison by some goon with a name like Stabby Ray.

He pulled the cell phone from his pocket and held it out. When Charlie reached for it, he jerked it back. "You have one minute. Sound calm. Just ask how her morning is and then say good-bye. Got it?"

Charlie nodded and Cid let him have the phone.

While Charlie dialed, Cid picked his coat off the floor and retrieved the control module from the pocket. He wanted to be ready to jump back home if he had to. It was then he noticed his bruised knuckles and the dried blood under his claws. He'd been called a monster many times, but it wasn't until now that he felt like one.

"Morning," Charlie said into the phone. "Just got a crazy urge to call you, see how you're doing this morning." He paused, looking at Cid as he listened. "Oh, I'm fine. Might be getting the sniffles or something."

When Charlie gave a thumbs up sign, Cid let his knees buckle and sat down hard on the bed. At least now he had some breathing room to figure out his next move. He motioned to Charlie to wrap up the call.

"Yeah, I don't know if I'll be free tonight. Uh, my mom might need me to, um, help her with stuff . . . I'll call you . . . Okay, bye." Charlie ended the call and held out the phone to Cid, who waived it away. "She's fine. Everything's fine." He dabbed at his eyes with a clean corner of the T-shirt. "How did you know?"

Cid tapped his nose. "She's all over your bed. Her shampoo, that fruity body wash she uses, her sweat, and . . ." He curled his lips up into a leering grin. "Well, you get it. I smell her."

Charlie looked at the bed as if trying to see what Cid's nose detected.

"If I wasn't so pissed," said Cid, "I'd be congratulating you on finally giving her the high hard one." He groaned as he realized how long his dry spell had been. He made a mental note to look up Val when he got back home.

"What now?"

He looked at Charlie's mangled face and the blood drying on his shoulders. "Now you go clean up, 'cause looking at you is making me sick."

"You're not gonna finish the job?"

Cid sighed. "I'm not going to kill you, Charlie."

He laughed, a choked, snorting sound, as he stood and threw the bloody T-shirt into the small trash can by his bed. "I don't believe you."

Cid watched him as he crossed to his bathroom door. "Why not?"

"You called me Charlie."

Chapter 22

It was decided that Charlie would call in sick to work that day. Cid didn't want the distraction and Charlie didn't want to scare clients with his smashed eggplant face. After his shower, Charlie walked into the kitchen in jeans and a fresh T-shirt, lightly poking at his nose with his fingers.

"I think it's broken," he said as he turned on the coffee maker with one hand, the other still pressed to his face. He'd taken four ibuprofens, but everything still throbbed. He supposed he should be grateful for the pain. It meant he was still alive.

Cid walked in from the living room. "Let me see."

Charlie shook his head. "No way." He tried to leave the kitchen, but Cid blocked the doorway. "What is it with you? First, you turn my face into hamburger and now you want to play nurse-maid?"

"I'm an enigma." Cid held his hands out in a gesture that would have been reassuring if those claws hadn't been poised at Charlie's neck an hour ago. "Just let me look at it. I got experience with broken noses."

"I bet you do." Charlie backed up against the counter, hand covering his nose.

"If it's broken, we can go to the hospital, get you patched up. But I can't tell if you don't let me look at it first."

Charlie saw a glint of emotion in Cid's flat black eyes that he imagined could have been sympathy. Maybe this was Cid's way of apologizing. *Yeah, and maybe I'm Idris Elba.*

"You look more like a half-black John Cusack to me," said Cid as he waived for Charlie to lower his hand.

He was so surprised and confused by Cid's admission and sudden change in demeanor that he did drop his hand from his face and let the Hordt examine his nose. Cid's warm, dry fingers gently prodded the swollen flesh as he cocked his head to the side and squinted.

"Good news and bad news," said Cid after a moment.

"Okay?" Charlie wished Cid would just get on with it. Being this close to him was giving him PTSD.

"Good news is that it isn't broken." Cid then gripped the bridge of Charlie's nose hard between his thumb and forefinger and in one quick movement wrenched down and to the side.

Blinding pain exploded through Charlie's face and he screamed as he pushed Cid away and stumbled to the sink. He turned on the tap and washed away the fresh blood that streamed from his nose.

"Bad news is that I lied." Cid watched as Charlie spit blood into the sink. "But I saved you a trip to the hospital. You're welcome." He slapped Charlie on the shoulder and left the kitchen.

The bleeding had stopped, but a metallic taste still coated Charlie's mouth and the back of his throat, making his coffee taste like it was spiked with pennies. He could only stomach a few sips before he poured the rest down the drain. The pain had doubled since Cid had so helpfully reset his nose and after swallowing more ibuprofen, he grabbed a beer from the fridge. Drinking at nine in the morning wasn't how he normally operated, but he figured it was never too late for a lifestyle change. Especially since he was certain he didn't have much life left to style. He chugged the first beer in front of the open fridge then grabbed two more bottles and took them to the living room, holding one to his swollen face.

He'd always intended on buying a chair of some sort for the living room, just to have somewhere else to sit other than the sofa, but he never got around to it. He regretted this now more than ever as he flopped down on the opposite end of the sofa from Cid. Setting one beer on the coffee table and opening the other, he

wondered if he should write up a will of some kind. Or at least pull out his bank account and life insurance information so his family could easily find it.

"I told you I wasn't going to kill you. Relax," said Cid. He'd taken off his coat again and was perched on the edge of the sofa, gripping his knees with his claws.

Charlie had seen that knee clawing action before. After Cid had found out about the text conversations with Tracey. "Yeah, well, maybe I'd relax if you would." He took a deep pull from the bottle and was happy that it tasted like beer, not copper. So happy, in fact, he took another long drink and another until the bottle was empty.

"Looks like you're well on your way to being relaxed."

"Want one?" Charlie held out the other bottle of beer.

Cid grimaced. "No. But you wouldn't happen to have any B12, would you?"

Charlie raised an eyebrow as he twisted off the cap on the beer. "Uh, no. Why?"

"Never mind." Cid sighed and leaned back in his seat.

Shrugging, Charlie swigged his beer and noticed that the sharp pain in his nose had dialed down to a dull throb. He also enjoyed a nice buzz and settled back into the sofa, propping his legs up on the coffee table. His heel hit the empty bottle and it toppled over, rolling off the table and on to the floor. Any other time, he would have felt compelled to pick it up and wipe a towel across the floor for good measure. At this moment, he stared at the bottle where it settled against the baseboard and felt no such compulsion. It could lay there forever for all he cared. It's amazing what becomes trivial when your life has been violently threatened by a gray monster from another dimension.

Just to prove the point to himself, after he drained the last drop of beer, he dropped the empty to the floor. It bounced on the hardwood and rolled somewhere out of his line of sight. He laughed as he hoisted himself off the couch and went to the kitchen for round two.

"You may want to ease up there, Chuck," said Cid as Charlie slumped back down on the sofa with two fresh bottles.

"At least you're calling me 'Chuck' again." Charlie twisted the cap off one of the beers and tossed it over his shoulder. "And why do you care, anyway?" He held the bottle to his lips, but didn't tip it up, daring Cid to give him an excuse to drain it dry.

Cid groaned. "I still have a job to do."

Charlie laughed again. "And what, pray tell, is that job, Cid?" He set the bottle on the table so hard that beer foamed out the top. "Can you please let me know why your job is so important that if it goes haywire, I have to die?" Unconsciously, he mimicked Cid's previous action and gripped his knees tight as he rocked in place. "Can you? Huh? Cid?"

A gray hand shot out and wrapped around Charlie's arm, claws sinking into his bicep as he was yanked sideways. "You think your miserable life is the only one at risk?" Cid's snarling face was inches away. "I got my whole fucking planet on the line." He released Charlie with a shove.

After confirming that his arm wasn't bleeding, Charlie said, "Why? What's wrong with your planet?"

Cid sighed as he leaned back on the sofa. "Nothing. Everything." He stared at his hands as he flexed his claws in the air, then crossed his arms over his chest.

"Just tell me." Charlie turned to Cid. "What can it hurt at this point?"

"You just want to try and figure out a way to stay alive," said Cid with a huff.

"You said you weren't going to kill me."

"Yeah, and I also said your nose wasn't broken." Cid curled one corner of his mouth up into a cold smirk.

Charlie shuddered. "Jesus, Cid. Can't we work together on this? Try and figure something out?"

"We tried that in the beginning. Didn't turn out so good."

"When was that?" Charlie remembered his beer and took a gulp.

Cid pulled out a hand to scratch at his eyebrow. "Damn. It's been ages since I took that class." He chuckled. "Wouldn't have passed if I hadn't performed some *extra credit* with the professor after hours." He nodded his head and smiled.

Charlie just stared at him expressionless, waiting to see if he'd answer the question.

The smile dissolved from Cid's face. "I don't know. Sometime around your late fifth century. A bunch of guys in leather armor owned everything. Then we showed up and people freaked out and it all kinda went pear-shaped after that."

Charlie dug up dusty memories of his own history classes, which he passed without any kind of extra credit. Taking a sip of his beer he realized what time period Cid referred to. "That coincides with the fall of the Roman Empire."

"Yeah, Romans. Those were the guys. They thought we were devils ushering in a new era of hell on Earth." Cid stretched, the joints in his shoulders popping. "We tried to reel it in, calm everyone down, but there's no reasoning with primitive minds. And, man, were you guys primitive to us. It'd be like you trying to convince a chimpanzee that ripping your face off might not be the most diplomatic way to resolve your differences."

Charlie tried to wrap his primitive mind around what Cid was telling him. If he remembered correctly, after the fall of the Roman Empire there was a succession of emperors, all overthrown by barbarians from the north or some other warring faction. During all this unrest and upheaval, reason seemed to get tossed by the wayside. "You caused The Dark Ages," he nearly whispered.

"Hey, you can't prove that. For all we know, you guys would have fucked up all on your own."

"How does no one know about this? How was none of this ever written down?"

"How do I keep you from talking about me?" Cid groaned. "Or at least, how did I *try* to keep you from talking about me?"

"The pain thing?"

"Yeah, only back then we were a little more hands-on." Cid flexed his fingers for emphasis. "Besides, most people back then couldn't write, so we just had to keep them quiet. Even then, a few things slipped through the cracks."

"Like what?"

"What looks like modern technology woven into the scene on an old tapestry. Strange weaponry being held by gray demons in

the background of a fresco. Oil paintings with ships in the sky. Stuff like that."

"Wait. You guys use ships to get here?" Charlie clamped a hand over his mouth, amazed by what he was going to say and that he hadn't made the connection earlier. "UFOs are real! Alien abductions are a thing!" He pointed a finger at Cid and bounced in place with excitement. "You guys are the grays! Roswell was Hordts! Do you guys run Area 51?"

Cid groaned and shook his head. "Calm down. Don't get ahead of yourself."

"What's the deal with anal probes? Have you ever done one?" Charlie knew he was risking having his nose broken again, but the beer had made him giddy and unable to control his mouth.

"I'm glad you're having fun," said Cid with a sneer. "But you can get all that nonsense out of your head. Seriously, stop thinking about anal probes."

Charlie gladly complied.

"First of all, human imaginations are like a virus, one crazy idea can infect hundreds, thousands, laying waste to a population's common sense and leaving in its wake barren, rocky ground where the seed of truth can find no purchase. Second, you're all stupid."

He waited for Charlie to stop grinning before he continued. "Roswell was a couple of kids taking a joyride with a stolen control module. They broke some shit, as kids do, and the cover-up was sloppy. 'The grays' as you call them don't exist. Human nonsense and subconscious white noise mutated into a paranoid delusion. Anal probes are just wishful thinking, never happened. And UFOs are not real. At least, not on Earth."

Charlie chugged the rest of his beer and set the empty bottle on the table instead of tossing it to the floor. He reached for the other unopened bottle but changed his mind, wanting to remain as cognizant as he could. "But I still don't understand how this could be kept a secret for over a millennium. I mean, if everyone on the planet has a Hordt--"

"Not everyone."

"What? You told me that everyone goes through this," he waved his hand between him and Cid, "at some point in their lives."

Cid rolled his eyes. "Chuck, when are you gonna learn? I lie."

Charlie slumped back on the couch. "Then why am I even listening to you?"

"I'm not lying now." At Charlie's scowl, he said, "I swear. All this history shit is the truth. We found a portal to your planet almost two thousand years ago, things were dicey for a while, but eventually we found a way to live amongst you without causing chaos. And, thanks to an illiterate population and a speed of communication limited by the fastest horse, we managed to keep a tight lid on things. Then, after several generations, you just kinda became programmed to accept us."

"How many?"

"What?"

"How many people have a Hordt?"

"Oh." Cid seemed to think for a moment. "Well back then, we only needed about one percent of you. It's raised a bit over the years."

"Why?"

"Because you changed. Started thinking differently. Now we need more of you."

"What?" Charlie shook his head. "No, I mean why do you need us at all?"

"You know that. We need your brainwaves."

Charlie took a deep breath and held it for a count of three. He should be used to these round-about conversations with Cid by now, but they still frustrated the hell out of him. However, he was getting more straight answers this go-around than he ever had in the past, so he tried to remain calm. "Why, you cagey son of a bitch, do you need our brainwaves?"

Cid had been plucking at a thread on his trousers, but he stopped to look at Charlie. He squinted his black eyes, then shook his head and turned away.

Should have known, thought Charlie as he reached for his beer. He savored a long drink and was surprised when he heard Cid speak in a voice so low, he could barely hear it.

"We need your brainwaves to keep the monsters away."

Chapter 23

It all started with a signal, beamed out into the swirling, tumbling cosmos with no destination, only a hope that it would bounce off just the right rock, get just the right attention. Like a binary personal ad, the signal announced that the young, attractive, fit planet named Odt had its own atmosphere, a variety of sentient and non-sentient lifeforms, and was seeking another planet for companionship or, perhaps, more. It's a big, lonely universe, and you have to put yourself out there if you want to make friends.

As it happens when you send out an open invitation to party, you never know who, or what, will knock on your door. Odt was unprepared for the hulking black ships that darkened its horizon barely one hundred years after the signal aired. Then came the hulking black monsters that crewed those ships. Like massive walking slabs of granite with roughly hewn appendages, the monsters marched across the continents. From the forests of Alo to the Cel ocean, across the frost covered tundra of Dis and the white Gon desert. The monsters, whose name no Hordt would ever learn, occupied every corner of the planet.

Then they just stood there.

Unmoving, silent, flat-faced monoliths scattered across the landscape, looking much like statues carved by an artist with a very bleak sensibility. No amount of discourse or reasoning could convince them to communicate. No threat could impress them. No weapon could crack their cold facades.

The monsters stood.

Requests were never given. Demands were not made. None of the monsters ever raised a slab-like hand in violence or even

moved from their posts. They elicited a general sense of unease and paranoia, nothing more.

Two weeks after the monster's arrival, Hordts by the hundreds swarmed hospitals and doctor's offices, complaining about headaches and an irritating buzzing in their ears. At first, only the elderly and those weakened by disease were affected. Within hours, the patient's skin would grow ashen, and convulsions wracked their body. Before a day had passed, the Hordt would be dead, a dried-up husk of his or her former self. When younger, previously healthy Hordts became victims of this mysterious illness, an already shaken planet was overcome with panic.

It didn't take long to figure out that at the epicenter of every outbreak of this new disease was an alien sentinel. When the population surrounding the alien was sufficiently dead, a small, black ship would collect it and fly away to one of the orbiting leviathans. The obvious conclusion was that these monsters were the cause of the escalating death toll. And the shrunken, desiccated condition of the bodies suggested that the population was being drained for some unknown purpose. There was a mad scramble to try and find a cure, a preventative, or a way to rid themselves of the invaders. Chaos prevailed for months as roughly one third of the population succumbed to the plague propagated by the massive stone aliens. The largely secular society relearned how to pray.

Then, from literally out of thin air, fell two more strange creatures. These beings were tan, small, and fleshy, wearing layers of heavy clothing. They landed in a tangled heap on the gravel driveway outside a small warehouse that had been converted into a station to monitor the Stoneheads - which is what the Hordts had taken to calling the monsters. Crews switched out in eight-hour shifts to watch a Stonehead half a mile away on a small hill.

From a second story perch behind one of the many dusty windows of the warehouse, clawed hands that were curled around a sandwich, paused their upward movement toward a fang-toothed mouth. The two black eyes above the mouth witnessed these new fleshy creatures appear as if hatched from a huge soap bubble, then tumble three feet to the ground. The lookout threw his sandwich to the platform and scrambled down the scaffolding of the perch as he yelled for his crewmates to wake up and look outside.

The other four members of the crew, thinking that the Stoneheads were finally doing something other than just stand there and kill things, grabbed their various monitoring devices and ran to the door. The crew member in charge of security, Mal, unholstered his weapon and edged to the front of the group, sliding the door open a few inches with one hand. Five pairs of black eyes peered out through the opening at the two tan creatures, who were now clutching one another and staring at their surroundings with wide expressions of complete shock.

The Hordts opened the door all the way and walked very slowly toward this new potential threat to their civilization. Upon seeing the group, the creatures dropped to their knees and made some bizarre gesture before clasping their hands to their chests and speaking in an incomprehensible, guttural language. The Hordts barely had time to decide how to handle these creatures before something even more surprising happened.

The Stonehead installed on the hill moved. It raised its slab arms and appeared to clutch its head.

Making a snap and, ultimately, historic decision, Mal ordered his crew mates to each grab an arm of one of the wailing, flailing creatures and take them to the hill. There was a bit of arguing since he was just in charge of security, not necessarily the crew leader, and wasn't authorized to give orders. But he had the only weapon and seemed inclined to use it, so the rest of the crew decided to trust his judgment.

The creatures were made further upset by being man-handled and tried to pry themselves from the clawed hands gripping their arms. The Hordts were pleased to learn that they were much stronger than the creatures and had little trouble dragging them toward the hill. As they advanced, the Stonehead exhibited more signs of distress, dropping to its knees and releasing a sound like grinding metal gears from the square hole that served as its mouth. Encouraged by this behavior, the Hordts moved faster, practically running toward the hill, their screaming captives in tow.

Feet from the Stonehead, the Hordts stumbled to a stop and thrust the creatures forward like a threat. It worked. The Stonehead lumbered to its feet and backed away, hands still planted on the

sides of its head and still making that grinding gears noise. Then it went silent, dropped its arms, and fell backward, hitting the ground with a percussive thud. There it lay. Still and, upon further inspection, dead.

The Hordts erupted into yelping laughter, embracing each other in euphoric joy.

The tan creatures passed out.

That day and the next, the Hordts transported the creatures, who now seemed more confused than frightened, to the nearest Stoneheads and the scene on the hill was repeated each time. A research team was assembled to study and analyze the creatures to find the source of their amazing power over the Stoneheads and to see if, perhaps, they could be a mating pair so more creatures could be bred to put into service. But after only rudimentary tests were run, a major set-back occurred.

The creatures died.

There was much finger pointing and blame shifting, but an autopsy revealed that radiation sickness was the most likely cause of death. An autopsy wouldn't have been necessary if they'd paid closer attention to the creatures' appearance and made note of their missing hair and blistered skin. While the creatures' physiology was remarkably similar to that of the Hordts, there were many key differences on a cellular and chromosomal level. The creatures could breathe Odt's air, but the sun was poison.

In a desperate move, the Hordts sewed the creatures back up, dressed them, and drove them to a Stonehead who stood a few miles outside of town. Two Hordts held up each lifeless creature before the Stonehead and wiggled them around a bit, mimicking their guttural language as best they could. All this had no effect on the Stonehead. The Hordts tossed the dead creatures into the truck and drove back to town, determined to find out where they had come from.

Every type of geologic, atmospheric, and quantum device the Hordts had, and even a few that were still in development, was brought to the gravel driveway where the creatures had first appeared. The greatest scientific minds still alive converged on the site and ran test after test, wrote equation after equation, and formed theory after theory. Finally, a junior scientist from the city

university--it is rumored, during a sleepless, two-day porry seed fueled fury of calculations--found the dimensional portal.

Avy, the junior scientist, pieced together the first, rudimentary version of a control module from bits of other devices. She thought that waiting for a remote-controlled rover was a waste of time, so she stood at ground zero and activated the device herself before anyone could stop her. The now familiar bubble of air surrounded her and she blinked out of sight. A very tense twenty minutes passed before the bubble appeared again and out stepped a laughing Avy with a terrified tan creature in her grasp.

That day became known as Discovery Day and was celebrated with carnivals and parades every year after. Avy was lauded as the greatest scientific mind of her time and was offered tenured positions at top tier universities and high-paying jobs at the most sensitive levels of government research. She turned down all those offers and instead took a job with her small local university. The pay wasn't much, but she had free rein over what she wanted to research and how she went about it. To her, the autonomy was more important than money. Avy went on to develop the next three generations of the control module and she furthered advancements in communications and intra-planetary teleportation. Well into her twilight years, on any given night, she could be found at the popular campus bar joking with the students and telling stories about her many jaunts through the portal. She never paid for a single drink.

At first, teams were sent through the portal to snatch a few of the screaming creatures--that they soon found out came in an array of colors--and bring them across. The creatures were transported to the nearest Stoneheads who collapsed, dead, in their presence. However, after two or three days, the creatures themselves would die and new creatures would need to be collected. It was a frustratingly inefficient system.

More control modules were made so more Hordts could be sent through the portal, however the creatures weren't quite as dumb as they appeared and learned to avoid the areas where Hordts popped out. The Hordts had to trek further and further into the strange world in search of creatures, which proved to be time

consuming and dangerous. Meanwhile, Hordts were still dying by the thousands.

Two major discoveries turned the tide in the Hordt's battle with the Stoneheads. First was how to manipulate the dimensional portal so that they could not only pop into different locations on the other world, but also open the portal in other spots on their home planet. This solved the problem of having to transport the creatures across Odt before they died. Hordts could now open a portal where the Stoneheads were and bring over a creature on the spot.

Then they discovered it was the creatures' unique brain waves that caused the Stoneheads to collapse and die. This was a welcome development, because the Hordts did regret having to kill so many of the creatures. They were obviously intelligent, if primitive, and had formed complex societies, even if they were constantly at war with one another. Now that the Hordts knew what they needed, it was only a matter of inventing a device to record the creature's brainwaves. No longer would they need to pull the creatures, kicking and screaming, through the portal to their certain deaths. The Hordts would pop over, record some brainwaves, then pop back to broadcast the brainwaves through amplifiers set up across the planet.

The Stoneheads, after a failed attempt to destroy the amplifiers, marched back to their ships and left Odt. The Hordts were planning a global celebration when they realized there was still one ship in orbit. As dark and menacing as the monsters inside, the ship kept a constant silent vigil over the planet. Presumably, waiting for their quarry to let down their guard. The ship would occasionally leave for years at a time. Then, just when the planet relaxed and stopped broadcasting brain waves, the ship would return. The Hordts were reminded that they, like the creatures on the other side of the portal, were nothing more than a commodity to be harvested by alien monsters.

Chapter 24

Tracey double-checked the address before pulling into the driveway, which was already full of other cars. She parked her hatchback half on the grass and cut the engine. For the hundredth time that night, she had second thoughts, not only about attending this gathering, but about going alone. She was disappointed at first when Charlie had called her earlier with what sounded like a massive head cold and later texted her apologizing that he didn't feel up to seeing her that night. He was always so hesitant when it came to matters involving figuring out the Hordts, so she found herself settling into the uneasy justification that a solo trip was probably for the best. If this field trip was a bust, then he didn't ever need to know. If it yielded results, then it would be much easier convincing him to go next time.

She weaved her way through the parked cars to the front door of the white, two-story farmhouse set back far from the dark country road. Sconces on either side of the front door lit up a porch covered in pots overflowing with flowering plants. Tracey walked up the steps to the door decorated with a large grapevine wreath festooned with tiny burlap angels. She again contemplated driving back home but knocked on the door instead.

A beautiful young woman with long red hair opened the door. "Hi!" She smiled and swayed back and forth a bit, her flower print dress flowing around her legs. "I'm supposed to ask you for the code phrase." She lowered her head, looking a bit embarrassed.

Tracey wasn't sure what she'd expected, but it wasn't this. "Celery stalks at midnight," she said, trying to not make it sound like a question.

The woman's smile brightened and she opened the door wider. "That's it! Please come in."

Roughly a dozen people chatted in the large living room while standing or sitting on one of the old-fashioned wing-back chairs or the maroon velveteen couch. A large fireplace dominated the wall to her right and straight ahead was a wide doorway leading to a kitchen. She felt a hand on her elbow and turned to see the red head at her side.

"I'm Rebecca," said the woman, still flashing a bright smile. "This is my house. Well, it was my family's, but now it's mine." She giggled and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

Tracey found it hard not to smile back. "I'm Tracey."

Rebecca's eyes widened. "Oh, you're one of the new ones. This is your first meeting, right?"

"Yeah. First time."

"Don't you worry about a thing." Rebecca led her by the elbow further into the house. "I assure you that these meetings are super private. No one will know you were here unless you tell them."

Tracey was led around the room where Rebecca introduced her to the others in attendance. She didn't even try to keep the names straight in her head, there were too many and she wasn't yet sure she'd see any of these people ever again.

"Would you like something to drink?" Rebecca asked. "I have caffeine-free pop and pink lemonade."

"Sure, lemonade would be fine, thank you." Tracey followed Rebecca into the kitchen and stopped dead when she saw the huge, gray creature leaning against the counter next to the sink. She backed up against the doorframe, clutching the molding, her heart pounding in her ears.

The Hordt saw her reaction and stepped toward her, holding out his hands. "It's okay."

Rebecca was at her side. "He's on our team," she said.

Reluctantly, Tracey allowed herself to be led by the arm toward the Hordt, who appeared as apologetic as she was stunned.

None of the forums she'd read had even suggested any Hordts were complicit in human efforts to counteract their agenda, whatever it may be. She never considered that she would meet another Hordt other than Lia, and now she was walking toward one who held out his hand like he was just another party guest awaiting an introduction.

She nudged herself away from Rebecca's grasp and walked the last few steps on her own. This Hordt was big, like body-builder big, and his black shirt stretched tight across the muscles of his chest and abdomen. His face, however, was kind. Well, as kind as a spiked-toothed monster's face could be. She stood in front of him for a moment before she grasped his clawed hand in her own. It was at this moment she realized that she'd never touched Lia.

"My name's Myk," the Hordt said as he shook her hand.

She managed to squeak out "Tracey" as she marveled at how normal his hand felt within hers.

"I know this must be weird for you," he said.

Tracey barely heard him as she studied his hand. His flesh was warm and she could feel a pulse.

She looked up at Myk, who smiled down at her, and she let loose a nervous tittering laugh. "Yeah, this is totally weird." She examined his hand for a moment more, then dropped it when she heard Rebecca clear her throat.

"Shouldn't we start the meeting?" Rebecca tugged on Myk's sleeve and flashed Tracey a sideways glance.

Myk gave Rebecca a patient smile. "Yes. Why don't you get everyone settled? I just want a moment with Tracey. Just to get her up to speed." He took Rebecca's hand. "You have such a way with the crowd." He kissed her knuckles twice and gave her a warm smile.

Rebecca blushed and clasped the hand he'd kissed to her chest. "If you insist." She twirled around and sashayed out of the room, giving Myk a wink over her shoulder as she left.

Tracey watched her go, then turned back to Myk who was shaking his head, eyes closed, while holding the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. She couldn't help but laugh at his distressed appearance.

Myk lowered his hand and offered a weak sort of smirk to Tracey. "Who's your Hordt?" he asked.

"Her name's Lia," Tracey said, already liking this Myk guy.

He tilted his head back and sighed. "Damn, and I thought I had it rough."

Tracey let loose a snorting laugh at this and quickly clamped her hand over her mouth.

Myk gave a reserved chuckle. Then his demeanor turned serious. "You know Charlie, then."

She nodded. "Yeah, I know him. And he's told me about Cid."

Myk sighed again. "This could get complicated."

Tracey forgot all about her lemonade as she listened to Myk tell the group about the Stoneheads and discovering the portal to Earth. It wasn't until he'd finished that she noticed all the ice had melted and her hand was wet with condensation. She set the glass on a side table and wiped her hand on her jeans.

"Well, that's the history," said Myk with a sigh. "Now I'm sure you're wondering what any of this means for you here today."

There were murmurs and nodding heads from a few people. Some didn't move, just stared at Myk with looks of either skepticism or apathy. She wondered how many times they had heard this spiel and couldn't help but think of the one occasion she got roped into sitting through a high-pressure time-share sales pitch. However, she was sure there wouldn't be free movie passes or tickets to the aquarium given out at the end of this meeting.

"It's obvious that we need you to keep our people alive," continued Myk. "We haven't yet found a way to keep the Stoneheads away other than your brainwaves. But there is a growing group of us that believes taking your brainwaves like we do is wrong."

A woman standing by the window said, "Why do we have to see you? Can't you just record our brainwaves while you're invisible? Then we wouldn't even know you're here."

Myk nodded. "We'd love to, but the biowave recorder doesn't function while we're invisible to you."

Tracey leaned a little closer to the older gentleman sitting beside her. "Kinda like how a Klingon Bird of Prey can't fire while cloaked." She smiled and raised her eyebrows, but he only frowned and shook his head, obviously not understanding the reference.

Charlie would have laughed, she thought glumly.

"We shouldn't have to work in secret," Myk continued. "Shouldn't have to use intimidation to keep you silent."

"Or death," said someone standing behind Tracey.

Myk tugged at the collar of his shirt. "Yes. It's true. We've resorted to killing humans who were caught talking about us to others."

Tracey raised her hand on impulse, speaking before Myk acknowledged her. "Um, like we're doing right now?"

Shifting his weight from foot to foot, Myk said, "Look, it's a last resort and most of us will do anything to prevent it. And that's kind of the whole point. This should be a mutual arrangement. As much as we need you, we have so much to offer you as well." He pulled something from his pocket that looked like an old cell phone and waved it at the group. "This device contains enough technology to advance your society hundreds of years. We can help you cure diseases. End famine. And all we want in return are your brainwaves, which we can harvest without any detriment to you."

Tracey half expected him to say "But wait! There's more!" and shook her head. It was edging toward one in the morning and she didn't function well without sleep. That's probably why she blurted out, "So what's the hold up? Why don't you give this speech to the President or something?"

"We tried that years ago," Myk said, stuffing the device back in his pocket. "Your president as well as leaders of other countries. Apparently, the global protocol regarding aliens, no matter how altruistic their motives, is exterminate with extreme prejudice. We should have been used to your habit of overreacting to every little thing by this time, but for some reason we thought you'd evolved past all that. Our mistake." He laughed, then seemed to realize he was the only one in the room who'd think it

was funny and his laughter morphed into a few dry coughs and a bout of throat clearing. "Anyway, we formed these groups because we need allies on this side of the portal as much as we need them on our side. The goal shouldn't be how to get rid of us, but how to work with us."

Tracey looked at Myk, a hulking, gray monster, and was surprised at how eager she was to buy in. She had always tried to make as much order out of the chaos of life as she could; everything done with the utmost efficiency, the closest to "right." Now she had an opportunity to be in on the ground level of most significant event to ever happen to humans - and it felt like the right thing to do.

She mulled this over as she drove home. The people she helped every day at her job had disabilities of various sorts. What if the Hordts' technology could help them integrate easier into society? What if their tech ushered in a Star Trek future where money was obsolete, famine was a distant memory, and everyone had enough of everything they needed to live? She then thought of her parents and the boat crash that killed them. Maybe they could have been saved, had we only worked with the Hordt's sooner.

Tracey forced the thought away as she unlocked the door to her side of the duplex and entered her kitchen. She stumbled to her bedroom, hoping to catch a few hours of sleep before work in the morning. Flicking on the light switch, she saw Lia sitting on the end of her bed like a nightmare come to life.

Lia stood and pointed a device at Tracey. "Thought you could get away with it, didn't you?"

Tracey felt a flare of pain then the world went black.

Chapter 25

After confiscating the bottle of melatonin and begging Charlie not to do anything stupid, Cid left Earth for the night. He shuffled slowly through the winding hallways of the barracks, taking the long way to his bunk so he could pass by Nel's. He took this detour – more often lately – hoping to catch her with her door open so he could pop his head in and waste some time. If her door was closed, he didn't ever knock. He hadn't analyzed it too deeply, just figured it was a matter of control and not wanting her to make the decision to let him in or not. Now, as he stood outside her closed door, forehead resting against the metal, he knew that was a load of shit. Knocking on her door was the same as admitting he needed her. Wanting her was one thing, needing was quite another.

"Fuck it," he mumbled as he curled his hand into a fist and rapped three times on the door. A moment passed before he heard the lock disengage and the door slid open, releasing the fragrance of fruit trees after a light rain and a warmer, deeper scent that was all Nel. He smiled at her, but she did not reciprocate.

"You look like crap," she said as she pulled him inside and slid the door closed behind them.

Cid chuckled. "Yep." He flopped down on her bed and leaned against the wall.

She sat next to him, curling her legs beneath her. "You're still wearing your coat. Did you come straight from the portal dock?"

"Yep," he said as he stretched his arms until his shoulder joints popped.

"What happened?"

He looked at her, sitting so close in a loose black shirt and shorts, damp hair falling haphazardly around her freshly scrubbed face, and all he wanted to do was pull her close and kiss her over and over until the universe collapsed around them in a flash of white-hot light. Instead, he pulled the bottle of melatonin tablets from his coat pocket and handed it to her.

Her eyes went wide as she examined the bottle. "Did Charlie have these?"

"Yep."

"Did he use them to sneak around while you weren't there? And if you say 'yep' again I will gouge your eyes out." She grasped his arm, claws digging into the fabric of his coat to drive her threat home.

Cid couldn't help but smile. "Affirmative."

The melatonin bottle flew across the room, ricocheting off the far wall and bouncing along the floor. Cid watched it roll under Nel's workstation, impressed with the bottle's structural integrity.

"How can you be so calm?" She shook his arm. "What did you do?"

Sighing, he reached up and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. She looked so concerned, her eyebrows knotted in the middle, forming the cutest little wrinkle at the bridge of her nose. He didn't know why she was so riled up. Everything was going to be fine. He would come up with a plan, and a good one if he knew himself, which he did. Yes, a brilliant plan would come to him. All he needed was a moment to think. And maybe a nap. Oh, a nap would be great. He closed his eyes, feeling himself slipping away . . .

"Cid!"

He snapped to attention. This wasn't his room. He turned and saw Nel staring at him like he had just quoted a sonnet.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she asked, waving a hand in front of his face.

At once it came to him, what the hell was wrong with him, and he chuckled to himself. He grabbed Nel's wrist and pulled her hand away from his face to his leg, where he laced his fingers with

hers. "It appears," he said with a sigh, "that melatonin has a similar calming effect on Hordts as it does on humans."

Nel groaned. "You didn't."

"You're surprised?"

"How many?"

That was a good question. He remembered standing in Charlie's living room with the bottle in his hand and emptying a few tablets into his palm. "No more than three," he said. Then he thought for a moment. "Maybe eight."

"Shit." Nel stood and went to her sink to fill glass full of water. Returning to her bed she thrust it at Cid. "Drink."

Cid gulped down the water. When he handed the empty glass back to Nel, she returned to the sink and filled it again. He rolled his eyes at her, but the look she gave him was enough to convince him to drink it down.

"We should get some coffee in you," she said after the fourth glass of water.

"Ooh! Coffee!" Cid tried to stand, but the bed seemed at the bottom of a gravity well. Nel offered her hand and he took it, yanking himself to a wobbly, but standing, position. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and felt her wrap hers around his waist.

She led him out of her bunk and down the hall to the elevator. While they traveled up to ground level, he pulled her closer and rested his head on top of hers.

"I don't deserve you," he murmured into her hair.

Her grip on his side tightened. "Shut up, Cid."

Three cups of coffee later, Cid felt more coherent, which meant he felt agitated. He gripped the empty coffee cup in one hand and the other scratched at the surface of the cafeteria table. "I'm screwed," he said.

Nel reached out and grasped his hand. "You're lucky that Charlie isn't one to start trouble. Sounds like he really just wanted some time alone with his girlfriend."

"Doesn't matter what he wanted. The result is the same."

"Hey." She squeezed his hand. "Look at me."

Cid turned and met her wide, kind eyes. He tried to ignore the seizing feeling in his chest. "What?"

She took a deep breath. "You were right to be cautious and not call in the Section 10. Believe it or not, you're not alone in this."

"What does that mean?" He saw something change in her eyes. A spectrum shift from compassion to caution. He slipped his hand from under hers and gripped her wrist. "What aren't you telling me?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Shaking her head, she tried to pull away from Cid's grasp, but he held tight.

"Nel?" He wrapped his other hand around her fingers. "Please. Tell me."

Again, she attempted to form words, but only managed a strangled squeak. She screwed up her face and shook her head. Then she relaxed and squared her shoulders. But before she could say anything, Myk ran into the cafeteria, yelling her name.

He stopped cold when he saw Cid.

"What is it, Myk?" she asked.

He looked between her and Cid and gaped like a fish on a dock.

"For fuck's sake," said Cid. "Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

Myk looked to Nel, who nodded. He turned to Cid and said, "Lia's called a Section 10 on Tracey."

Chapter 26

Cid paced the floor, spasmodically clenching his fists. To prevent being overheard after Myk's announcement, they'd moved the conversation to Nel's bunk. She sat on the edge of the bed and Myk perched on the workstation stool, watching him.

"I wanted to tell you," said Nel. "But . . ."

Cid stopped pacing and glared at her. "But what? You're supposed to be my friend. Both of you." He pointed a finger at Myk, who lowered his head. Cid turned back to Nel. "I told you things. Things I never . . ." He shook his head and continued pacing.

All this time, he'd had the stress of Saf's directive to watch Lia and the fear he'd have to Section 10 Charlie while two of his best friends were founding members of a covert group attempting to bring the whole system down. If he'd known, he could have focused on other matters like misdirecting Lia and helping Charlie and Tracey. Not to mention, he could have participated in one of his favorite pass-times: Fucking with authority.

He held his arms out to Nel and Myk. "I'm the very definition of resistive. How could you not let me in on this?"

Myk leaned forward on the stool. "Look, this is a very sensitive mission that requires the utmost care and discretion. And you . . . you're a bit . . . unpredictable."

Cid's first reaction was to be insulted, but even he had to admit that Myk had a point.

"But we were going to tell you soon," Myk said. "We knew this whole business with Lia would be the perfect catalyst to recruit you."

Cid clapped his hands. "Okay, great. Sign me up. Is there a secret handshake or some forms I need to sign?"

Myk laughed. "No, nothing like that."

"So, what's the plan? The clock is ticking on Tracey, here."

Nel stood to stand beside Myk. "Well, we've never stopped a Sec 10 before. Never even conceived of it happening."

Cid knew the Level Sevens only needed about an hour to organize a mission. Maybe a bit more if they intended to fabricate a medical condition to cover-up the human's death, instead of just arranging a violent accident. Almost twenty minutes had already passed since Myk learned from a resistance member that Saf had ordered the Section 10 on Tracey. "We have to move her quick."

"I know," said Nel. "But Lia's control module will be able to track where Tracey is."

Cid shook his head. "The Sevens would have only been given coordinates to Tracey's current location. Lia probably incapacitated her at home before she left to tell Saf. Moving her will give us some time to get to Lia's control module and wipe out Tracey's biometrics so she can't be tracked anymore."

"Move her where?" asked Myk.

"To Chuck's place," said Cid.

"Will he go for that?"

Cid cocked an eyebrow. "He risked his life to stick his dick in her last night. Pretty sure he'll go for it."

Nel shook her head at Cid's comment then turned to Myk. "Cid and I will move Tracey. You get close to Lia and try to get your hands on her control module."

"Me? Why me?" He ran one hand through his hair and the other plucked at the collar of his shirt. "That'll never work."

Nel placed a hand on his shoulder. "Myk, you big idiot. Lia is totally into you. In fact, most women are."

He looked at her like she'd lost her mind. "What?"

Cid stepped up and patted his other shoulder. "She's right, man. You got some kind of gentle giant thing that the chicks just eat up. Kinda pisses me off, to be honest."

Myk seemed to consider this for a moment then shook his head. "If you say so, but I don't guess we have much choice." He

walked to the door. "I'll message you when I've wiped out Lia's module."

"Good luck, stud," said Cid as Myk left. He turned to Nel, grinning from ear to ear. They were about to engage in activities that, if they were caught, would certainly send them to prison. Possibly get them executed. Not much different than the situation he was already in because of Charlie's actions. But now, instead of feeling overwhelmed and stressed, he was excited. Now, he wasn't alone. He was part of a mission against the establishment. And he was doing it with Nel by his side. "Ready to do this?"

She gave him a small smile and took both his hands in hers. "This is serious stuff, you know. It's not too late to back out."

He relaxed his grin into a smirk and lowered his face level with hers. "And let you have all the fun? No way."

Nel leaned in and placed a quick kiss on his cheek then pulled him by the hand out of her bunk and toward the portal dock.

Chapter 27

A bright light reddened Charlie's closed eyelids and he felt something shaking his arm.

"Wake up, princess."

He opened his eyes and held up his hand to block the glare until they adjusted. When he focused on Cid's gray face peering at him, he groaned. "I didn't do anything."

"I know. But you're going to. Get up."

Charlie threw back the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "What's going on?"

"Just get some clothes on and join us in the living room." Cid left down the hall.

Charlie stretched and yawned. Then he realized what Cid had said. "Us?" He threw on a pair of jeans and a shirt and smoothed down his bedhead. Turning from the hallway into the living room, he saw Tracey sitting on his sofa, her face cradled in her hands. Without thinking, he started toward her, but stopped when he saw a black-haired, gray-skinned woman standing next to Cid in the doorway of the kitchen.

His pulse thundered in his ears. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

The female Hordt stepped forward. "I'm Nel. I'm a friend of Cid's."

Charlie edged closer to the sofa. "You say that like it's a good thing." He pointed at Tracey. "May I?"

Nel nodded. "Of course."

Charlie sat down next to Tracey and held her close to him. "Hey, you okay?"

Tracey lifted her head and when her red-rimmed eyes registered Charlie's face, she gasped. "What happened to you?"

He'd forgotten that he looked like a Fight Club reject. "I'll explain later. First, you."

She ran the back of her hand under her nose and managed a weak smile. "I fucked up, Charlie. I got caught." Tears welled up and spilled over down her cheeks.

He wiped her tears away and cupped her face in his hands. "But I called you and you said everything was fine."

She shook her head. "It was. But tonight I--" Her breath caught in her throat and she closed her eyes, releasing fresh tears.

"Hey, hey." Charlie pulled her close, nestling her head under his cheek. He wanted to tell her that everything would be okay, but even without having heard the whole story, he knew that would be a lie. Chances were that nothing would ever be okay for the rest of their probably short lives. That didn't stop him from trying to comfort her. He kissed her temple and rubbed his hand across her back.

Tracey sniffed and took a deep breath. "I went to a meeting I found on one of those forums I told you about. There were about fifteen people there and one of them." She waived her hand over her shoulder, in the direction of Cid and Nel. "His name is Myk and he's on our side. At least on the side of not sneaking around anymore. He said there were others like him who wanted to change the way things were done." She sniffed again and looked at Charlie with a small smile. "I left the meeting feeling so great. It was just like what we'd talked about, you know?" Her smile faded and she looked down at her hands. "When I got home, Lia was waiting for me. She did that pain thing and it was so bad that I passed out."

Charlie felt a shudder ripple through her and he held her tighter. He looked back at the pair of Hordts. "Is that where you guys come in?"

Nel walked around to sit on the arm of the sofa closest to Tracey. "Myk and I are members of the resistance. We heard that Lia had called a Sec 10 on Tracey and decided to take action."

Charlie shook his head. "A what?"

"A Section 10." She pursed her lips, not offering an explanation.

"It's a kill order." Cid stood next to Nel and crossed his arms over his chest. "When one of us finds out that one of you has broken the rules to a spectacular degree, we call in the death squad, or Level Sevens. You're lucky all you got was my fist in your face."

Tracey glanced between Cid and Charlie. "Oh, no. You got caught, too." She reached her hand up to lightly touch the bruising under his eye. "I'm so sorry."

He pulled her hand away and kissed her palm. "Don't worry about me." Looking up at Cid he asked, "So you're part of the resistance, too?"

"Not until about an hour ago." Cid smirked. "Apparently their vetting process is very stringent." He looked at Nel and she just shook her head.

Charlie huffed. "They probably want members who don't enjoy their job as much as you do."

Nel smiled and turned to Cid. "I can see why you like him."

Charlie's eyebrows shot up. "What? Are you kidding? He can't stand the sight of me."

Cid opened his mouth to speak, but Nel elbowed him and spoke first. "Don't let him fool you. Cid's got a big gooey center under that hard, sarcastic shell."

The look that passed between Cid and Nel was most definitely gooey. If he hadn't seen it in person, he would never have believed it; Cid had actual feelings, positive feelings, for someone other than himself. There was more to Cid than just sarcasm, indifference, and violence. Charlie shook off the thought and squeezed Tracey's shoulder. "What happens now?"

Cid pulled a device from his coat pocket that Charlie recognized from earlier that day. "Lia's control module--" he held up the device for clarity "--is linked to Tracey. It's how we know where you guys are all the time. She should still think Tracey is passed out at home, and that's where the Level Sevens will be dispatched. We sent Myk to cozy up to Lia so he can get his mitts

on her module to wipe it out. When the Sevens find Tracey is gone, Lia won't be able to give them her current location."

Tracey nodded and Charlie was surprised to see her smiling. "Using Myk to seduce Lia. I can see that working." She turned to Nel. "Right?"

Nel grinned and tucked her hair behind one ear. "Oh, yeah." She released a long, breathy sigh. "He's totally the guy for the job."

Tracey giggled. Actually giggled.

Charlie thought he'd had a firm grasp on things until that moment. "I don't get it. What am I missing?"

Cid tilted his head back and groaned. "Not a damn thing, Chuck." He nudged Nel's shoulder with one finger. "Snap out of it. We still need to figure out what to do with Ms. Instigator, here."

"Wait," Tracey said. "If Myk gets Lia's module thingy, then they won't know where I am. I'm safe."

"Not quite." Cid sat down on the coffee table, knocking a small stack of magazines off-kilter in the process. Charlie repressed a strong desire to set the stack to rights. "Where is the first place you think they'll look for you?"

Tracey's smile melted and she sank deeper into the couch. "Here."

"Yep," said Cid. "Wiping out the control module just buys us some time."

Taking Tracey's hand, Charlie said, "We'll find some place for you to go."

She laughed, wiping fresh tears away. "My purse with all my credit cards is still at my house. I don't have my car. All I have are the clothes on my back. Where can I go? Underground? On the run? I forgot to stash a Jason Bourne go-bag with extra passports and money in a locker at the airport!"

"Hey, hey," Charlie squeezed her hand. "I'll give you some money, whatever you need. We'll figure something out." He looked to Nel, desperate for her help to turn his platitudes into the truth. "You guys have a contingency plan for this sort of thing?"

Nel rubbed her palm against the back of her neck and sighed. "We hoped we'd never have to deal with this. It's been over

a year since a Sec 10 has been called on someone. We were banking on the streak holding out."

Tracey sat up. "What about Rebecca?"

"Who?" asked Charlie.

"She had that meeting at her house. Myk is her Hordt. I'm sure she'd help."

Nel leaned forward. "That could work."

"Okay," said Charlie. "How do we get there? You said you don't have your car."

Tracey dried her face with her sleeve. "How do you think we got here? They used their magic cell phones and beamed us into your living room."

"It's called shifting," said Nel as she pulled her magic cell phone from her pocket. "I've been to Rebecca's, so I have her coordinates in my module."

"Great." Charlie stood and pulled Tracey to her feet. A thought formed in the back of his mind that getting Tracey to safety would mean not seeing her again for a long time, if ever. He pushed the thought away and allowed himself one moment in the present. He cupped her face in his hand and wrapped his other arm around her waist, pulling her tight against him. She looked into his eyes and smiled, raising up on her toes to inch her face closer to his. Charlie leaned down to meet her halfway and pressed his lips to hers in a soft kiss. He pulled away just far enough to rest his forehead against hers. "Let's get you out of here."

"Bad news, lovebirds."

Charlie looked up and saw Cid standing next to the sofa, holding his module out to Nel. She took it and whatever was displayed on the screen made her gasp, her eyes opening wide. She handed the module back with a shaking hand. Tracey's grip around Charlie's middle tightened and he clenched his jaw, not daring to ask what the definition of "bad news" could possibly be in a situation such as this.

Cid supplied the answer anyway. "That bitch Lia isn't as dumb as we thought. She let Myk try to nab her module then outed him as a member of the resistance. She was on to us all along, just needed proof." He clapped his hands once then rubbed his palms

together. His lips peeled back in a wide, full-toothed grin. "Well, onto plan B."

Chapter 28

Plan B was insanity.

Charlie watched Tracey tug on one of his gray hoodies and zip it up to her chin. It fell to mid-thigh and hid all her curves within a blob of fabric. Good thing she was already wearing dark jeans and boots. She pulled the hood up over her head, covering her blonde hair and most of her face, then turned to Cid and Nel with a shrug, the sleeves sliding down over her hands.

"That'll work," said Cid. He returned his attention to his control module, thumbs typing in commands on the keypad with a speed that would rival any teenager.

Nel edged closer to him, curling her hand around his elbow. "Are you sure about this?"

Since Cid had been Charlie's only point of reference when it came to Hordts, he had assumed the entire species was populated with psychopathic narcissists. Now that he'd met Nel, he was relieved to learn some Hordts seemed like reasonable, empathetic beings. It made him feel a little better about the whole plan. In the way a cold compress would make a sucking chest wound feel better.

Cid didn't divert his focus from his module. "We don't have much choice, do we?" He punched a few more keys then looked up, his eyes glittering with more excitement than seemed appropriate for the situation. "The only place Tracey can go where no module will be able to track her location is through the portal. On Odt she'll be invisible."

"Hardly," said Charlie, waving at Tracey's pale skin and blonde hair, visible since the hood had slid back to her shoulders.

"That's why we'll keep her covered." Cid yanked the hood over Tracey's head again.

Nel rubbed her palm against the back of her neck. "The portal dock is always busy. Someone is bound to spot her."

"We're not going to the portal dock." He waved his module in front of her face. "I've reprogrammed the module to pop us out in my bunk."

"You can do that?" She grabbed the module from him and scanned the digital readout.

A self-satisfied smirk spread across Cid's face. "It takes a bit of hacking into the system and there's hell to pay if you get caught." He plucked the module out of her grasp. "My misspent youth yielded some useful tricks."

Tracey pushed up the sleeves and pulled the hood off. "Aren't you forgetting one little thing?" She looked between Cid and Nel, her fists on her hips. When neither one answered she threw up her hands. "Humans can't survive on your planet."

Charlie turned Tracey toward him and clutched her shoulders. "What are you talking about?"

She pointed at Cid. "He didn't tell you?"

Of course not. The amount of information that Cid didn't tell him could fill libraries. He glared at the Hordt. "Care to elaborate?"

Cid had the gall to look irritated. "Our sun's radiation is fatal to humans. I didn't want to tell you because I knew you'd over-react."

"Over-react!" Charlie was aware that Cid was stronger, his face bore the bruises to prove it, but he still stalked forward with every intention of ripping the Hordt apart.

Nel stepped between them, holding up her hands. "Charlie, it's okay."

He looked at Nel, his earlier impression of her tarnished. "But she'll die."

Cid sighed. "Not right away."

"Shut up, Cid." Nel pulled Charlie and Tracey to the side, away from Cid. "She'll be inside an environmentally controlled building and should have at least twenty-four hours before we'll

have to worry about any serious radiation poisoning. We should have Lia's module well before then."

"And if you don't?" he asked.

"Then we'll pop her back Earth-side and figure out something else." At Charlie's incredulous look, Nel said, "I know it's not the best plan. But I promise we'll do all we can to keep her safe."

Charlie felt Tracey's fingers entwine with his. She looked up at him, wiping her face with the cuff of the hoodie. "It's the only chance I got at this point." She gave his hand a squeeze before releasing it to pull the hood up over her head.

Nel led her back to Cid who had his control module at the ready. "Go back to bed, Chuck. When the Sevens arrive, say you've been asleep since I left earlier this evening, just like normal. They'll only be interested in finding Tracey and should leave once they know she's not here."

Cid and Nel crowded close to either side of Tracey as she waved good-by at Charlie with one sleeve-covered hand. He heard the rushing air sound that he remembered from the other night, which now seemed like ages ago. A bubble of light surrounded the trio and with a flash and a pop, they were gone. Charlie was left in his living room with only his crushing sense of helplessness for company.

He turned out the lights and shuffled back to his bedroom, not bothering to remove his clothes before he fell into bed. Out of habit, he started counting.

Charlie had reached two thousand and thirty-four when he heard a portal open in his living room once again. Closing his eyes, he tried to slow his breathing and pretended to be asleep. Heavy footsteps grew louder and his bedroom door slammed against the wall. The overhead light turned on and strong hands gripped his arm and yanked him out of bed onto the floor. He didn't have to pretend to be shocked.

"Where is she?" Two male Hordts in tight black jackets and pressed uniform pants stood over him. A female, who had

spoken, stood beside them, holding in her hand what looked uncomfortably like a .44 Magnum revolver.

Charlie rubbed his eyes and blinked to adjust to the sudden change in light. "Who?" he asked. "What's going on?" He convinced himself that the waiver in his voice was added on purpose to make him sound confused.

"The human woman, Tracey Pratt, she was here. Where is she now?"

"Tracey? I haven't seen her since the day before yesterday." He pulled himself up to sit on the edge of his bed.

Dirty Harriet stepped forward. "What happened to your face?"

Charlie touched his fingers to his nose, wincing at the pain. He recited the excuse he'd fabricated to tell his co-workers, if this mess was ever resolved and he could resume his normal life. "Bike accident."

She nodded at his answer and pulled a control module from her jacket pocket. "Looks like they shifted the woman here to gain some time then moved her somewhere else. They're onto us. Let's return to base and get the Level Four's module to pinpoint her exact location."

"What about him?" The Hordt closest to Charlie pointed in his direction.

She pondered the question long enough to make Charlie very uneasy.

"We don't yet know Cid's affiliation," she said. "We can't locate him on the base, but that's not surprising, knowing him."

Charlie's lip curled into a smirk on its own accord.

"To be safe, we better bring him with us."

The two Hordts grasped Charlie under each arm and lifted him up. "Wait!" He dug in his heels, trying to keep them from dragging him out of his room. "Where are you taking me?"

Dirty Harriet led them down the hall. She turned to Charlie once they reached the living room. "You are to be detained on our planet. If you've done nothing wrong, then you have no reason to worry." The sinister grin that crawled across her face made any of Cid's such expressions look like a smile from a kindly grandma by comparison.

The two grunts held Charlie still as the female leader stepped in front of them, pushing buttons on her control module. He heard that sound like air rushing past a car window, but from within the vortex it was like the window was open on an airplane during takeoff. His clothes twisted about his body and he found it hard to keep his eyes open against the buffeting air. The bubble of light appeared around them, and he had a split second to wonder if the process would hurt before the world popped out of existence and he felt nothing at all.

Chapter 29

"Cid. This isn't your bunk."

"Yes, Nel. I am aware of that." Cid looked down the hallway at the dozen or so startled gray faces staring at them. He pocketed his module and pulled Tracey behind him. To the group bearing witness to his highly restricted maneuver, he said, "No reason to go squealing to the powers-that-be about this, right?" He held out his hands and smiled.

A familiar voice in the back said, "Go on, guys. Nothing to see here." Edd elbowed his way through the dispersing crowd toward Cid. "Are you lost?"

"Been awhile since I've done this trick." He shrugged and scratched his head. "Must have misplaced a decimal or something."

"You always were a crap student." Edd looked at the hooded form standing next to Nel. "Who's this?"

Tracey tilted her head up and when he saw her face, he released a low whistle. "Shit. This is worse than I thought." He waved them forward. "Come on. Better get moving."

His demeanor and Nel's reassuring nod clued Cid in that Edd was a member of the resistance, too. He wondered how many of his friends were in on the big secret while he was left out in the dark. Trying not to feel bitter, he pushed Nel and Tracey in front of him and they all followed Edd down one hallway, then another. "Where are we going?"

Edd glanced over his shoulder. "Nel's been outed. We got to get her somewhere safe before anyone knows she's back. And get this human out of sight."

"Where's Myk?" asked Nel.

"The brig."

Cid groaned. It was his plan that got Myk caught.

Edd stopped to slide open a bunk door and ushered them all inside. Closing the door behind them, he said, "Lia managed to get a list of names. Not all of us, but enough. I'm in the clear for now. And so is Fin. This is his bunk."

Cid threw up his hands. "Fin? He's in on it, too? Am I literally the last to know?"

"We didn't want to bring you in until later. We knew you'd be on our side, but you aren't the easiest guy to keep a lid on. We didn't want you to go off half-cocked and blow the whole deal."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Cid managed not to sound too petulant.

Edd rolled his eyes. "Don't be such a baby. No one knows more ways to buck the system than you. And if it weren't for you, she'd be dead already." He pointed a claw at Tracey who flinched. "Sorry. I'm Edd, by the way. You must be Tracey."

She nodded, looking scared and so very out of place. This one little human was going to be the catalyst for revolution and, possibly, get them all killed in the process. Then again, if it weren't for humans, all Hordts would already be dead. Hordts, with all their technological as well as sociological advancements, owed their continued existence to the weak, bumbling, infantile humans from planet Earth. There were few things the universe favored more than irony.

Edd pulled his module from his trouser pocket and addressed Nel as he typed. "You and Tracey wait here for Fin. He'll take you to a secure spot we've carved out behind a false wall of a storage locker."

Nel grumbled something under her breath and Cid smiled. "Aw, sorry you're gonna have to sit out the revolution," he said.

Her glare only made him smile more.

"Cid," Edd said, "we're going to find Lia. Tracey's only hope is wiping out that control module."

"I'm ready." Those weren't just words. Cid had joined the resistance without much thought—carried along by the excitement of the moment and not wanting to be left out of the action—but he

understood the motivation to rebel against the system. Cid realized a part of him had always been ready and waiting to focus all his agitated energy on something big, something important, rather than wasting it on cheap thrills and selfish means. This was much like his penchant for scalding hot showers, but now he was ready to test his endurance when it really mattered. Then one glance at Nel as she smiled warmly at him and the subsequent catch in his breathing, made him wonder if he was over-thinking the whole situation.

He'd probably do damn near anything to keep that smile on Nel's face.

Chapter 30

Charlie was uncomfortable. Partially because he was sitting on a metal bench incarcerated within a ten by ten cell with dull gray metal walls and, so far, this entire planet smelled like the fruit department at Thrifty Acres had been left out in the sun too long. Mostly he was uncomfortable because he was barefoot. He looked down at his toes curled against the cold metal floor and made a mental note to remember to ask if he could slip on some shoes the next time he was dragged against his will through a portal to another dimension.

He was glad he wasn't wearing his watch. If he had only twenty-four hours on this planet before bits of himself started falling off, he didn't want to be counting down the minutes. Of course, he didn't want his final hours to be spent in Hordt jail either, but kicking the bucket on an alien planet was at least a unique way to go. Not that anyone would ever know.

Groaning, he slumped down further on the bench and thought of Tracey. What were the odds that she would get out of this alive? "We're both boned," he said to the walls of his cold metal tomb.

"Hey, you."

The voice echoed from out of nowhere.

"In the next cell. You."

Charlie looked up at the narrow, barred windows lining the top of the two side walls of his cell. From the window to his left, a large gray hand appeared, one clawed finger curling in an invitation to come closer. He stood on the bench, face level with the window, and saw a very large Hordt peering back at him.

"Oh man," said the Hordt. "Your name wouldn't happen to be Chuck, would it?"

Charlie sighed. "You a friend of Cid's?"

"Yeah. Name's Myk. What the hell happened to your face?"

Charlie registered the name and grinned. "So, you're Myk. Apparently, you made quite an impression on my girlfriend."

Myk's cheeks darkened in what Charlie figured was the Hordt equivalent of a blush. "Man, I don't know about that. Where is she?"

Charlie looked toward the barred window on his cell door, worried someone might overhear their conversation.

Myk must have sensed his apprehension. "Don't worry about the guards. They keep their asses planted at the entry desk and will only come back here if we're loud enough to interfere with their card game."

Nice to know that humans hadn't cornered the market on shirking job responsibilities. "She's somewhere here," said Charlie. "Cid said this side of the portal is the one place where no one would be able to find her."

Myk nodded. "He's right. It's ballsy, but smart. Why did you get brought over?"

"A 'better be safe than sorry' scenario. The Level Sevens came to my place looking for Tracey and decided to take me when they couldn't find her."

"You seem rather calm about the whole thing."

Charlie laughed because he didn't know what else to do. This whole situation was insane and hopeless, but he couldn't be bothered to panic. Maybe he'd crossed over the other side of fear into shock. Or maybe living with Cid these past weeks had numbed him to potentially violent situations.

Pointing to his face, he said, "Cid did this to me when I broke the rules. I expected him to kill me, but he didn't. I guess there's still a part of me that thinks I'll get out of this alive."

Myk edged closer to the window. "Did you see any other humans once they pulled you through the portal?"

Charlie shook his head. "No. Why?"

"I'm worried about Rebecca. If I'm compromised, then they must know she's been helping me. If a Sec 10 has been called on

her . . ." He gripped one of the bars so tight Charlie imagined he heard the metal groan.

What must it be like to have a Hordt feel so protective of you, instead of you needing protection from him? Charlie couldn't even imagine.

Myk rested his head against the bars on the window. "I thought she was certifiable at first. Totally nuts. But once she calmed down, started really talking to me, I got to know her." He chuckled. "Don't get me wrong, she can still be a pain in my neck, but she's grown on me."

Until now, Charlie didn't think it was possible to see so much emotion in such flat, black eyes. Both Myk and Nel seemed like sincere, caring creatures who would never consider torturing another soul just for giggles. Charlie wondered what he ever did to deserve a fate such as Cid.

"You humans do that, you know."

Charlie snapped his focus back to Myk. "What?"

"Grow on us. Get under our skin. It happened from the beginning. That's why we didn't just imprison your entire planet and turn you into slaves."

"No, just a select few of us."

"We just did what we thought we had to do to survive. Would you have done any different if the tables were turned?"

Knowing the human tendency to conquer first and ask questions later, Charlie supposed not.

Myk gave a weary smile then backed away from the window, disappearing into the shadows of his cell.

Charlie slid down the wall and collapsed on the bench. Perhaps the main reason why Hordts and humans hadn't cooperated with each other after millennia of contact was because both species were more alike than either would admit.

Chapter 31

Tracey sat on the floor of the dark cubbyhole she and Nel were wedged into, thinking this was the weirdest version of "seven minutes in heaven" she'd ever played. The image made her laugh out loud and Nel turned on the small flashlight Fin had given her.

"What's so funny?" Nel asked, her face cast in odd shadows.

"What isn't funny at this point?" said Tracey.

Nel smiled, the light stretching the shadow of her lips up past her cheekbones. If Tracey didn't already know Nel, the image would have been terrifying. "I suppose you're right."

Tracey picked at the cuffs of the hoodie, unsure if the fact that it smelled like Charlie relaxed her or made her sad. She shook her head. If she hadn't pried, hadn't stuck her nose in where it didn't belong, none of this would have happened. "Because of me," she muttered under her breath.

"What was that?" asked Nel.

After a sigh, Tracey said, "All this mess is because of me."

Nel covered Tracey's hands in one of hers. "You didn't do anything wrong. We imposed an unreasonable system on you. It's only natural that you would rebel against it."

"Yeah, but why did I have to start the rebellion?"

Nel fiddled with the flashlight, sending a jiggling pattern of light and shadow cascading across the walls of the narrow space. Tracey knew there wasn't an answer to her question, so she attempted to make small talk.

"The person you're assigned to. What are they like?"

There was a long moment of silence, then Nel answered, "He's just a kid. Nine years old."

Stunned, Tracey gasped. "I didn't know you followed children, too."

"We don't," Nel said. "He's a special case. He's . . ." Nel closed her eyes for a breath. "He's sick. Potentially terminal. They figured we should gather what we can out of him while he's still alive."

"Good god." Tracey covered her mouth with one hand. She knew that the Hordts needed their brainwaves, but she never thought about what they were doing as "harvesting" until now. She shuddered at the thought.

Nel must have sensed her unease. "It's because of Norman, the kid I'm assigned to, that I joined the resistance. It's just . . ." she shook her head. "It's just not right."

Tracey readjusted, trying to get comfortable in the small space. Sitting and waiting wasn't one of her strong suits. She knew this personality quirk was the main reason why she was in this position in the first place, but she couldn't change her nature this late in the game. Noticing how agitated Nel appeared, she took a chance. "Is there anything we can do to help? Anything?"

Nel raised the flashlight to shine directly on Tracey's face. "Are you suggesting we join the fight?"

The light in Tracey's eyes prevented her from seeing Nel's expression, but her tone of voice suggested she was eager to be free of this rat hole. "Anything to get out of here," Tracey said.

Nel lowered the flashlight so Tracey could see her sly grin. "How about we bust Myk out of lockup?"

"You have a plan?"

"Not really." Nel shrugged.

Tracey was at once terrified and excited. What did she have to lose? "Let's do it," she said.

Chapter 32

Edd and Cid took the elevator to the third floor above ground level and wound their way through the halls toward Saf's office. Reports from various resistance members said Lia was waiting with Saf for the Level Sevens to return from their mission.

The plan was for Edd to request to speak to Saf alone regarding information he'd uncovered about the resistance. When Lia stepped out into the hall, Cid would approach her and either pick her pocket or use his vast array of charms to liberate her module from her person. Edd had reservations about the second part of the plan, but Cid was confident he could perform, as always.

Cid watched from around the corner as Saf opened her office door to Edd then ushered Lia out into the hall, just as they'd anticipated. Cid waited for a count of ten, then ran up the hallway pretending to be out of breath. He acted as if he didn't see Lia standing there and made to knock on Saf's door.

"Hey," she said, grabbing his arm. "Saf's in there with Edd and doesn't want to be disturbed."

He nodded and leaned against the wall, wiping imaginary sweat from his forehead. "Why are you here?"

"Don't you know? I had to call a Sec 10 on Tracey."

Cid made a face that he hoped projected shock and disbelief. "No way." He shook his head and exhaled long and loud. "Well, you must have had no choice. Good for you for making the tough call."

Lia straightened her spine, rolling her shoulders back, head held high. "Yes. I had no choice. Thank you."

He grasped her upper arm and rearranged his face into a grave expression. "I have a similar call to make. That's why I'm here."

She pulled his hand from her arm and held it in hers. "Charlie?"

Cid swallowed hard and nodded. She gripped his hand tighter and gave him a warm look. It appeared that Lia could easily forget tense months of circling around each other like fighters in a ring once they both had a common very heavy, very deadly consequence to bear. Cid was more than willing to use her sympathies to his advantage.

To help him act the part of the hopeless victim, Cid squeezed his eyes shut and conjured the saddest thoughts he could imagine. Having to shave his head. Setting his trench coat on fire. A permanent scar across his face. Impotence. Nel in the brig. His breath hitched at the last image and his mind ran away with the thought. He saw Nel, wrists bound, standing before the Council, being found guilty of treason. She was led away from the court, to the execution chamber. Her face was passive, but tears streamed from her eyes as she was secured to the wall by her wrists and ankles. The door to the chamber slammed closed and Nel flinched. Her eyes darted around the room then settled straight ahead, right into Cid's, as the chamber filled with gas.

Cid gasped for breath and he opened his eyes to a stunned Lia, who reached up a hand to his face. He thought the gesture strange until he realized she was wiping away a tear from his cheek. Regaining some semblance of self-control, Cid backed away, but Lia grabbed him and pulled him into a hug.

"It's going to be okay," she whispered as she held him close and patted his back.

The unexpected show of compassion stunned him, but he soon realized he was in the perfect position. He wrapped his arms around Lia and slid his left hand down into the right pocket of her jacket, where he knew she kept her control module. His fingers inched closer, and the claw of his index finger brushed against what would be the antenna if the module really was the old cell phone it appeared to be.

"There's been an unexpected development."

Lia pulled away and Cid turned toward the source of the voice to see three Level Sevens marching down the hall. The leader, a female, pointed ahead. "Are you Lia?"

Lia nodded and Cid groaned, anticipating the worst.

The leader stopped a few feet away, her two minions filing behind her. "I'm Dex. Your human, Tracey Pratt, was not at the coordinates you supplied us."

Cid watched, helpless, as Lia pulled her module from her pocket and handed it to Dex. "I don't understand. I left her in her bedroom."

"She wasn't there." Dex scrolled through the module for a moment then eyed Cid. "You're assigned to the human Charlie Andrus, are you not?"

Cid could guess where this road would dead-end. "Yes."

"We assumed that if Ms. Pratt was not at home, the only logical place she would go is Mr. Andrus' residence. We shifted to that location, but she was not there. Mr. Andrus insisted he hadn't seen her, but we took him into custody just to be safe."

Charlie was in the brig. The fact hit home with all the force of a cell door being slammed shut. The odds of saving Tracey alone were slim; adding Charlie to the mix rendered the whole situation hopeless beyond even lunatic standards. Both humans were probably as good as dead, but if they could save one, who would it be? Cid prayed to a god he wasn't sure he believed in that he wouldn't have to be the one to make that decision.

Dex stared at him like they were in an interrogation room, sitting on opposite sides of a table. He knew she was waiting for a reaction from him, anything to tell her where his loyalties lie.

Cid shook his head and buried his hands in his coat pockets. "Tough luck for Chuck."

Dex raised an eyebrow, but before she could reply, the office door opened and Saf and Edd emerged.

Saf surveyed the group. "What's going on here?"

Dex stepped forward. "We were unable to locate the human, Ms. Pratt."

Edd must have noticed the module in Dex's hand because he shot a panicked look at Cid, who only managed a shrug in response. Either they'd have to fabricate a new plan right here and

now or resign themselves to failure. Charlie, Tracey, Nel, Myk, as well as the other resistance members Lia had uncovered were doomed. Plus, it would only be a short matter of time before he and Edd were implicated in this whole disaster as well.

Cid let his gaze settle on the plasma pistol nestled in the holster secured to Dex's thigh. She and Saf were engaged in conversation. The other two Level Sevens looked bored and weren't paying any attention to him. All he had to do was take three quick steps forward, slip the pistol from the holster and--

A claxon wailed from the public address system. At the same time, red lights descended from pockets in the ceiling and flashed in time with the alarm. This warning meant only one thing and the group stood motionless in shock.

Cid suppressed a smile. He had to hand it to those Stoneheads; they had an uncanny sense of timing.

Chapter 33

The group crowded into Saf's office and surrounded the terminal mounted on the desk. Bulletins and reports flashed across the screen announcing that a fleet of twenty large Stonehead transport ships were in orbit around Odt. As usual, they declined to respond to any communications from the surface. It had been decades since more than one or two ships had been spotted and those were scouting vessels, obviously sent to see if the Hordts had let their guard down. As they watched the footage on the terminal, dozens of small shuttles launched from each ship like spawn from a sea monster.

Saf ran her finger along the screen, scrolling through the reports. "Are they mounting an attack?"

Dex leaned forward, bracing herself with one hand on the desk. "Surely not. They have to detect our brainwave broadcast across the planet."

"What if they have a way to shield themselves now?"

Lia inhaled sharply. "You think that's possible?"

Cid clenched and unclenched his hands. Anything was possible. Based on the last brainwave reserve analysis he'd glanced through a week ago, they had enough juice stored for three months worth of broadcasting. Dispatching every Level Four on an emergency mission to record as many brainwaves from their humans as they could would add to the reserve, but if the Stoneheads had found a way to block their amplifiers, then it was all moot. The Hordts were dead in the water. They had maybe six months before global extinction. Since fighting back had been a hopeless venture before, Cid wondered if Hordts would attempt a

mass exodus through the portal to Earth. Maybe Chuck and Tracey would make it home after all.

An idea flashed into Cid's mind with such force that, for a fraction of a second, he thought Dex had shot him between the eyes with her plasma pistol. The idea was brilliant and simple, but any plan constructed to bring the idea to life would be suicidal at best. However, if he was right and could pull it off, he could add Hero to his long list of superlatives.

Grasping Edd's arm, Cid pulled him aside. "We gotta go."

Edd looked confused. "Go? Where?"

"Yes, Cid." Dex turned and leveled a stern glare at him. "Where do you need to go?"

"Edd and I both have combat training," Cid said without pause. "The soldiers are gonna need all the help they can get, so I thought we'd volunteer."

Dex raised an eyebrow, as if she were going to question his motives. Then she nodded and said, "Very commendable of you. Be on your way."

Cid pushed Edd ahead of him out of the office and ran with him down the hallway. After they rounded the corner, Edd skipped to a halt in front of the elevators. "What is going on in that head of yours?" he asked.

"You don't believe I want to volunteer to fight?" Cid grinned.

"Forgive my skepticism."

Cid laughed and pushed the down button. "I'll explain on the way."

"Where are we going?"

The elevator doors opened and Cid stepped inside. "We need to reunite a couple of lovebirds."

Chapter 34

Trying to keep his anxiety at bay, Charlie paced his cell, bare feet slapping against the metal floor. At least the deafening alarm had stopped, but red lights still flashed through the bars of his cell door. Myk had told him what the alarm meant. He'd started the pacing shortly thereafter.

Charlie hoped Cid and Nel had found Lia's control module and were well on their way to finding a hiding place for Tracey somewhere "Earth-side" as the Hordts called it. No one would notice he was missing until tomorrow morning, which could have happened already. He didn't quite grasp how time worked on this planet compared to home. If everything went according to plan, Cid would be the first to realize Charlie wasn't where he was supposed to be. Would Cid look for him? Or just shrug and consider Charlie collateral damage? He wanted to think that after everything they'd been through, Cid would try to find him. But Charlie knew predicting Cid's next move was harder than guessing which roadside a squirrel sitting on the double yellow line would dart toward.

Voices halted Charlie's pacing. Familiar voices. Straining his ears, all he heard now was Myk's laughter. He walked to the bench, ready to climb up so he could see into Myk's cell when a voice stopped him.

"I'd make you my bitch in a hot minute."

Charlie turned to see Tracey's face smiling through the bars of his cell door. He took a moment to try and comprehend what her being on the other side of the door could mean. He was still focused on the plan, and no part of the plan included her even

knowing he was in alien prison, much less breaking him out. Was it even a good thing she was here?

"Stop thinking for two seconds and come over here and kiss me," she said, reaching her hand as far as she could through the bars.

That was an order he could follow. He closed the few steps between the bench and the door in a heartbeat and grasped Tracey's hand. Pressing his face in between the bars, his lips met hers in a smiley, messy kiss.

Pulling apart, he asked, "What are you doing here?"

Tracey grinned. "I could ask you the same thing."

Myk came into view behind her, followed by Nel, who wedged Tracey aside so she could unlock the door. When it opened, Charlie rushed out into the hall, feeling the weight of confinement slough from his psyche. Although he was still trapped. That is, unless someone had a plan for getting him off this planet in the next eighteen or so hours.

Tracey pushed Nel and Myk aside to slam into Charlie, clamping her arms around his middle and burying her face in his chest. He held her tight and kissed the top of her head. "My hero," he said.

She looked up at him with a full beaming smile. "Least I could do. You're only here 'cause of me."

Nel stepped forward. "Well, you both have the Stoneheads to thank for this rescue. The guards at the desk were called away to the front lines, leaving you ripe for the picking."

"Now what?" asked Charlie. Tracey unlatched herself from the front of him, but he kept one arm wrapped tight around her shoulders. She was his continuum, his only link to everything familiar. He wasn't about to let her out of his grasp.

Nel tossed the keys to the cell doors aside. "Okay," she said. "The Stoneheads have created a great diversion. Let's find some place to just lay low for a while."

Myk leaned down so he was closer to eye level with Nel. "Message Edd. He'll know where we can go."

Nel shook her head. "I've been outed. I smashed my module 'cause it was probably being monitored. Otherwise, I'd pop

us all to Earth. I'm sure the Level Sevens are no longer worried about one human."

"Where can we go then?" asked Myk.

Nel's brow knotted and her eyes darted from face to face. "I know of one place we could all fit where we probably won't be discovered until I can get my hands on another module." She settled her gaze on Charlie. "We'll need to cover you up, though, if we're gonna get down the halls unnoticed."

Myk looked Charlie up and down. "The guard station should have an extra jacket or something we can use."

Charlie looked at his feet, toes wiggling against the floor. "What about shoes?" he asked.

Myk just shrugged and turned to follow Nel down the hallway. Charlie joined them, his arm still around Tracey's shoulders. When they reached the guard station at the end of the hall, Myk rummaged behind the desk. Moving aside boxes and files he found a black uniform jacket and scarf. Charlie pulled on the jacket and wrapped the scarf around his face. He could tuck his hands in his pockets, but there was no helping his bare feet.

Nel gave him a hesitant smile. "Who's going to be looking down, anyway?"

Indeed, it appeared that everyone had much more important things to look at than Charlie's feet. The hallways were chaos. Hordts scrambled around them, scanning their control modules or pulling on coats and barking orders at others. Charlie wrapped one sleeve-covered hand around Tracey's arm as they were buffeted by the traffic. They followed behind Myk who, being a linebacker with claws and fangs, cleared a path for them. Nel brought up the rear, every few steps whispering, "It's okay," or, "Keep going," and patting one clawed hand on his back. Any time Cid had ever touched him, it was either painful or unnerving, but Nel's hand was comforting in a strange, surreal way.

He was jostled to the side then pushed forward, looking up just in time to stop a wall from slamming into his face. The floor vibrated and his stomach dropped then lurched back up as if tethered to an elastic band. He turned and saw they were crowded into a small metal room with at least five other Hordts. Everyone faced the same direction and there was a slit in the wall ahead of

them. When Charlie saw a small screen at the top of the wall displaying red symbols that changed few seconds, he realized they were riding in an elevator. He looked down to Tracey at his side and saw her face was turned up to his. He mouthed the word "elevator" and she raised one eyebrow and let her mouth drop open in an expression that could only mean, "Duh."

The elevator jerked to a stop and Myk edged his way to the front of the car as the doors opened. Nel followed, dragging Charlie by the arm who grabbed Tracey and pulled her along. In the hallway, Charlie turned toward the elevator in time to lock eyes with a confused Hordt who pointed at him just before the doors slid closed.

This floor was deserted, everyone apparently having already scrambled to wherever they needed to be. Nel led them in a jog down one gray, metal hallway to another that looked exactly the same as the last. Charlie wondered how anyone ever figured out where the hell they were in this featureless maze. He flashed to an image of himself as a lab rat and wished there would be a food pellet, in the form of a cheeseburger, at the end of this experiment.

Nel stopped at a door and slid it open, waving everyone inside. The space wasn't much larger than the jail cell Charlie had been pacing minutes ago. There was a narrow bed along the back wall, a sink and mirror to the right, and a small desk with a stool on the left. Something about this room was familiar. Not the room itself, but the feel of it. He inhaled deeply, catching his breath from their impromptu dash and he realized what he recognized. The room smelled like burnt chocolate.

Charlie turned to Nel and pointed at the floor. "Is this . . .?" He didn't want to finish the question, embarrassed that he recognized the Hordt by smell alone.

Nel filled in the blanks. "Yes. This is Cid's bunk." She sat down on the stool.

Myk motioned for Charlie and Tracey to sit on the bed, which they did, settling down with their hands clasped together. "He's not been associated with the resistance yet, and in the chaos no one should be looking for him or have put monitors in his room." He lifted his chin and scanned the ceiling, then turned his attention to Nel. "This was a good idea."

She waved off his praise and leaned against the desk. "I told Cid once that I'd only ever be caught dead in his bunk if the world were ending." Her laugh was short and weary.

Myk gripped her shoulder. "It's not that bad."

Charlie sympathized with the guy. He knew what it was like to try to comfort someone when your heart wasn't in it. When you knew the platitudes were hollow. He squeezed Tracey's hand tighter.

"Under the bed," Myk said, "Cid might have an extra pair of shoes."

Releasing Tracey's hand, Charlie scooted to the edge of the bed and looked between his knees to see a handle. Tracey lifted her legs and crossed them, so he could pull the handle and open the drawer. Inside were clothes, folded neater than Charlie would have guessed, a small black bag, and in the far corner, a pair of worn black boots. He grabbed them and some socks, then closed the drawer with his heels.

The boots were a little big, but comfortable enough with the thick socks. And, no, he didn't need anyone to point out that he was now literally walking in Cid's shoes.

Chapter 35

Cid stood in front of the open cells that were supposed to contain Charlie and Myk. "This is awkward," he said to Edd.

Edd scanned his module. "No one has posted anything about setting Myk or the human free."

Cid didn't like being this close to the cells. He figured he'd have a long time to become acquainted with them soon enough. Shaking off the thought, he said, "Maybe Myk found a way to escape and took Charlie with him."

A wide grin spread across Edd's face. "No offense, but if I couldn't break out, there's no way Myk did."

Years ago, Edd had been locked up on conspiracy charges that were later dropped because all the evidence was found to be fabricated and planted in Edd's bunk and the actual perpetrator confessed not long after. Knowing what he did now, Cid wondered if Edd was so innocent after all. Turning back to the empty cells, Cid contemplated who could have coordinated an escape and wouldn't have reported it to Edd. Or *couldn't* have reported. The memory of Nel's disappointed face when Edd told her she had to hide and wait was all the evidence Cid needed, and could afford. When it's the end of the world, you tend to go with your first instinct. This triggered an older memory, one that made him chuckle now, but at the time had fractured his none too fragile ego.

"Let's go," Cid said.

Standing in front of the closed door of his bunk, Cid did something he'd never done before. He knocked. Edd gave him a curious look, but Cid held up a finger and tilted his head to the side, listening for movement from within. Sure enough, he heard muffled voices and some shuffling around. Clasping his hands behind his back, and displaying the most charming smile he could manage, he waited.

The door cracked open a few inches and Myk's cautious face appeared through the gap. Within seconds, Myk's expression transformed and he slid the door wide with a huge grin. "You cocky asshole!" Myk bellowed as he invited Cid into his own bunk.

Cid stepped inside and his eyes immediately settled on Nel, standing in front of Charlie and Tracey, looking happier than he would have expected, considering the circumstances. He crossed so he was standing directly in front of her, hands still clasped firmly, safely, behind his back. "You aren't where you're supposed to be," he said.

She answered with a shrug of one shoulder and a smile.

Edd pointed at Charlie. "What happened to his face?"

"Just a little misunderstanding," said Cid with a smirk.

Charlie acted as if he were going to argue, then shut his mouth and shook his head. Wow, the world really was ending.

Tracey elbowed in front of Nel. "Did you get Lia's magic cell phone?"

Taking a step back, he sighed. He knew his failure to carry out the original plan would make them less than eager to jump on board with his new, even crazier scheme. "No. We weren't able to get the control module." Ignoring their fallen faces, he continued, "The Sevens showed up and confiscated it. That's how I learned that you" he nodded to Charlie, "had been locked up. Or at least you were. Your cell was empty by the time I got there."

Charlie looked surprised. "You were going to get me out?"

"You and Myk, of course."

Charlie smiled, appearing touched, and Cid waved his hand at the expression with a scowl.

"Don't get any ideas, Chuck. I had purely practical reasons for wanting you set free. I need you for my new plan."

"Taking us all to Earth as soon as possible?"

"That's a back-up option, yes."

"What?" Charlie looked about to short circuit. "Why? Why the hell would we stay here?"

Cid squared his shoulders. Confidence is what would sell this plan to the group. Genuine or faked, they wouldn't know the difference. "I need you and your troublemaker girlfriend to save the day." He smirked at Nel. "Good thing I had a hunch who beat me to your jailbreak and where you all were hiding out."

"I should know better than be surprised that you remembered," said Nel.

Cid leaned down to whisper in her ear. "I would have helped end the world sooner if I'd known you were serious." He straightened up again to give her a wink and took a moment to admire her darkening cheeks. Clapping his hands together once, he said to the group, "So, who wants to kill some aliens?"

Chapter 36

Cid had a relatively easy time convincing everyone to go along with his new plan. Lack of any other viable options and the extreme likelihood of certain death, no matter what action was taken, might have helped sway them to his side.

The group slipped through the halls with all the stealth four Hordts (one as wide as a tank) and two humans (both pale-faced and reeking of fear) could manage. Cid had found an old hooded jacket for Charlie to borrow and warned him that it and the boots better be returned in the same condition they were in now. They didn't encounter anyone else on their trek to the elevator, Edd slapping the DOOR CLOSE button as soon as all were inside. The door finally closed six agonizing seconds later.

"Okay," said Cid, "Edd and I will go to the portal dock while the rest of you keep the hell out of sight."

Myk raised a finger. "There's a small maintenance bay close to the portal that should be empty this time of day. We could hole up there."

"Perfect," said Cid. "Edd and I will fetch you once we got the biowave recorders."

The elevator doors slid open and Cid poked his head out to inspect the hallway. Red hazard lights flashed as half a dozen or so Level Fours ran by. From what he could tell, most were very young—too green to enlist in the fight against the Stoneheads, so they were dispatched to collect brainwaves like good little minions. Nel, Myk, and the humans ran to the right while Cid and Edd walked left, toward the portal.

The portal dock was almost empty. At any one time, a handful of Level Fours stood on The Grill, and there were only two biowave recorder stations open with lines three or so deep at each one. Cid filed into one line and Edd the other. Within minutes, Cid was face to face with the same old prune he'd encountered the last time he was synched up with a recorder. He smiled, attempting to disarm the cranky bat, but she only scowled.

"Shouldn't you be fighting?" the prune asked.

Cid bent to rub a hand along his leg. "I got a trick knee. Useless in combat, I'm afraid."

She huffed and snatched a recorder from the drawer, holding it up to his head and synching it as usual. When she handed it to him, Cid bowed and said, "Thank you kindly."

The prune's lips didn't raise even a fraction of an inch. "Don't hold up the line."

He couldn't agree with her more and skipped away toward the portal where Edd waited for him. They both circled The Grill and strolled out of the portal dock. If any of the Level Fours noticed them leaving with synched recorders, they didn't care enough to raise any alarms. Cid appreciated this apathetic quality in the younger generation.

As they walked to the maintenance bay where the rest of the gang waited, Edd said, "I knew we should have brought you into the resistance earlier. Your ability to think on your feet is impressive. This is one hell of a plan."

From anyone else, Cid would have shrugged off the compliment as stating the obvious. But this was Edd, his mentor and partner in crime. The guy taught Cid almost everything he knew about being a Level Four, not to mention a wealth of invaluable knowledge that got him both in and out of trouble more times than he could remember. Edd never had children, but he would have made a fantastic father. That is, if the kid were quick enough to keep up and sly enough stay out of prison. Cid liked to think of himself as Edd's surrogate son. One that child protective services couldn't take away.

Cid toyed with the biowave recorder in his hands. "Well, the plan hasn't worked, yet. It's kind of a long shot, actually."

"It's better than hiding or running, which is what anyone else would be doing."

They stopped in front of the door to the maintenance bay and Edd rapped four times. Myk opened the door and waved them inside. Cid looked over at Charlie and Tracey, holding hands and whispering, heads bowed close. A few days ago, the sight would have made him roll his eyes in disgust and stomp off to a different room. His reaction now was decidedly different.

It's a selfish thing, wanting someone you care for by your side, even if it means they will suffer the same fears and dangers as you. Cid guessed that as much as neither Charlie nor Tracey wished the other to be in this situation right now, they were also immensely grateful not to be going through it alone. He shifted his gaze to Nel who was also looking at the couple. Yes, it was a selfish thing, indeed.

Nel then looked at Cid, who smiled for her benefit, and approached the lovebirds. Edd followed him.

"Okay, kids," said Cid. "You've never been awake for this part before."

The humans faced the Hordts, who held up the biowave recorders and pressed the ENTER button until a green nine flashed on the screen of each one.

Edd punched a few more buttons as he talked. "We're turning off the mind reading function, just so you know."

Cid chuckled while he disabled the mind connection on his recorder as well, which basically consisted of turning the volume down. "Yeah, last thing I need in my head is Chuck screaming 'oh god, oh god, I'm gonna die' over and over." He looked up to see no one laughing with him. Charlie just raised his face to the ceiling and shook his head. Cid mumbled, "Aliens attack and everyone loses their sense of humor." He handed his recorder to Edd. "Okay, you better get going."

Edd nodded and motioned for the rest to follow him. Nel took a few steps then stopped to look back at Cid. "You aren't coming with us?"

He hesitated before answering. She needed to go with Edd. It was the safer option. No matter what he wanted. "Someone has to divert all power to the one amplifier. Might as well be me." She

stepped toward him and he held up a hand, stopping her. "No. You go with Edd and the rest. They'll need you."

Nel marched forward until she was inches from him, her fists at her sides. "You'll need someone to watch your back. You can't do it alone."

Cid locked his eyes with hers, unable to come up with a single argument to prove her wrong. Only Nel had the power to render him speechless. Her lips curled up into a smile and her eyes narrowed. Cid knew what that look meant, having displayed it himself more times than he could count. She had him, and she knew it. His own smile grew unbidden.

Edd, in his infinite wisdom, broke the silence. "Nel's right. You need her more than we do. Myk and I can handle this."

Cid didn't break eye contact with Nel as the rest left the bay. He itched to reach out and pull her to him and show her exactly how much he needed her. Instead, he dug his claws into the sides of his thighs. It was an unwritten rule: She would have to make the first move.

Nel took a step back and waved her arm toward the door. "Lead the way," she said with a smirk.

If the Stoneheads didn't kill him, Cid knew what would.

Chapter 37

The surface of Odt was nearly as monochromatic as the building they had all just snuck out of. Surrounding the six identical squat, gray buildings was a desert of white sand stretching in all directions. Charlie looked up to see the silver disk of their sun high in a bright, bleached-pink sky. Then he saw the ship. A massive black slab of machinery hung low in the sky, defying not only most laws of physics, but common sense as well. Explosions bloomed in intervals along the hull as Hordts on the ground fired missile after missile, but the ship appeared unaffected.

Charlie gripped Tracey's hand tighter as the group jogged around the corner of one of the buildings, through a rocky courtyard, and past a cluster of skeletal black things sprouting from the ground that he assumed were trees. When they reached a wide, flat tarmac, Edd pointed to their left and Charlie stumbled to a stop. About three hundred yards away, lined up on the ridge of a dune, stood five black shapes. He could make out rudimentary appendages and, even from this distance, it was obvious they were big enough to make Myk look like a preschooler. He didn't need Edd to tell him these were the Stoneheads.

A battalion of Hordts surrounded the ridge and aimed weapons of various designs at the Stoneheads. Tracked vehicles equipped with what looked like large guns or rocket launchers backed up the soldiers on foot. More vehicles approached as they watched. Charlie saw that the tarmac was a staging area. Row upon row of Hordts stood in formation while superiors barked orders at

them to either march out to the ridge or man one of the waiting vehicles. He realized then why the halls were so deserted before.

Staring at the Stoneheads again, Charlie said, "They're just standing there."

"That's what they do," said Edd. "Our weapons have little effect on them, but we feel like we have to try. Keeping them busy here prevents them from moving to another location on the planet."

"Do they shoot lasers out of their eyes, or what? How do they attack?"

Edd huffed a laugh. "You're looking at it. They stand there and after a while, we start dropping dead. It's like they are draining something from us that they need."

Charlie glanced between Edd and Myk. "You guys see the irony, don't you?"

Before either could answer, Tracey spoke. "I thought you were broadcasting human brainwaves across the planet? Shouldn't that have kept them away."

Myk sighed. "It seems they found a way to block the signal."

"Then how is this plan going to work?" she asked.

Edd raised his eyebrows and quirked up one corner of his mouth before turning and walking along the edge of the tarmac.

Charlie turned to Myk, but he only shrugged and followed. "Great," said Charlie as he took Tracey's hand again and jogged after them. "I'm used to Cid not telling me jack shit, but I expected more from you."

Edd glanced back at Charlie. "Taught him everything he knows."

They'd skirted the tarmac on the opposite end from where all the action was taking place and veered right along a gravel path. Myk slowed so he was walking next to Charlie. "I don't know all the technical ins and outs, but I think I can explain. Edd will correct me if I'm way off base."

Edd waved a hand over his shoulder.

Myk continued as they walked. "We broadcast at a very specific frequency. The brainwaves kind of grow a little stale while being stored in the recorder and more oomph is lost in the translation between the recorders and the amplifiers. We chose a

frequency to try and compensate for this loss. One that boosts without distorting. The theory is, if we connect to the amplifiers while recording directly from you, we can broadcast at a different, stronger frequency. One the Stoneheads haven't learned how to shield against."

"Bravo, Myk," said Edd while clapping his hands. "That was an excellent explanation."

Charlie glanced down at Tracey who was gnawing on the cuticle of her thumb with single-minded intensity. "Even if that works," he said, "it will only wipe out the Stoneheads here."

Edd answered this time. "If it works, Cid can send out a message from the control room to other bases and tell them what to do. Level Fours all over the planet will pull humans over through the portal and wire them up to the amplifiers. Kinda like the good old days. If it doesn't work, then I guess we pop over to Earth and live like refugees." Edd stopped and the rest halted behind him. "This is it."

The path ended at a concrete tower about forty feet tall. Edd opened the door at the base of the tower after jimmying the lock. Inside was just enough room for a metal staircase spiraling upward around a large center pole. Edd led the way, followed by Tracey, then Charlie, and finally Myk. At the top was a small room and, in the center, the pole rose from the floor through the ceiling. Silvery sunlight streamed in the windows lining the wall and Charlie saw the battlefield in the distance.

Edd pulled the biowave recorders from his pockets and turned to Charlie and Tracey. "I'm going to wire these directly into the amplifier. When Cid messages me that he's diverted all power to this station, I'll flip the switch. All you guys will have to do is keep thinking." He knelt to open a panel at the base of the pole and got to work.

Thanks to Cid, the one thought that looped through Charlie's brain was, "Oh god, oh god, I'm gonna die."

Chapter 38

Everything was proceeding according to plan, which made Cid very nervous. Edd had messaged him that they'd arrived at the amplifier tower without incident and no one was in the halls to stop and question why he and Nel were wandering around. It was all too easy.

They'd taken the elevator to sub-level four. Down a couple of winding hallways was their destination. Cid paused before turning the final corner and held a hand up to Nel then placed a finger across his lips. She nodded. Keeping his body hidden behind the wall, he edged his face toward the corner until he could see the door to the server room out of one eye. There weren't any guards posted. He stepped fully into the hall and motioned for Nel to follow. Once at the door, he grasped the knob. It was unlocked. Way too easy.

The room was alive with the whirrs and clicks of electronics and the soft roar of the cooling fans. The servers powered all the control modules issued to residents of the base, as well as a back-up terminal which, among other things, was connected to the operating system for the ten amplifier towers scattered across this sector. After confirming the room was unoccupied, Cid found the terminal along the far wall and powered it up.

"What can I do?" Nel stood beside him, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

Cid pointed to a smaller terminal behind him to the left, nestled within the towering banks of servers. "Log into our inter-base system. Get a message ready to send to every base on the

planet explaining how we used Chuck and Tracey to get past the Stoneheads' shields."

"You're that sure this plan will work?"

No. He wasn't. But she looked too worried for him to bother her with the truth. "I'm an optimist." He wasn't sure how convincing his smile was, but she returned it all the same and got to work.

The operating system controlling the amplifiers was not designed by the engineers who invented the amplifiers themselves, so the interface was uncluttered and intuitive. Cid still had little to no clue what he was doing, but he'd never let that deter him before. After a few wrong turns and a disastrous detour through the system's Help files, he stumbled across the power management screen. He then discovered that running a finger either up or down along one of the ten red bars on the screen toggled the amplification power. Their grid wasn't designed to handle running all the amplifiers at full power because it was simply unnecessary. The ten of them operating at sixty percent each was more than enough to blanket the sector with brainwaves at the standard frequency. He toggled the power to nine of them down to less than twenty percent, then boosted the power of the amplifier Edd was hooked into to one hundred percent. All he had to do now was kick up the frequency. A few taps on the screen and he landed exactly where he needed to be.

Cid cracked his knuckles and laughed. "I got it," he said as he turned toward the server terminal. His laughter caught in his throat when he saw Nel on her knees, hands behind her head. Dex, the Level Seven leader, stood beside Nel, pointing a plasma pistol at her temple.

Everything was no longer easy.

Cid tried to channel some small measure of comfort to Nel, and she admirably pretended it was working. The weight of their failure threatened to crush the air from Cid's lungs. He shifted his focus to Dex and her hard, cold victory glare gave him renewed purpose. Cid would let the bitch glare at him for the rest of his miserable life if she'd just aim that fucking pistol away from Nel.

Clenching his fists, Cid decided he'd have to make Dex want to shoot him more. "Following me? I'm flattered." He tried to tame his snarl into a grin.

"Your willingness to march off to the front lines was less than believable. And I've suspected Edd of treason for a while but lacked proof. Tracking you through your modules was merely a precaution, but one that proved lucrative."

Cid's grin faltered when he thought of Edd.

Dex must have caught the slight slip of his mask. "A team of Level Sevens was dispatched to the amplifier tower and, any minute now, they will escort your friends and the humans to the brig."

The humans are my friends, too. Cid cringed at the unexpected thought. If he had a plasma pistol, he'd point it at his own temple right now. He took a breath and said, "Congratulations. You just signed the death warrant for the entire planet."

Dex smirked. "Cut the drama. Since when do you care about saving anything but your own hide? Whatever idiocy you were planning would only serve to put this sector in jeopardy. Now, turn around and reset the power levels to the amplifiers."

Cid crossed his arms. "Let the geeks in the monitoring station above ground reset them."

"They've all been called away to join the fight. They didn't anticipate that anyone would be stupid enough to sabotage the system."

"I guess that makes them the stupid ones," he said with a laugh. Dex's expression didn't change, but Cid noticed the muzzle of the pistol waver.

"Reset them or I will shoot her." A muscle in Dex's jaw twitched.

This was the moment Cid was waiting for. His fake grin morphed into a genuine smile. "Shooting an unarmed, detained suspect? That has to be against regulations. I'm so gonna tell."

"Who will believe you? I'll say she attacked me." Dex sounded confident, but the pistol jostled once again.

"Probably right," said Cid. "But if you shoot her, I don't do shit." He kicked his smile up a few notches for maximum annoyance. Glancing at Nel, he saw a flicker of fire in her eyes.

That's it, sweetheart.

Dex narrowed her gaze. "You'd sacrifice one of your friends to your misguided cause?"

"As you said. All I care about is my own hide." He risked another brief glance at Nel and saw a barely restrained smile on her lips. In that moment, he couldn't have loved her more.

Dex squared her shoulders and showed some teeth, too many to be considered a smile. "Well, in that case." She pivoted her arm forward to aim the pistol directly at Cid's chest.

Jackpot.

Nel lunged sideways into Dex's hip and Cid dove forward. He managed to grab the barrel of the pistol as Dex fell to the concrete floor, but she was stronger than he anticipated. On her back with Cid straddling her, Dex wrenched the pistol away from his grasp and pulled her arm down to take aim at his head. Cid grasped her wrist and jerked it to the side. She sprang forward and head butted him with enough force to daze him and his grip on her wrist slackened. Dex raised her arm again and clutched the pistol with both hands. As Cid recovered, he saw Nel in his periphery, holding something large over her head. He reached for the pistol and Nel swung her arms.

There was a white flash and a sharp pain and then nothing.

Chapter 39

Thanks to the amazing acoustical properties of the tower, the intense pounding from the bottom of the staircase was the loudest sound Charlie had ever heard. Although fear might have exaggerated his senses a degree or twenty.

"Myk!" Edd yelled. "How ya holding up?"

Charlie clutched a shaking Tracey close to his chest. From where they stood next to a window, he could see the impassive Stoneheads standing on the ridge and the battalions of Hordts lined up, firing away with everything they had. Ordinance kicked up sand all around the monsters and the wind scattered it like snow. Every few moments a Hordt would drop to his knees, clutching his head and writhing in agony that was obvious even from over three hundred yards away. Both Myk and Edd were stunned at how fast the Stoneheads were killing the troops. In the past, it took days before anyone even suffered symptoms. The invaders not only found a way to work around the amplifiers, they had also maximized their efficiency. They were more clever than they looked.

Myk's voice bellowed from below, "They aren't firing pistols! Keeping them out for now!"

Edd shook his control module as if physical violence could convince the object to display the message he desperately wanted to read. "Hold on, Myk! Any minute!"

Echoing up the stairs came a particularly loud thud followed by a savage grunt from Myk. Charlie knew the guy was strong, but he could only hold out so long against the three Level Sevens hammering at the door.

Charlie wrenched Tracey from his grasp and gripped Edd's arm. "Let me go down and help him!"

Edd shook his head. "You need to be close to the recorder."

"Then show me what to do and you go."

Edd considered for a moment then handed his module over. "When you see the message from Cid, just yank this lever down." He placed his finger on a red lever sprouting through a tangle of wires within the open access panel on the antenna. He'd already untangled two white wires from the mass of circuitry and connected their ends to the corresponding white wires of the two recorders. "The antenna will power up and everything else should happen automatically."

"I got it," said Charlie. There was a rapid barrage of loud thuds from below. "Help him!"

He watched Edd sprint down the stairs and out of sight. Tracey turned from the window and knelt next to the recorders laying on the floor. She picked one up to double-check the connections and looked at Charlie. The recorder shook in her hand, but her jaw was set and her gaze steady.

"You ever have one of those days?" she yelled over the incessant banging at the door.

Charlie felt a grin edge its way across his face. "When this is over, we should totally take a vacation. Some place warm and sunny where nothing is trying to kill us."

Tracey returned his smile and the tremors in her hands stilled. Charlie opened his mouth to form the first of three very important words when he felt the control module vibrate. Looking down, he read the message from Cid.

"GO!"

Chapter 40

When Cid opened his eyes, he wondered why he was laying on the floor and why Nel looked so worried. "Hey," he said and winced at the intense burning that inflamed his right side.

Nel knelt next to him and stroked his face. "Shh. It's okay."

Of course it was okay. Nel no longer had a gun pointed at her head. As he tried to sit up, the flames of his pain were stoked to renewed life, forcing him back down. "Where?" he choked out.

Nel wiped at her eyes. "I knocked her out with the stool. Tied her to one of the server cages with my belt."

Cid smiled. At least that action didn't hurt. "Good girl."

She cradled his head in her lap. "I changed the frequency," she said, her breath hitching. "And I messaged Edd, but who knows if he got it or not." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "You—" A sob interrupted her. "You're shot pretty bad."

Nel looked miserable, but Cid couldn't remember when he'd been happier. She was going to live, he was more than certain of it. And, because he still had a few breaths left in him, he would make sure she ended up the hero. The title suited her more than him, anyway. "Don't cry." His focus on the plan helped distract him from the pain. "We still got work to do."

Nel sniffed and shook her head. "Shh. You're delirious. Don't waste your energy." She bent closer to him until her lips were moments from his.

Cid summoned every bit of strength he had to twist his head away. "Listen to me," he whispered. The edges of his vision heathered, but he was determined to stay conscious. "This isn't

over. You need to do one more thing, and I'm going to walk you through it."

Chapter 41

Charlie stood at the top of an antenna tower on an alien planet, holding what looked like an old cell phone in one hand and a pocket calculator in the other while a battle waged in the distance and a hit squad pounded on the door below. All he could think about was that his brother, Jimmy, would have panicked long before now, and he couldn't help but feel a bit smug.

Tracey stood, her hand on the red lever and Charlie nodded. They both held their breath as she pulled the lever down.

Predictably, nothing happened.

Charlie looked down at the other biowave recorder on the floor. He had no idea if anything was malfunctioning and, if it were, how to fix it. Edd could tell him, but from the constant thud of metal against metal echoing up the stairs, he knew Edd needed to stay below and help Myk bar the door. If Charlie could figure out how to use the control module, he could send a message to Cid for help. Running a thumb over the keys of the module, Charlie knew he shouldn't risk trying. With all the bells and whistles included on that little device, it was just as likely Charlie would end up sucking him and Tracey through a portal into the vacuum of deep space.

"Charlie?"

Tracey's face was white with shock and fear. Any self-congratulatory feelings he'd had about remaining calm evaporated. Her life had been in the balance for much longer than his and she was holding herself together just as well as he.

She grasped his upper arm, her eyes widening, and he reached out to pull her into a hug. He was confused when, instead

of returning the embrace, she tugged on his arm hard enough to pivot his upper body around. He opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong, when he noticed her focus was through the window on the battlefield on the ridge. At the same moment his brain comprehended the sight, he also realized the commotion at the bottom of the stairs had stopped. All was quiet. So quiet, he could hear his own pulse hammering away.

The Stoneheads were clutching their square black heads with the rough-hewn slabs they used as hands. A few had fallen to their knees, their angular mouths open in a scream that, from this distance, Charlie couldn't hear. As he watched, a few more collapsed to the sand, kicking up more white powder all around them. The soldiers left alive were frozen in their battle stances, but all firing had stopped.

Charlie felt someone at his side and turned to see Edd, out of breath and grinning.

"Fuck me, it worked," he said between gasps. He snatched the module from Charlie and his thumbs went to work at the buttons. "Cid's gonna be insufferable after this."

Now that he had a free hand, Charlie threaded his fingers with Tracey's and squeezed. Her face was lit with the same glorious smile that had greeted him the night he opened his door to her standing there in her plaid pajamas—right before she leapt into his arms and kissed him.

His smile grew at the memory as he watched the last of the Stoneheads fall to the sand.

"Shit," said Edd.

Charlie saw him do the universal "work damn you" shake and slap to the control module. "What's wrong?"

Edd pushed a few more buttons. "I was sending Cid the go-ahead to give the instructions to the other bases and the thing just went blank."

"Did the message go through?"

"I have no idea."

At that moment, Myk bounded up the stairs. "What the hell is happening?" His dark gray T-shirt was black with sweat.

Tracey pointed out the window. "It worked. The Stoneheads are dying."

Myk shook his head. "I figured that out. But something else is going on. I heard the goons through the door say something about a module failure then they ran off."

Charlie tipped his head toward Edd. "His went blank."

"No fucking way," said Edd under his breath. "Look at this, Myk." Edd held his module up so Myk could read the screen.

Myk's eyes widened and he snatched the module from Edd. "You know what this means, right?"

Charlie glanced at Tracey, but she just shook her head. "What's going on, guys?" he asked.

Edd was laughing now, holding one clawed hand over his eyes. "I should have known why he wanted to do the technical crap instead of seeing all the action."

Myk dropped the hand holding the module and shook his head. "This will change everything."

That was when the alarms sounded again.

Chapter 42

Edd had just composed himself enough to try and explain what had happened to the control modules, when six Level Sevens charged up the stairs. All of them brandished the same revolver-like weapon Charlie had seen strapped to the thigh of the female Level Seven who abducted him. If Hordts used a similar camouflage on their weapons as they did their other gadgets, Charlie guessed the gun fired something much different than a standard .44 caliber bullet.

The Level Sevens herded them out of the tower at pace close to a jog and back toward the building they'd left earlier. The tarmac and the courtyard swarmed with Hordts running in all directions. The wailing alarms were periodically interrupted with frantic voices over loudspeakers barking orders—something about a dock. It was chaos. He thought everyone would have been celebrating the Stoneheads' demise, but whatever happened with the control modules must have been top priority now.

Still at gunpoint, they entered the building and rode the elevator down. It was so crowded, Charlie could barely move and he could only see the top of Tracey's head from where he stood at the back of the car. When the doors opened, they were all pushed forward and after a few steps, Charlie recognized where they were.

The Level Sevens ushered them down a narrow hallway past the cell he'd been locked into only moments after arriving on the planet. How long ago was that? Ten hours? More? And Tracey had been here even longer. He wondered if it would hurt

when the radiation started eating away at his cells. Maybe execution was the more humane option.

The room they were shoved into was bare except for four metal chairs lined up against the far wall. One of the Level Sevens pointed and said, "Sit." He then walked out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Myk strolled over to the first chair and collapsed onto it, tugging his sweat-soaked shirt away from his chest. "What now? An interrogation?"

Edd sat next to him. "No. They would've put us in separate rooms. This is something different."

Charlie led Tracey over to the chairs and they both sat, her next to Edd. Before any of them could say anything else, a Level Seven burst through the door, pistol in hand, followed by a woman. To Charlie, she looked like the Hordt version of an evil queen from a Disney movie only in a gray power suit instead of a gown and cape.

"Saf," said Edd as he sat up straighter in his chair. "You have to make sure that the other bases know—"

"Enough!" Saf held up a slender hand then dropped it to her side. She paced the room like a caged animal, her black heels clicking on the metal floor. "Human *volunteers* have been acquired at each base and early reports indicate the Stoneheads are dropping just as they did here. Should only be a matter of time before they realize they are defeated and the ships leave our orbit." She stopped pacing and faced him. "The question is, did you know all along this would work? Is that why you brought the human woman here?"

Tracey popped up out of her seat, fists clenched at her sides. "They brought me here to save me! Your goon squad was going to kill me just for trying to figure out how to get rid of that idiot you sent to invade my life!"

Charlie patted her arm and he saw that Edd was reaching out to do the same. She shook them both off and took a step forward. "Now that I've helped to save your asses, are you still going to kill me?"

Saf's lips thinned and curled in what could possibly be considered a smile. Her voice was smooth and calm. "Fearless

little thing, aren't you? But, if you weren't, you wouldn't currently be in this situation. To answer your question, no, we have no plans to kill you or your friend." Her smile dissolved and she gestured to Tracey's chair. "Now, please, return to your seat."

Tracey hesitated, but stepped back and sat down. Charlie placed his hand on her knee and she clutched it.

"So, Edd," said Saf, "can you please answer my original question."

Edd cleared his throat. "No, we pulled Tracey through the portal before the Stoneheads attacked, as she said, to save her life. Cid crafted the entire plan after seeing the reports of the attack on your office terminal."

"Wrong!" Saf held up her hand again. "A supervisory committee formulated the plan and was entirely responsible for carrying it out and notifying the other bases. Command Forces will arrive within the hour and that is exactly what they will be told. If asked, you will corroborate this story. In exchange you will all be allowed to live."

Charlie almost laughed. He wondered if the Hordts learned this type of government cover-up from us, or if we learned it from them. "What about Cid and Nel?"

Saf resumed her pacing. "That is a different matter. What he did to the control modules was sabotage. An act of treason. It delayed the missions to pull humans through the portal, putting lives unnecessarily at risk. Not to mention the resulting chaos."

"What did he do?" Charlie glanced between Saf and Edd.

"You didn't tell him?" Saf asked Edd.

Edd shook his head. "Didn't get a chance before you hauled us out of the tower. And I only know the mechanics, not what happened after."

"We're still doing damage control for what happened after," said Saf.

Charlie slapped his forehead and groaned. "Are all Hordts genetically incapable of answering a direct question?"

Tracey nodded. "I know, right? What is with that?"

Both Edd and Myk bit back smiles. Saf cut her eyes to them and they straightened up.

"Cid," said Saf, "performed a forced reboot of every control module issued out of this base." At Charlie's wrinkled eyebrows she said, "While the modules are off-line, all functions are disabled including the spatial disruptor." Before Charlie could ask, she continued, "It's what makes us invisible to everyone on Earth except for the human we're assigned to."

"But wasn't everyone here fighting the Stoneheads?" asked Charlie.

Saf sighed. "Not everyone. About one hundred young recruits from this base were sent to Earth to continue collecting brainwaves. However, it appears resistance groups at the other bases learned about this little reboot maneuver and have already done the same. We estimate over five thousand of us were clearly visible to everyone on Earth for about three minutes, until the modules came back on-line."

Charlie thought about what all this meant. By now, pictures and videos of Hordts had gone viral on the internet. News stations were breaking into scheduled programming to report about the alien sightings. Then there were the poor "volunteers" snatched through the portal to help defeat the Stoneheads. Unlike any other alien abductee, they will be believed and lauded as heroes thanks to millions of eyewitnesses. The Hordts would now need to find a way to work with humans out in the open.

Cid was a member of the resistance for half a day and he accomplished a mission they had been planning for years. Edd was right, Cid would be insufferable after this. If he was allowed to live.

Myk said, "You can't convict Nel and Cid with treason. The resistance is big. There will be riots. And if you do, you can forget about me keeping quiet to Command about the plan that defeated the Stoneheads."

"Me, too," said Edd. "You'll have to kill me."

Saf waved a hand at them then pressed her fingers to her temples. "Your loyalty is moot at this point."

"Why is that?" asked Edd.

"Because, at the moment, we have no idea where Cid or Nel are."

Chapter 43

Cid opened his eyes and saw stars. They weren't arranged in any constellations he was familiar with, either on Odt or Earth. Scattered amongst the star field were comets suspended in mid-streak and small ringed planets. Each of the celestial bodies were perfect in their symmetry and emitted a uniform yellow aura. Tilting his head to the right, he saw a window. The curtains were pulled back revealing a clear night sky full of stars. Real ones. Not like the glow-in-the-dark stickers adhered to the ceiling of the dark room he was lying in.

He braced his elbows on the bed and attempted to sit up, but a flair of pain in his side forced him back down with a loud groan. A vertical line of light appeared to his left and it grew as the door opened wider. A figure darkened the doorway, not much taller than the doorknob, and hesitated for a moment before entering the room. It stood beside the bed and then a white light blinded him. Cid squinted and when his eyes adjusted he saw his visitor was a male human child. The boy smiled at him, blond hair glowing under the light of the bedside lamp.

"You wanna hear a joke?" asked the boy.

Cid was saved from answering by a human woman who rushed into the room and grasped the boy by the shoulders. "Leave him alone, sweetie. He needs his rest." The boy waved good-bye as the woman pulled led him out of the room.

This was all way too confusing to Cid's current state of mind and he contemplated just closing his eyes in hopes that everything made more sense the next time he opened them.

Then he saw a familiar face at the door.

"Welcome back," said Nel as she knelt next to the bed.

"Am I in hell?" Cid's throat was dry and the words came out in a croak.

Nel smiled. "No. Earth."

He groaned. "Even worse."

She took a glass of water from the nightstand and held the straw bobbing in it to his lips. He pushed the glass away and tried to sit up again, wincing at the searing pain, but not letting it stop him this time.

"You're so stubborn," said Nel as she gripped him under his shoulders to help him up, propping pillows behind him once he was settled.

After he caught his breath from the exertion, he took the glass of water Nel offered, plucking out the straw and dropping it on the nightstand. As he drank, he looked around the room at the shelves of toys and the matching rocket ship curtains and bedspread. "Where am I?" he asked, handing back the empty glass.

Nel sat next to him on the bed. "This is Norman's room. We were going to put you in the guest room, but he insisted you take his."

It took him a moment before the name registered. Norman was the kid Nel was assigned to. He looked at the nightstand and saw prescription bottles lined up next to the lamp. The kid is sick as hell and he gave up his bed to Cid. Go figure. Looking down at himself, he saw a wide, white bandage wrapped around his bare abdomen. Did Nel do that? He then remembered the mom and realized she was not only aware that there was a wounded monster in her son's bed, but she was supportive of it.

Nel giggled. "Trying to put it all together?"

Cid ran his hand over the bandage. "Yeah. And I'm rather embarrassed at how long it's taking me."

"You're still groggy from the pain killers."

He leaned his head back against the headboard. "Then explain it to me. But go slow."

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Cid thought back to the server room, laying on the cold concrete floor while he gave Nel instructions on how to reboot the system. He remembered watching her at the terminal, her back to him, then everything faded to black. "Did the reboot work?"

She nodded. "Just like you said it would."

"And connecting Chuck and Tracey directly to the antenna?"

"That worked, too. Edd's message got through right before the reboot. I sent the message to the other bases. Last I saw, the Stoneheads were as good as dead all over the planet."

Cid smiled. If he weren't a traitor, he'd get a medal. "What about here? What did Earth think about seeing a bunch of aliens suddenly pop out of nowhere?"

Nel cocked her head from side to side. "They didn't freak out as much as you'd think. It may have been the mental conditioning or the fact that a good ten percent of the population already knew about us. Government leaders are uncharacteristically calm. I think everyone was just ready for it to happen. It may be easier than we thought to work together out in the open."

"Should've recruited me to the resistance sooner." Cid attempted a laugh, but the pain cut it short. "So," he said with a sigh. "Million-dollar question. How am I still alive and snug in a human boy's bed?"

An emotion flashed across Nel's face that Cid couldn't define. All he knew is that he never wanted to see it again.

She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "You were unconscious on the floor. Dex was screaming at me to untie her, and a squad of Level Sevens was pounding on the door. I had a plasma pistol but knew it wouldn't be enough to stop them."

She paused and Cid folded his hand over hers. To his surprise, she wove her fingers with his and held tight.

"I still had your module," she continued, "so I pulled up your calculations from when you popped us into the hallway and I just reversed them and tweaked them a bit so we could pop from the server room to Earth."

Cid didn't care how much it hurt his side, he had to laugh. He brought the back of Nel's hand to his mouth and kissed it. "You, my dear, are brilliant."

She lowered her head and grinned. "I just pay attention."

"You popped us here from the server room?"

"No, I didn't want them to track us. I popped us miles away, smashed the module, and stole a car."

He didn't know which part of her statement to react to first. "You stole a car?"

"Yeah. It wasn't that hard. Rudimentary mechanics."

Shaking off the image of Nel as a car thief, he focused on the other issue. "And you smashed the module?"

"I had to. They'd be able to track us with it. And I knew that activating the self-destruct feature sends a signal to base." She looked panicked. "Was that the wrong move?"

They were fugitives, trapped on an alien planet with no way of contacting home. But destroying the module was the ballsy choice. It's what he would have done. He squeezed her hand. "No. It was the exact right move. What did you do next?"

"I drove here." She shook her head and smiled. "I don't know how well you know kids, but they're crap at keeping secrets. I had to reveal myself to Norman's mother early on or else they were going to send him to a psych ward. Luckily, she was calm enough about it. Especially when I told her that I could help Norman get better."

"You told her what?"

"His heart condition, it's treatable with medicine we have at home. I've been smuggling drugs to him and they've been working."

Cid felt all warm in his chest. He already knew he loved her, but now he felt an overwhelming sense of pride. "And all this time I thought you played by the rules."

"The rules were stupid." She tucked her hair behind one ear.

"And what about me?" He motioned to his bandaged middle.

"You have Rebecca to thank for that."

"Myk's human? The 'take me demon' chick?"

Nel rolled her eyes. "Yeah. I called her and she knew the number of a human doctor sympathetic to the resistance. The doc came over and patched you up."

Cid shook his head. "A human doctor? How did he know how to help me?"

"She. Wendy. The doctor is a woman."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Well . . ." Nel grimaced a little, then screwed up her face. Finally, she said, "It's Edd's human. He let the good doctor experiment on him."

"What?"

"She just drew some blood and took a few X-rays. Maybe an MRI."

"Why would he let her do that?"

Nel shrugged. "Um, it seems she let him *experiment* on her as well."

The way Nel said "experiment" made Cid very uncomfortable. Then very jealous. "That old dog!"

Nel laughed.

"Guys?"

Cid and Nel turned toward the door where Norman's mother stood.

"You may want to see this. Can he walk?"

Nel gave a wary look at Cid, but he ignored it. He threw off the covers, thankful that he was still wearing his trousers, and slid his legs off the side of the bed. When he leaned up in preparation to raise himself out of the bed, it was like getting shot with the plasma pistol all over again. He winced and clutched the sheets. Nel had stood and was staring at him with her arms crossed.

"I may need some help getting up," he said through clenched teeth.

She arched an eyebrow and gave him a self-satisfied smile. "Ya think?"

At that moment, Cid knew how everyone else felt when confronted with his sarcasm. He didn't like it.

Chapter 44

Cid's side ached from his Nel-assisted hobble down the hallway to the living room, but the images that flashed on the television helped to distract him from the pain.

In the six hours since the control module reboot, every major government on Earth, in cooperation with the United Nations, had declared the Hordts a benevolent species and were already in talks as to how Odt and Earth could mutually benefit each other. The initial panic caused by the sudden reveal of Hordts was gradually being reined in. The citizens of Earth were told to remain calm and await further instructions. For the first time in recorded history, the humans actually listened.

Nel sat on the couch next to Cid while Carrie, Norman's mother, cradled her son in the large recliner to their left. The flickering light from the television reflected off their stunned faces. It was incredible that a planet as large and fractured and powerful and paranoid as Earth would welcome an alien presence so easily. Way too incredible.

"Do you think . . ." Nel whispered to Cid.

"Absolutely," he replied.

Carrie shifted a half-sleeping Norman in her lap. "What?"

Cid turned to her. "My guess is that our government made sure one of us was assigned to every major political figure on this planet. Probably for decades. Our leaders denied any collusion but making friendly with Earth's most powerful only makes sense. Keep them aware of us and what we can do. Not to them, but for them."

"So, your people and our were prepared for something like this?" asked Carrie.

"Yeah." He glanced at Nel. "The resistance was, in a word, futile."

"Son of a bitch," Nel muttered under her breath.

Then, as if on cue, a bubble of air appeared, swirling a stack of Norman's crayon drawings around the room. Carrie clutched her suddenly fully awake son to her chest as the bubble burst, revealing three Level Sevens. Dex stepped forward, brandishing a smug grin nearly as deadly as the plasma pistol pointed at Cid's chest.

Chapter 45

Seven months later, Charlie sat on a velveteen couch in Rebecca's living room, Tracey by his side. Next to the fireplace, Myk and their host cuddled in a large leather chair, the Hordt absently twirling strands of her red hair around his claws. Edd sprawled on the floor leaning against the ottoman Wendy sat on while she kneaded his shoulders. The scene would have been oddly romantic, if it weren't for everyone's dejected expressions.

Both Myk and Edd had been issued passports with extended visitation visas so they could pop over to Earth whenever they wanted. The privilege was given to them as a gesture of thanks for their cooperation. Both considered it a bitter reward.

They all watched the celebrations and ceremonies broadcast by CNN on the television mounted above the fireplace. Currently, a representative from Odt was reading a poem, then there would be a musical performance by some pop star who looked less human than the actual visitors from another planet. Afterward would be the signing ceremony where Earth, as represented by the U.N., would sign a treaty with the delegates from Odt. Only seven months after The Great Reveal—as the result of the control module reboot was now known—an arrangement had been reached, granting Hordts all the brainwaves they could want in exchange for technical advancements beyond humankind's wildest dreams. Charlie didn't know about other countries, but the U.S. Congress was ecstatic, even though no weapons technology was on the table.

The atmosphere of cheer and goodwill did not extend further than the digitized image on the screen. While the leaders

from Earth and Odt patted themselves on the back for a peaceful resolution to a chaotic, history-making event, one doomed soul sat in a prison cell.

Edd took a sip of the boot-legged hootch he'd brought through the portal. "Shouldn't have trusted that bitch." He lifted the bottle up behind his head and Wendy passed it along.

Myk took the offered bottle and tipped it up. After wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he said, "Don't beat yourself up. We all thought they'd keep their word."

Charlie looked down at the full beer in his hand and set it on the side table. He couldn't imagine the guilt that Edd shouldered. Saf had promised that all charges would be dropped against anyone involved in the plot against the Stoneheads as well as the control module reboot. She assured everyone that the preservation of life on Odt canceled out any act of treason, which only resulted in an event the Central Government knew would happen one day anyway. It was with this assurance that Edd had told Saf about Nel's cooperation with Norman and his mother and that, more than likely, the boy's house was where Cid and Nel were holed up.

After Dex popped back through the portal with the fugitives in tow, Charlie and Tracey were dragged out of the holding cell and booted back to Earth. They were given no explanation or apology. Just deposited in Charlie's living room like nothing had ever happened. The Hordts may have developed technologies beyond human comprehension, but their communication skills sucked a bag of dicks. Tracey had released all her pent-up terror and anger by crumpling into a ball and sobbing off and on for an hour, followed by a long shower and then ordering her weight in Chinese take-out. Charlie had finished his third eggroll before wondering if this was just a stay of execution and if the radiation from Odt had ruined his chances of fathering children one day.

Weeks after, once the boil of chaos had reduced to a simmer, Nel popped through the portal to give Charlie an update. He could tell by her haggard expression that the news wasn't good.

"Cid's been made a scapegoat." Nel tossed her control module on the coffee table and collapsed on the sofa. "I got a full

pardon and a travel visa, but he got the book thrown at him." She gave a short laugh. "Jammed down his throat is more like it."

Charlie listened while Nel recalled how everyone involved in the resistance had their record cleared of any wrongdoing. Except for Cid. Central Government needed someone to answer for the breach in protocol, no matter what the eventual outcome. It was Cid who concocted the plans to save Tracey, to hook the humans up to the amplifiers, and to reboot the control module server. He would be the one to bear the full weight of the resistance's punishment under the law.

As Myk had told Saf, members of the resistance revolted against this injustice, but they were either bribed or threatened. Nel begged Myk and Edd to stand down and not fight the government. She'd already lost Cid, she didn't want to lose them, too.

"He hasn't been sentenced to execution," Nel said. "They want to keep him alive as some sort of example to parade around." She ran her claws through her hair, which looked like it hadn't been washed in days, then stood and picked up her control module from the table. "I should go."

Charlie stood with her. "Is there anything . . ." He didn't finish the question, knowing how stupid it was.

Nel gave him a weak smile. "You're a good guy. Cid likes you a lot, you know."

At his incredulous snort, Nel grasped Charlie's hand. "He does. And he'd never admit it, but I know he doesn't regret saving your life."

Charlie flinched at the memory, the sting just as sharp now as it had been all those months ago, and blinked to refocus on the television. Tracey squeezed his knee, but he didn't look at her, not wanting to see the worry that filled her eyes whenever she was around him these days.

Adjusting to the absence of Cid's constant presence was harder than he'd imagined. All the insults and sarcastic comments had become the background radiation of his life, and the silence without Cid was like the momentary nothingness between dimensions when traveling through the portal – a sickening void. The asshole's persistence had worn Charlie down, which was probably how Cid had formed most of his long-term relationships.

The thought made Charlie laugh and everyone turned their attention from the television to him. He smiled at the Hordt and human faces of his friends and said, "God, he was a son-of-a-bitch, wasn't he?"

Myk grinned and Edd held up the bottle of alien liquor like a tribute. "To Cid."

Charlie raised his beer and everyone else lifted their glasses or bottles. "To Cid," they all said in unison then took a drink.

In that moment, Charlie would have given just about anything to hear Cid call him Chuck one more time.

Chapter 46

The worst thing about prison, besides the food, was the boredom. Cid had no trouble finding outlets for his restlessness on Earth or in the entertainment zones on base or in the bunk of some willing member of the opposite sex. Confined to an eight by eight cell, he was reduced to counting the hairs on his head for fun. It was either that or curl up on his lumpy mattress and contemplate his own existence. Without the aid of mind-altering substances, contemplation was out of the question. He'd kill to have that bottle of melatonin tablets back.

He blamed the painkillers that Edd's human, Doctor Wendy, had pumped into his unconscious body for his lapse in judgment. When Dex popped into Norman's living room, he should have grabbed Nel and run. But Dex offered them clemency like scientists offer a seal carcass to a starving polar bear and Cid had snatched it up. Then, sure enough, he was tagged and bagged, but instead of a spray-painted number on his flank he had an ID code printed on his prison-issued coveralls. His friends, most importantly Nel, were alive and free, which would have been a grand consolation if he were the selfless type. But martyrdom fit him like a borrowed suit.

So instead of succumbing to his bitterness he entertained himself by counting his hairs one by one. After losing the count twice, he aborted the endeavor in favor of counting the number of times he could slam his head against the metal wall of his cell before passing out.

Concerned about permanent brain damage, he moved on to push-ups. Prior to being locked-up, he could do one hundred in a

session easily. After a time in prison, he could knock out over three hundred before breakfast. He'd developed an impressive set of guns, but without anyone to show them off to, they were useless. Cid would count anything - cracks in the ceiling, the thread count of his mattress, dust motes - anything but how many endless days he'd been contained. Finally, he figured brain damage wasn't such a bad idea and returned to counting in time to the rhythm of his head banging against the wall.

Just as he was about to set a new record, a voice spoke to him beyond his cell door.

"You're gonna make yourself stupid doing that, and girls don't like stupid."

He turned to the door but didn't see anyone through the bars. Then he heard the merciful clink of the lock disengaging and the creak of the cell door swinging open. A figure, covered by a hooded coat, darkened the doorway, then stepped inside his cell.

Cid got to his knees on his bunk and started to turn himself toward the wall, as was the protocol whenever a guard entered the cell, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him. He sat back down and looked at his visitor just as she removed the hood.

Nel smiled and sat next to him on his bunk. "Hi there, stranger."

For a moment, Cid wondered if his head-banging had induced a hallucination. Then he reached out and touched Nel's face, which was as solid as the walls that confined him.

"Nel?"

"Yeah, you idiot. It's me." She scooted closer to him and cupped his face in her hands. "How would you like to get out of here?"

Cid didn't know what to feel. He was grateful for the break-out and pissed that she would risk her own life to do so. How did she even manage to get this far? He knew he was under multiple layers of surveillance.

"You have friends in important places," said Nel, answering his unspoken questions.

Cid smiled. "I'm a lucky guy." He leaned forward until his lips were a breath away from hers.

Nel pulled back and grabbed his arm as she stood. "This is a prison break, not a make-out session. Come on, move it!"

Cid shook his head and groaned as he heaved himself off the bunk. "Where are we going?"

"Where do you think?" She pulled a control module from her pocket and thumbed at the buttons. "I'm getting pretty good at this portal manipulation stuff, by the way." After entering a few more commands she said, "Charlie will be so glad to see you."

Now he knew he had brain damage, because at the thought of seeing Charlie, a full, genuine smile stretched across his face. Cid draped his arm around Nel's shoulders as the portal bubbled up around them. "Yeah, I can't wait to see Chuck," he said. "The bastard still has my boots."

Chapter 47

Charlie finally did get a chair for his living room—an oversized leather number with matching ottoman—but he hardly ever got a chance to enjoy it. He didn’t enjoy anything much in his apartment lately, not since two aliens had taken to making out enthusiastically on every horizontal surface. And even some vertical surfaces. His fridge still didn’t quite close the way it should.

Not that he minded much. It was worth it to see Cid so happy. Well, to just see Cid at all, not that he would ever admit it to the bastard’s smirking gray face.

Two days ago, when Nel had popped into his living room with a bedraggled, yet surprisingly buff, Cid under her arm, Charlie was at once ecstatic and terrified. He couldn’t imagine how many laws, on both sides of the portal, that Nel had broken. While Cid took the longest and hottest shower known to human or Hordt-kind, Nel reassured Charlie that a hit squad wouldn’t be popping in with plasma pistols blazing.

“That isn’t to say that you won’t get a visitor asking some questions,” said Nel while fiddling with her control module.

Charlie had long ago determined that being vague was encoded in Hordt’s DNA, but that didn’t make it any easier to stomach. “Define ‘visitor’ and ‘questions,’ please.”

“There’s going to be an inquiry, but all evidence will point to Cid having fled to one of several resistance-friendly strongholds on Odt. A Level Six, a glorified investigator, will inevitably sniff around here just to make sure you don’t know anything.” She gave Charlie a pointed stare. “Which you don’t.”

Charlie rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Of course I don’t. But my story would be easier to sell if you hadn’t stopped by first.”

Nel shrugged. “Just say as little as possible, you’ll be fine.”

“But why wouldn’t the Level whatevs think this would be the first place Cid would go?”

“Do you remember Saf?”

The image of an evil queen in a power suit flashed in Charlie’s mind. “Yeah, she questioned us after the control module reboot chaos.”

“That’s her.” Nel leaned in closer. “It seems that she has a soft spot for Cid. I totally called it, but he will never admit I was right.” She grinned, shaking her head. “Anyway, Saf orchestrated the prison break and planted evidence that will leave the Level Sixes chasing their own tails. You will get investigated as a shot in the dark only and that won’t be for several days.”

“When they show up, I just play dumb,” said Charlie.

“Shouldn’t be hard,” said Cid as he walked into the room wearing a pair of Charlie’s boxer shorts and drying his black hair with a towel.

Charlie prepared to make a sarcastic rebuttal but held his tongue when he saw Nel drop her control module to the coffee table and walk over to Cid. She plucked the towel from his grasp and tossed it to the sofa then ran her clawed fingers through his damp hair. When her hands met at the back of his neck, she pulled his head down and crushed her lips to his. Cid wrapped his arms around her waist and clutched her close with the single-minded desperation of a drowning man. The kiss was sloppy and frantic and one of the most intimate things Charlie had ever witnessed first-hand.

When they surfaced for air, Cid said, “Hey Chuck, you may wanna make yourself scarce for a few hours.” Nel nibbled at his neck and must have hit a particularly sensitive spot because Cid gasped then groaned. “Or maybe a few days,” he growled as he hoisted Nel up over one shoulder and carried her giggling and kicking toward the bedroom.

Two days later, Nel received a head's up from Saf on her control module. The message gave her and Cid enough time to put their clothes on and call Charlie back from his exile at Tracey's. As he walked through his front door, he prayed he had enough bleach to eradicate all the Hordt bodily fluids from his apartment.

"The Level Six will be here later today," Nel informed him as she tugged on her jacket.

"We're going to check in with a few friends back home," said Cid. "And get me some real clothes." He looked down at himself. "I feel like an idiot."

Since all Cid had to wear was his prison-issue coverall, Charlie had loaned him a white oxford shirt and black pair of pants. He bit back a smile, imagining a black tie and backpack full of bibles with Cid's outfit. Turning to Nel, he said, "You look fine. As long as you don't start knocking on people's doors."

Nel's eyes went wide and she clamped a hand over her mouth, barely suppressing a snort of laughter.

Clearing his throat to keep his own laughter at bay, Charlie then said to Cid, "Have you heard the good news?"

Cid glared at both of them, flexing his claws at his sides. "I'll rip every shred of this off and go naked except for my boots." He pointed at Nel. "You know I will."

She stepped over to him and placed her hands on his chest. "Don't be such a big baby. We're just having a bit of fun."

The transformation when Nel touched him was immediate. He softened like warmed wax and pulled her into an easy embrace, kissing her on the forehead.

"Oh, man," Charlie said, shaking his head. "You are royally whipped, aren't you?"

Cid opened his mouth to speak, but Nel placed a finger on his lips. "Yes, he is," she said with a smile.

After they left, the first thing Charlie did was open all his windows and turn the ceiling fans on high. The apartment smelled like burnt chocolate chip cookies and sex. Next he stripped the bed and threw the sheets in the wash. Then he tackled the mess they left in the kitchen, which appeared to be the only room they had occupied other than the bedroom.

“Refueling,” he said to himself with a shudder as he threw away pizza boxes and empty bags of chips.

He’d just finished unloading the dishwasher when the Level Six popped into his living room. Charlie guessed it never occurred to any of the Hordts to pop outside his door first and knock to announce their presence like the civilized species they claimed to be.

“My name is Gil,” said the Level Six without offering his hand.

Charlie feigned surprise at the intrusion. “What’s going on?”

“No need to be alarmed. This is a routine visit prompted by a criminal matter on Odt.” Gil thumbed at his control module. “It is my obligation to inform you that this conversation is being recorded.” Gil was reedy and his skin was a very light shade of gray with darker splotches that made him look moldy.

“What kind of criminal matter?” asked Charlie.

“Regarding Omendaligcoricalistandis Cid.”

“Come again?”

“Omendaligcoricalistandis Cid. You just know him as Cid.”

“Thank god for that.” Charlie leaned against the kitchen counter and crossed his arms over his chest. “So what has he done?”

“Cid has escaped from a Central Government prison.”

“That doesn’t sound like him at all.”

If Gil detected the sarcasm, he didn’t let on. “Has Cid contacted you in any way?”

“No, I haven’t seen or heard from him since, well, you know. Since the shit went down.”

Gil raised an eyebrow. “You are certain you have had no contact with Cid or have any knowledge of his current location?”

“I’m certain.” Charlie heeded Nel’s advice and didn’t offer any details.

Gil didn’t break eye contact with Charlie as he said, “Do you mind if I take a look around?”

Charlie's heart rate revved into the red zone, but he concentrated on breathing normally. "Sure." He waved his hand in the air. "Have fun."

When Gil turned to inspect the living room, Charlie frantically tried to remember if Cid had taken his prison coverall with him. He didn't come across it in the bedroom, but he hadn't looked under the bed or in the closet. Following Gil down the hallway, Charlie prayed that Cid was still the clever asshole he'd always been and that Nel hadn't distracted him to the point of carelessness.

The bathroom earned a cursory inspection from Gil then he moved on to the bedroom. Charlie loitered in the doorway with his hands thrust in his pockets so he wouldn't fidget.

Gil pointed to the bed where stacks of folded towels and sheets were waiting.

"Caught me on laundry day."

"Your file did mention your compulsive tendency toward neatness."

Charlie stepped into the room. "I have a file?"

"Of course," Gil answered as he ran a finger over the dust-free surface of the oak dresser.

More than likely, this "file" was thick with Cid's acerbic observations and vulgar ranting. He had a morbid desire to read every syllable but feared it would result in the first documented case of attempted homicide of an undocumented alien—from space, that is—on planet Earth.

Gil tilted his chin up and inhaled deep through his nose. He then turned in a circle and sniffed the air again. The bottom fell out of Charlie's stomach. Damn the Hordts and their preternatural sense of smell.

Pointing at the closed bi-fold closet doors, Gil said, "May I?"

Charlie's mouth was too dry to form words, so he nodded in reply. Transfixed in his terror, he watched as thin gray fingers tugged at the round knob on one of the doors and slid it open. Gil stepped so far into the closet his chest almost collided with the clothes. He inhaled again then turned his head toward Charlie.

"Anything you want to tell me?"

There were a good three dozen things Charlie wanted to tell Gil, but he doubted the Hordt would appreciate the profanity. He hoped his silence projected an aura of disinterest, not the panic boiling within him.

Gil walked his claws along the shoulders of the hanging shirts then thrust his hand forward and drew his arm to the side, raking the hangers across the bar with a dull screech. He grasped the collar of the garment that caught his nose's attention and ripped it from the closet to hold it at arm's length in front of him.

“Care to explain this?” he asked with a self-satisfied grin.

Charlie fisted the insides of his pockets and clenched his teeth. It took every ounce of his self-control to not burst into relieved laughter.

“That,” he said after he was certain he could speak, “is a jacket I borrowed to cover myself after my friends broke me out of the brig. It should all be in my file.”

Gil examined the black uniform jacket that Myk had found at the security officer's station for Charlie to wear. Tracey must have hung it in his closet right after they were released back home, because Charlie would have washed it first.

“Right,” said Gil. “I seem to remember reading something about your attire when you were released.” He returned the jacket to the closet and cast a cursory look around the rest of the room. After a moment he tugged his control module out of his jacket and thumbed the keys.

Charlie would have felt sorry for the guy if his, and Cid's, life weren't on the line. He pulled his hands from his pockets and hooked his thumbs into his belt-loops. “So, are we good here?”

Gil didn't look up from his control module. “Yes. I think this will conclude my investigation.” At that, a bubble appeared around him and the air whipped around the room.

Charlie gave Gil a mock salute as the Hordt popped out of sight.

Chapter 48

Cid tossed his prison-issued coverall into the bonfire and grinned as the flames engulfed it, transforming the fibers into carbon and sending sparks spiraling into the clear night. He wove his fingers with Nel's and gripped her hand tight. A simple gesture that he vowed to never take for granted. He had quite a bit to not take for granted at the moment.

“The chaos has just begun,” said Edd, the flickering shadows from the fire accentuating the lines on his face.

Myk grunted a laugh. “Way to ruin a moment.”

Cid wanted to laugh, but he knew Edd was right. There were factions on both sides of the portal who didn’t want or trust the sudden alliance. The mass media on Earth was choked with wild conspiracy theories that now seemed totally plausible because if aliens existed and were having dinner with the President on the regular, then anything was possible. On Odt, resentment bubbled through the ranks, threatening to boil over if someone didn’t serve up an acceptable answer as to why they were lied to for so long, essentially wasting time and lives. The diplomatic circus paraded before the public on both planets was dangerously close to being trampled by the elephants.

“This is all uncharted territory,” said Cid, finding it hard to give a shit. “There’s bound to be quicksand and angry natives. At least you got your freedom.”

Myk poked at the fire with a long stick. “Kind of. Seems there was some fine print on our immunity papers. Central Government built in a way to use us.”

“Use you for what?” asked Cid.

“We’re not sure,” said Edd. “Saf is worried, though.”

Cid groaned at the mention of his former supervisor’s name.

“Hey.” Edd pointed a claw at him. “You owe that bitch.”

“I know, I know,” said Cid. “She’s my biggest fan.”

“She didn’t just spring you from prison. Her faith in the government was tarnished when they reneged on their promise to include you in the immunity deal. She’s the one that dug up the suspicious wording in our papers. Wording that could basically turn us into spies.”

Cid laughed. “Well you’ve already proved that you’re good at espionage. Not too surprising that they want you working for their team now.”

“Never gonna happen.” Edd shook his head and tossed a pebble into the darkness.

Myk cleared his throat. “That’s not all of it, though.” He gripped the stick he held so tight, his claws splintered the wood. “Some Level Nines visited me.”

The bonfire raged three feet in front of him, but a chill still crawled up Cid’s spine. “Nines are just a myth.” He looked down at Nel. “Right?”

She squeezed his hand tighter, saying nothing.

Myk continued, “They had a lot of questions about Rebecca.” The stick snapped in two and he threw the pieces into the flames. “Questions about our . . . relationship. It was disturbing, to say the least.”

Cid laughed. “You know they want you guys to breed human-Hordt superbabies!”

Myk looked mortified.

Cid continued, “If they can make a human that can survive on Odt or a Hordt with human brainwave patterns, then all their problems are solved. No more amplifiers, no more bases or Level Fours. Hybrids would take care of all that.”

“He’s right,” said Edd. “They insinuated as much regarding me and Wendy, but she can’t have children cause of some infection she got as a teenager.” He smiled and slapped Myk on the back. “Looks like it’s up to you and Rebecca to birth the answer to our continued survival.”

“Fuck for our future, Myk,” said Cid with mock solemnity.

Myk pushed Edd away from him. “Aw, shut up, both of you.” He turned his head away from the light of the fire, but not quick enough to hide his huge grin.

“Well, no matter what happens,” said Edd, “I’m retired. I got a nice pension and I’m going to find some quiet, secluded cabin in the mountains where I can get high and go fishing while the new world order sorts itself out.” He turned to Cid. “I’d offer to invite you, but I don’t know if there is a mountaintop secluded enough to keep you hidden for long.”

Before Cid could answer, Nel cleared her throat. “I think I have that covered.”

“Really?” asked Cid. “When were you going to tell me?”

“We were kinda busy,” she said, nudging him with her elbow. “Besides, I wasn’t sure until a few hours ago. When I got the message.”

“What message?”

“From the rover.”

Cid took a moment to process what her answer implied. Rovers were used to explore uncertain or unknown environments. Either she was taking him to the bottom of the ocean or . . . He looked at her, biting her lower lip and looking as innocent as she could fake. If his assumption was correct, then she was officially the best girlfriend in the entire universe. He pulled her hand to his chest so they could both feel his galloping heart. “Oh, Nel. Did you find a new planet?”

She nodded, giggling. “I think so.”

Myk stepped forward. “How the hell did you manage that?”

Nel pulled out her control module. “I had a conversation with a former module programmer. She told me that the nature of the dimensional portal is such that it wants to open where it will meet the least resistance. The more similar two planets are in atmosphere and mass and mineral composition all the way down to the quantum level, the easier it is for a portal to open between them.”

“I’ve never heard anything about this before,” said Edd. “Can you trust this programmer? Who is she?”

“Her name is Rin, and she’s the granddaughter of Avy, the first Hordt to open the portal. At ten years old, Rin probably already knew more about the portal and control modules than most university graduates. She worked with the government until a few years ago when she quit due to what she called ‘creative differences.’ She continued doing her own research, however, and was sympathetic to the resistance. When she found out who I was, she was eager to tell me what she had discovered.”

“A new planet?” Cid hadn’t been this excited since the day he first popped from the portal to Earth.

Nel laughed. “She showed me how it could be done with a few calculations and a lot of luck.”

“Seems like luck is on your side.” Cid released her hand and wrapped his arms around her.

“Seems it is,” she said, hugging him back.

“Woah, woah, woah,” Myk waved his arms as if to dissipate an offensive smell. “Are you saying you’re leaving? For good?”

Cid turned to him. “Well, until every bureaucrat on this planet who wants me to rot in prison is, themselves, rotting in a grave, my choices are limited.”

Myk began to voice a protest, but Edd stopped him. “Cid’s right. There’s no square inch on Odt or Earth that the Central Government won’t be looking for him. And a life on the run is no life at all.”

Cid clapped Myk on the shoulder. “I’ll miss you, too, you big idiot.”

“I hope they like assholes where you’re going,” said Myk, grinning like he was, indeed, a big idiot.

“Speaking of which,” said Cid as he turned back to Nel. “Tell me about this planet.”

She grinned at him. “It’s pre-industrial, sparsely populated, with plenty of natural resources and temperate zones where we could be comfortable and fed year-round.”

“We?” Cid hadn’t dared to assume that Nel would be going with him. He’d hoped, but he also knew how great a sacrifice leaving would be. “If you disappear, everyone will know you helped me escape. You’d be a fugitive, too.”

“Central Government knows that the best shot they have of finding you is by keeping an eye on me. My freedom is already compromised. I don’t want to be looking over my shoulder all the time. As Edd said, that’s no kind of life.” She linked her arm with his. “I’d rather go native on an alien planet with you.”

Cid wasn’t going to argue with her and, if he was reading her smile correctly, she knew it. In fact, he couldn’t think of a damn thing to say at all, so he opted for action over words and gathered her in his arms and kissed her like time had no consequence because the universe would wait for them forever.

Epilogue

It was a balmy, mostly-sunny afternoon in Cid and Nel's little corner of the planet they dubbed Steve 5. Their portable enviro-dome (smuggled from Odt along with other supplies that made "going native" actually bearable for two urban Hordts) overlooked a sandy bend in a wide, burbling river teeming with white-spotted fish the size of a large man's hand. Nel waded shin-deep into the current and scooped up half a dozen of the wriggling, flopping fish with a wide-mouth net, holding it at arm's length so she wouldn't get splashed. On shore, inside the dome, Cid set a pot of water on the solar stove and got to work chopping up a few root vegetables and greens they'd harvested from the lush, semi-tropical forest that the river meandered through.

This was the fifth planet they'd found using a jail-broke control module and some back-alley math. Each new discovery added fresh data to the equations, making it exponentially easier to find suitable planets. After Steve 3, they began popping over to their new worlds without sending in a rover to scout it first, although they did wear pressure suits just in case.

Nel carried the net-full of fish to the dome and dumped them into a white cooler just inside the doorway. Before closing the lid, she hooked her claws through the gills of two fish and carried them to the other end of the table where Cid was still chopping. She then slipped a hunting knife from the sheath on her belt and went to work gutting and scaling their lunch.

They didn't linger too long on any of the planets. They wanted to limit their impact on the native environments as much as possible and Nel was a little paranoid that somehow Central Government would find a way to track them. But those were convenient excuses. Truth was, they were both addicted to backpacking across the universe and could only sit still for so long before the itch to travel demanded to be scratched. After a few months of exploring, they would pack up their gear and open a portal to the next strange, new world.

Cid stirred the pot of simmering veggies as Nel dropped in chunks of the pink-fleshed fish to complete their soup. He had just set the lid on the pot when a raucous chorus of whoops and screeches erupted from the forest around them. Nel wiped her hands on a towel and they both walked out of the dome to investigate.

Steve 5 didn't yet have creatures evolved enough to form any kind of recognizable civilization. The closest thing the planet had to a humanoid population were large, black lemur-like animals with pointed ears and teeth and claws. They lived primarily in the trees and currently a troop of them were swiftly moving west, swinging and jumping from limb to limb while calling out either in fear or in warning. Cid and Nel watched the frantic group pass until a shadow fell over them and they looked up to see the source of the alarm. Blocking the sun as it cruised through the upper atmosphere was a slab of dark metal roughly the size of an elementary school. Then a barrage of smaller dark hunks of metal erupted from the sides of the slab like spores from a mushroom.

"Fuckin' Stoneheads," said Cid. He turned and went back to the dome, grabbing a bag and tossing necessities into it.

Nel followed him and began filling her own bag. "Their range is impressive. We're hundreds of light years from Odt. I wonder what star system they are from?"

"I can't imagine these bastards are *from* anywhere. They're sentient space rocks." Cid zipped his bag and hoisted the strap over his shoulder. "You found the coordinates?"

Nel had finished packing and was scrolling through her control module. "Yep. I hope he hasn't rearranged his furniture."

"Knowing him, not likely."

They stepped outside and Nel opened the portal. Cid looked at the proto-Hordts fleeing through the trees as the Stonehead ships rained down. Before the bubble closed, he called out to them, “Don’t worry, fellas! We’re coming back with reinforcements!”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.C. Adams is an adult human female living her best life in the wilds of the Florida panhandle with her superhero husband. By day she works at a small-town library and by night she goes home.