

WALK THROUGH FIRE

AMONG STARS

ANNA UDDING



By Anna Udding

A Second Life Among Stars
Walk Through Fire Among Stars

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental or unintentional.

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Cover design: Anna Udding

Cover images courtesy of PxHere

ISBN 978 9 4648 0416 4

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*To Eline Noorlag, Anouk van der Burgt,
Sander Groen and Larissa Boon.*

“Wat gebeurt er allemaal?”

WALK THROUGH FIRE

AMONG

STARS

PART ONE:



Smoke

ONE

GST ROBINSON-BLANKENSHIP, UNCHARTED

SPACE:

13 FEBRUUM, 307.3 SC

ANDEE DARK

Do you like your job?

This is a question I get asked everyday. Usually it takes the shape of: *Does it make you happy to take my credits when I have so little to spare? Or: Do you get off pressing me into the ground until I can barely breathe?*

Yes, I gladly pull someone to the side of the road and hand them an outrageously expensive speeding ticket. Surprised? What if I told you I do it in the hopes you will ease your foot on the pedal and the young girl biking down the poorly illuminated street ahead will finish her journey safely. And yes, there are also times where I have to get violent. Potentially against someone in an angry, confused, drunken or, worse, drugged state. I give and take those punches to protect my own life or that of my colleagues and fellow colonists. What people tend to forget is that before my cuffs

cut into his skin, before my knee ended up pressing into his back, before I cannoned into him with all my might, *before* all the cameras switched on, what they might not have seen, is an entire story of its own.

I am an officer of Cap Esmay Colonial Security (CECS), the gendarmerie responsible for the wellbeing and safety of all colonists on Cap Esmay Station. CECS officers risk their lives every time we don our bulky, black uniforms and the responsibilities that come with it. When people collectively run in one direction, we go against the current – diving headfirst into whatever it is they are running *away* from. We won't know what we'll find until we get there. For all we know it could be a person with a knife attacking innocent bystanders. And the worst thing? I *want* to run to the person wielding the knife. I want to feel what the risk and unforeseeability do to me – how adrenaline rushes through my veins when instinct and training take over, and how my mind screams *danger* at me, but my will tells me to soldier on.

Don't take me wrong – I don't have a death wish. Far from it. I want to come home to the people I love, and I want the same thing for every other colonist on this station. At the end of the day, *everybody* must come home. That is what I vowed to ensure.

That is my job.

But in the wake of that... I must admit the work can be as demanding as it is rewarding. I— *We* try our hardest, but sometimes that isn't enough. Sometimes we are too late.

Days.

Minutes.

Seconds.

And those moments are totally, utterly and irrevocably

disastrous. Unstoppable. Irreversible. A tide pulling back and growing into a tsunami from one minute to the next. Thinking back, I suspect I have lost as many people as I have saved, whether it be directly or indirectly. Today is one of those times: a moment where we have lost and our failure to protect and serve will cause irreparable damage to dozens of lives.

So what is my answer? *Do I like my job?*

At that thought my fingers clench around my *Rubik's Cube*, twisting the sides with lightning quick precision – solving it and then rearranging the colored tiles to solve it all over again. I don't have to think about it anymore. Up *click*, up inverse *click*, front *click*, left inverse *click*, over and over and over. I no longer experience the thrill of turning every face the same color, but the straightforward process is soothing. No matter how many times I take it apart, the end result will always be the same: it is broken; and I fix it.

Yes, I like my job. I *love* my job. I'm in the middle of everything, get to see everything, get to experience the kinds of things nobody else will. I wake up energized and revitalized by a single thought: let's catch some bad guys, bring the good guys home.

Cross *click*.

No, I don't like my job. I *hate* my job. I'm in the middle of everything, have to see everything, have to experience the kinds of things nobody else has to. I lie in my bed, rundown and broken, because of a single thought: I couldn't catch the bad guys, I couldn't bring the good guys home.

Corners *click*.

I think I cannot answer that question. Not really. It has to be posed differently, for his job isn't a matter of liking it or not liking it. Some moments you will and some moments

you won't. The real question is: is it worth it? Is the constant inevitable, devastating loss worth the unnoticed victories?

Click. Click. Solved.

I look down at the cube in my hands, each side returned to one color. When you first release one of these from their packaging it's just like this: clean, organized. But to enjoy the game you have to mix it up and move through the chaos until something clicks. Life is like that. Mine used to be shuffled pretty badly, but this job was my click.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath through my nose, hold it, and expel it slowly through my mouth. *Five seconds in. Hold. Five seconds out:* the mantra I've been relying on for years to offer me focus and control – to stay right here; in this moment. During these precious seconds I listen to the gentle hum of *Robinson-Blankenship's* engines, the buzzing overhead lights and the duo of pilots conversing quietly in their compartment. I feel the vibrations of the deck through the soles of my footgear and the warmth of the climate control that leaves me on the verge of sweating. I smell the faint scent of another officer's perfume: pink rose.

Five seconds in. Hold. Five seconds out.

As I reopen my eyes and catch my reflection against the viewport. I've tried to look my best despite my pager going off a meager three hours following a twenty four hour shift. I'd barely dozed off when it woke me with its insistent screeching. Get up. Up–up–up. My head was foggy and dazed – working on autopilot. Trousers on, vest on, belt buckled, gun holstered, beret folded to one side and then out I went with an alertness no ordinary human being should possess under those circumstances.

Judging by my reflection I fixed myself up adequately for the time I had. Certainly better than my Second, who had

showed up on the launch platform in a chic red gown and matching heels. The shade served as a perfect compliment to her black hair and bronzed skin. Indian and British descent, she told me once. But neither of the accents to go with it.

“Stop staring, Dark,” she’d snapped when she passed me on the boarding ramp. I followed her inside *Robinson-Blankenship*.

“I was not staring.”

“Yeah, you were.” She grinned. “And I’m flattered.”

“Get changed before someone sees you, Thatch.”

I thought it was a tad too revealing as it put her (probably intentionally, now that I think on it) very, very, *very* spicy underthings on display. I can imagine what her face looked like when she heard the same electronic scream I did. Not to mention the face of her latest bed partner.

I doubt I’ll find myself facing a similar conundrum any time soon. Not that I need a whole lot of time to prepare anyway. I only ever use a minimal amount of make-up, wear no jewelry of any kind, own precious few clothes besides my uniforms and my long, dark brown hair is per definition pulled back into a bun to keep it out of my eyes. It’s... practical. I’m not sure how else I could describe myself. It applies to me being able to reach the highest shelf at the supermarket and also that I look capable of single-handedly flooring another person – and possibly lift them over my head if I put my back into it. I’ve never thought of myself as beautiful or pretty. It’s not that I feel no vanity, everyone does to some extent, but I’ve stopped thinking of myself in that way a long time ago. No matter what I wear to boast my figure or how my hair encapsulates my face – believe me, I’ve tried – nothing can change that there will always be *one* thing people remember me by. *One* thing that leaves an

impression.

My eyes.

Not over their exceptional shade of blue, but because they don't line up in the same direction like they should. The affected side switches sporadically, but as a rule one of my eyes is focussed and the other spiritlessly drifts off towards the bridge of my nose. In other words: I have permanent cross-eyes – a birth defect that can best be compared to a gap between front teeth, an overbite or a cleft lip. Small things. Simple things. Things that won't impair. That is to say: not in any *physical* way.

I've grown used to falling outside society's celebrated definition of "normal", though. Someone helped me see myself differently: proud of what I braved through to get where I am and what I have accomplished. Still... Beautiful? Pretty? Not words I will ever use on myself.

But that is not what I came all the way out here for, of course. That book is closed.

One more time.

Five seconds in. Hold. Five seconds out.

I gather the courage to focus my eyes not on my reflection – seemingly standing inside the void, unbothered by the lack of gravity or breathable air – but on what lies beyond. More specifically the naked, frozen body floating stationary outside our hull, twisted and broken into pieces. I cannot even tell whether it is female or male. Its limbs hover in proximity to where they used to be attached like a dissected marionette and what I suspect are organs envelope it like liquid glass. The dramatic posing leaves the entire image looking like a macabre nineteenth century painting. Never have I seen anything like it.

Humans cannot survive in space, obviously. Not without

protective gear like an OBS suit or a thick hull like I am standing behind right now. Without, the unforgiving vacuum will suck the air from your body, you'll bloat to balloon-size and your tongue and eyes will boil. You'll be conscious for approximately fifteen agonizing seconds before dying a minute later of asphyxiation. Shortly thereafter you'll burn to a crisp if you're close to a sun or be nothing more than an ice sculpture so fragile the slightest touch will break you apart. You can remain in that state for millions of years, actually.

Unless a Navy vessel runs into you. Literally.

I see another person walking up behind me against the viewport's surface and slip my *Rubik's Cube* into a pocket of my vest.

"Is this everything they could recover?" I ask without turning, posing the question to Colonial Security Lieutenant Riese Thatcher's grim-looking counterpart in the viewport, her red gown now exchanged for a freshly pressed service uniform.

"Yes, Sir," she replies, snapping off a salute. "Ma'am" simply never emitted the same authority as "sir" and within the ranks of CECS, the honorific has become interchangeable.

At my "at ease", Thatcher leans her back against the viewport, tilting her head to look up at me rather than the dismembered corpse. When we're out of earshot – or when our comrades *think* we are anyway – they refer to us as Han and Chewy due to our almost comical size difference. Where I hit one ninety meters bare footed, Thatcher can be happy coming up to my shoulders in heels. As a child she was frequently given a hard time over her length, or lack thereof, but in response the instigator would soon meet the

end of her manicured fist.

Thatcher grew up in a family of all older brothers. (Yes. Plural.) Despite the tight laws on population control she has two of them. Thatcher had been a bit of an accident, a happy accident, but an accident nonetheless. The colony stations have only so much room and can take only so much weight. As a general rule Cap Esmians couldn't care less whether you're female or male, what your age is, your sexual preference, color of your skin, the accent you speak in... As long as you pull. Your. Weight.

Literally.

And that, for the record, goes both ways. If you're not doing your part: nothing matters. And so, as a literal third wheel, Thatcher was pressured to defend her very existence from the day she was born. But never to *change* herself. Riese Thatcher became the type of little girl who'd go out playing soccer wearing a glitter fairy costume (With wings! I've seen the adorable pictures that prove it.) and had her action figures team up with her princess dolls to fight evil. It's women like her who prove you can be a respected CECS officer *and* have a distinctly feminine presence. Now Thatcher is someone I would define as beautiful.

"I just got off with forensics," Thatcher continues, pushing a lock of raven black hair behind her ear. And yes, the color of her nails indeed matches the dress and heels she wore earlier. "They mentioned something I hadn't even thought about: we don't have just X and Z to consider. There's a pretty steep Y-axis too."

No up or down in space. Again I take a deep breath; let it out slowly. "Understood, Lieutenant. Anything else?"

"We've got ourselves an impatient pathologist. They're on their way here now with *Barton* to pick up the last of the...

the pieces. One of their specialists will take care of coupling the ships so we can attend the preliminary. Sir.”

I nod once. One of the Navy’s exploratory vessels had discovered the body on their voyage home, but not before drifting into it – scattering remains all over in big, frozen chunks. Forensics has been on an egg hunt for the past eight hours, assembling what they could find in front of our ship. “Thank you for taking their ping, Lieutenant. Sounds like a plan.”

Thatcher studies me with narrowed, gold-brown eyes – recognizing the deliberate pacing of my breathing for what it is. “What’s your take on outer space, Sir?”

I blink at the sudden question that is clearly meant to take my mind off things. “Come again?”

“I mean, it’s really difficult for me to picture little girls and boys dreaming of coming out here. Space might seem kinda magical from down there, but up here it’s pretty boring. And back then this stuff was actually *dangerous* too. They put themselves in mortal danger just to see some empty, lifeless dustball up close. While I’m glad – praise our ancestors for their sacrifices and all that – I’m also surprised we ever made it this far.”

By “this far” she means a human kingdom spanning across the stars. As of today there are nine settlements in the void: three space stations, three outposts, two planets and, obviously, one moon – though the latter functions as more of a solar farm so Earth could break down the shiny blue mirrors and white propellers that took up most of western Europe and the Northern Sea. Talk about irony...

The colony I call home is Cap Esmay Station and coincidentally it marks the edge of human occupied space. It’s easy to forget you’re surrounded by vacuum, though,

when artificial gravity keeps you grounded, insects zoom around your ears and a sun in a cloudless sky warms your face. I like to think of Cap Esmay as a snowglobe: a big structure enclosing a mini-Earth with towns, cities, landscapes, characters... But don't shatter the fragile glass encasement – or hull in this case – or it will all be gone in seconds.

I decide to indulge my partner. “I find there is beauty in space. Way back when it was the greatest mystery for humanity to conquer. It still is, in fact.”

“Conquer,” Thatcher ponders. “Do you mean to imply you think there're others out there? Little green Martians in flying saucers?” she teases.

I glance at her. “Little and green? I suppose they might be. Flying saucers? Only if they advanced slower than us. And Martians? Definitely not. *We* are Martians.”

“Right. Another dustball with less than nothing on it we just *had* to visit.”

“They have turned it into a beautiful planet.”

“You've been to Mars?”

“Brochures. But to answer your question: do I believe there are intelligent life forms other than ourselves out there? Yes, I do. I think it is selfish to expect otherwise.”

She grins widely.

“What?”

“You're not saying aliens could be involved in this...?” All I need to do to break her off is raise my eyebrow. I've reached the rank of master in that regard. “Oh, no. Don't get coy with me, Dark. It crossed your mind too!”

“*Too*, is it?” I stifle a snort – for the most part – and let my eyes drift back outside the hull. Thatcher turns around as well, forcing herself to face the body for the first time since

she walked up to me. She sighs with a shudder.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“No,” she says plainly, but truthfully. “Still gotta get used to this.”

I shake my head. “You will never ‘get used’ to this.”

“Then how do you deal?”

My lips curl into a rueful smile. “You do not. The best we can do is distance ourselves in the moment and focus on doing our job to the best of our ability. Just be mindful you can only delay the hit. It has to come out eventually. Sometimes in ways you do not expect.”

Thatcher rests her eyes on mine a little longer than necessary. I should have known it would only be a matter of minutes before she would bring it up. “Are *you* okay? I can imagine a frozen body digging up some bad stuff for you.”

“Commander Dark?”

We turn at the voice. I remain unused to the new title preceding my name – I don’t quite feel like it belongs to me.

“Report, Officer Spaeder.”

“Sir,” he replies with a salute. “*Barton* has arrived. She’s ready to dock at our portside airlock and will only need your signature.” I take the pad he offers me and press my thumb down on it after vaguely skimming the fine lining. “Thank you, Commander.”

“Look...” Thatcher picks up when Spaeder departs. “I’m just saying that if you wanna talk or vent or something... I’m here for you.”

I lift my beret to weave a hand through my hair. I must admit I had begun to draw comparisons between the two incidents. I cannot believe it has been over a standard year since I stood on Bay A24. Drenched in artificial rainwater, I was dwarfed by the massive colony starship *Arcade*. She

had made the one-way trip from Earth: the same planet that I called home in a past life. We expected *Arcade* was a ghost ship, and for the most part she was. Onboard we found three hundred-forty one frozen dead bodies inside their respective stasis capsules.

But that's not the parallel I've drawn here.

During the investigation we discovered a lone survivor, someone I once knew, had mercilessly jettisoned two people into space to save her own hide. One of them may even have been alive at the time – dying a quick but agonizing death. The Central Earth Government never did find the bodies of Merilla Carston or Ezra Schneider in Earth space, and not for a lack of trying. They must still be out there: drifting aimlessly like the one out here.

I shake it off – for now. It will get to me, and when it does I know what to do. I smile down at Thatcher. I've been told I smile crooked, but that asymmetry adds to my charm. Luckily for me, I have a lot of that going on. “Thanks, Thatch. I think I might like to ventilate for a bit when we are done here.”

Her shoulders drop down from her ears, relieved and satisfied with my answer I am sure. “I'll bring the snacks.”

Reluctantly, I turn back to the viewport. “I hope we can recover the body without doing more damage. It looks to be in an exceptionally bad state.”

“I think...” Thatcher voices carefully. “I think that any evidence will be long gone by now. Sir.”

“I am not worried about evidence,” I say, cocking my hip and crossing my arms over my chest. “Say we cannot ID it through the database. Facial recognition seems like a poor bet, so it will have to be prints or the serial of an implant. If neither turns out to be useful, we must find a next of kin

through media outlets and have them identify the body..." I shiver. My new epaulets hadn't yet felt this heavy. "Nobody should have to see their loved ones like this."

A sudden mechanical buzz causes us both to whirl around. The airlock is cycling.

"That'll be the specialist from *Barton*," Thatcher says.

"Punctual. I like them already."

We walk over there, assuming our paraderest by default, and wait for the doors to whoosh open. I slack my posture immediately when I see a familiar face, grinning from ear to ear. It seems even the thought of *Arcade* can turn memory to flesh.

"LT! Was hoping to walk into you again. How've you been?"

Instinctively, I back away at the enthusiasm, but also cannot help but smile at it. "Never better."

Lead Technician Christian Hoffman looks me up and down. "What's happened to you?"

"It has been a long day," I explain, brushing imaginary frozen skin flakes and other human tissue off my uniform.

"No-no. Not that. I meant these!" He pulls at my left shoulder board. "Way to go, LT. Or should I say *Commander*."

"'Andee' works fine. I recall us agreeing on a first name basis last time we saw each other." We take a step to the side to let another specialist through.

"Right," he says. "Short for 'Adrienne', yeah? Who came up with that anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's cute, but... if we're talking linguistics you're not using the appropriate diminutive form. Creative, though."

My voice sounds more defensive than I mean it to. “It was on the spur of the moment. I liked it so that did not matter to me.”

“Can’t argue with that. So who was it?”

“Who was what?”

“The one who first started calling you that.”

“My...” I’m never entirely sure what to say. For simplicity’s sake, and as not to raise a million questions, I usually refer to her as: “My mom. My mom came up with it.”

“That’s nice.”

“Commander Dark?” Spaeder asks from behind me. “Pardon me for interrupting again, Sir. Forensics are about to recover the body and the pathologist has requested your presence at the preliminary. If you could sign this off real quick...”

I study the pad he hands me, my thumb hovering over the approval button. I look up sharply. “Our pathologist is Dr. Briar Rose Stevens?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Something in my face must have changed, because Thatcher asks, “What’s wrong? Is she bad?”

I shake my head and press my thumb down on the pad so Spaeder can move on. “On the contrary. She is one of the best on Cap Esmay. Probably beyond.”

Thatcher looks at me through narrowed eyes. “Then why are you—?”

I glare at her. “I did not expect to see her here. In fact—” I eye Hoffman. “—I did not expect to see you here either. I thought you worked with colony ships exclusively.”

“Keyword ‘worked’. I’m on your team now! After *Arcade* I was recruited to lead a new team of forensic engineers.”

“Congratulations. Your efforts made a huge difference during *Arcade*’s investigation.” A hint of red rises to his cheeks. I decide not to press him further. “Where are you headed, Chris?” I add.

“Silent-AI main station, as always, for a proper handshake between the ships.” He points in its general direction. “Which is at the pilot’s compartment—”

I block him with a shoulder when he attempts to walk past me. “Try to avoid the viewports. Trust me, you do not wish to see what is out there unless you have to.”

His tan complexion turns pale at the thought. “Don’t need to tell me twice. Oh! I’m meant to warn you *Barton*’s kept pretty frosty. I guess you could say *Arcade*-frosty. You two didn’t happen to bring a scarf, did you?”

“No need.” I beat my fist against my uniformed chest. “Your tax credits at work.”

His eyes wander over me appreciatively. Not in a sexual way – he’s aware he’d be barking up the wrong tree – but with the keen eye of a lover of innovation. “Nice. I’ll be seeing you then, Commander.”

“Mr. Hoffman.”

He nods at Thatcher, who gives him a radiant smile in return.

I motion for my partner to join me in the airlock and rock back and forth on my heels, waiting for it to seal. I give the viewport another glance. One of the forensic specialists drifts past, rigged up in an OBS suit that is tethered to their ship. It won’t be me going out there this time and I really don’t mind.

The specialist pushes himself over to the cluster of body parts and slowly, carefully secures the anchor around the remains of its torso so it can be lugged toward the ship. But

when the line pulls taut I cannot help but wince. Before the airlock door closes, I can just see the neck cracking apart at the force, severing the head. It's revolting and I have to work very hard to control my gag reflex.

"So what was that about?" Thatcher asks from beside me. She must have strategically been looking in another direction than I was.

"What was what about?" I ask after swallowing my own bile.

"With the pathologist."

"Nothing." I aim for casualness, but terror is the best I can manage. "We just have a little history."

She narrows her eyes. "What kinda history?"

Please work faster, I beg the technology, but the process takes notoriously long.

When I hesitate to answer she asks, "Is it Shelley Wright type of history?"

"*What?*" I physically recoil at the idea. "*No!* No, it is not like that at all. Please, gawd, never again."

The lights stop blinking and I hurl myself out of the airlock before the doors have fully whisked open. Hoffman wasn't exaggerating about the temperature. It takes my breath away and though my uniform is indeed properly insulated, I can feel the ice cold settle on my exposed face. I nearly stop dead in my tracks.

The deck officers come to attention at the sight of us, saying, "Commander. Lieutenant."

"Deck officers," I reply and unsurprisingly I'm able to see my breath. "Is *Barton* still flagging this region?"

"Yes, Commander. But no joy, so to say."

I nod. Not only are they looking for pieces that belonged to this body, I also asked them to keep an eye out for more.

We're in the perfect dumping ground after all.

"Where may we find Dr. Stevens?" I ask.

He directs a hand. "Down this hall and to the right, ma'am."

"Thank you." I wrap my arms around my chest, glad to be moving. *Barton* uses the outside temperature to maintain the morgue so as to not "waste" any power. Even though it's no colder here than a simulated crystal-white winter on Cap Esmay, deep space cold cuts through marrow and bone like no snowstorm can.

We step inside the compartment the deck officer indicated, though I needn't have asked. Everything from storage to restrooms has been neatly cataloged on the walls. The light inside the morgue is extremely bright, bouncing across the highly reflective surfaces of the deck and bulkheads. Freezing capsules for bodies are installed in the walls and the one nearest me is pulled out like a drawer. Empty, because I find its soon-to-be-occupant displayed on the examination table, bathing in two overly bright ceiling lights. It's uncomfortably similar to an actor on stage. And bend over this Jane or John Doe is Dr. Briar Rose Stevens. She hasn't changed since I saw her last. Same slender body, same shiny and straight auburn hair, same thin, penciled eyebrows, and the same carefully assembled attire. The prescription glasses are new, though. Oval: the recommended shape for people with angular faces. The glass inside the frame catches the light when she looks up at us and I must admit the instant look of recognition is as unexpected as a kick in the teeth.

"Andee?" she says in her modulated voice. "Gosh, wow. It's been a long time. How are you?"

I press my lips into a thin line, unsure of what would be an

appropriate answer. She deserves better than an *I'm fine*, but for lack of a better explanation that's exactly the throwaway response I give her.

Thatcher steps forward, hand outstretched to – who is without a doubt – the most intriguing person on this side of space to her. “Hi. Lieutenant Riese Thatcher.”

Briar removes her right-hand glove, offering me a glimpse at the ring on her finger. Now that is definitely new. She surprises Thatcher with a firm grip – which does precious little to wipe that grin off her face.

“What is their name?” I ask.

Briar follows my gaze to her ring and holds up her hand, smiling. “His name is Mace. We've been together for five years next month.”

“That is wonderful. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” She snaps on a new pair of gloves. “Shall we get started?”

“Please.”

“Record on.” The pad she's left on a tray behind her flickers to life to record her every word and action. Briar crosses to the body, shattered like an ancient Roman statue, but reassembled as far as that had been possible in this short time.

“It must be stated the victim's head was, unfortunately, severed from her body during the recovery process.”

“Her?” I ask, still unable to see it.

“Yes. There are too many fragments to put her head back together again, so I am running digital facial reconstruction should we need it.”

This is exactly what I'd feared. Parents, siblings, friends... trudging across the heavily sterilized medical examiner's office – all the while hoping their requested presence is a

mistake.

“Why do you think we might need reconstruction?” I inquire.

“No teeth were found at the scene, so no dental records. I detect no implants or medical aid devices either... That leaves only one other option.” Carefully, ever so carefully as to not break it off like a twig, Briar takes prints from the single suitable finger to compare to our database. “If you’ve ever picked up on what praying was, now is probably when people would have done that sort of thing,” she mumbles. “I’ll let it run in the background. We’ll know in a few minutes.”

“What can you tell us about her?” I ask, indicating the body.

“Female. Approximately in her late teens. Blonde. Caucasian. Her height I estimate at one-sixty to one-sixty five. As you can see a lot of her is missing, but parts of the remaining fragments have turned black and hard. You can see it especially well on the toes and calves here.”

I cock my head. I’ve seen a great many corpses throughout my career and generally I observe with professional distance, but for this instance I pride myself on not fainting or throwing up. “Did she burn herself?”

“It’s difficult to tell with the state her body is in.”

“Could it be frostbite? From space?”

“Maybe,” she says vaguely. I elect not to press her on it. I know how much she despises theorizing.

“Have you determined the time of death?”

“Considering the body is frozen solid, we know she’s been dead for at least twelve to twenty-six hours.” She looks up at us over the rim of her glasses. “That’s the minimum – the maximum is infinite and thus will be impossible to

determine. In theory, she could have been out here since before any of us were even born.”

“Cause of death?” I venture, even though I have my suspicions.

Briar circles the body, rarely touching or moving a piece as if it’s an ancient relic. “In addition to the aforementioned blackened surfaces, I detect bruising on her arms, legs, collarbone and midsection. They might resemble defensive wounds to you, but the swelling and bruising can also be caused by the formation of water vapor beneath the skin or gas bubbles in the bloodstream. Either way, it does not look fatal. I will have to open her up to determine the cause of death, but considering the damage and circumstances it’s very possible she died from exposure to the vac. But let’s not risk making more assumptions.”

Thatcher swallows audibly beside me. “You mean she might’ve been alive? When they dumped her?”

Just like Ezra Schneider on Arcade. A chill runs down my spine.

Briar takes off her glasses, twirls them between her fingers while keeping her steady gaze on Thatcher. “I need to open her up to know for sure. Gas bubbles in the bloodstream would suggest blood flow...”

“A heartbeat,” I figure.

She shoves her glasses back on. “Precisely.”

I narrow my eyes. “Does that mean blood is not at all affected by exposure to vacuum?”

“The circulatory system remains mostly unaffected. It is only deoxygenated.”

“Then can you run a tox screen and determine whether she had taken, or was given, a type of legal or illegal drug?”

A nod. “Back on station, yes.”

“Because if she did, she may not have been conscious at the time—”

Her pad chimes for her attention. “Record pause,” she mumbles, picking it up from the tray.

“Is there a match?” I ask hopefully. Desperately.

“It’s your lucky day, Commander.” She hands me the pad. “Though it won’t feel like it.”

Reluctantly, I inspect its screen and am greeted by a picture of a young woman with long, blonde hair that’s nearly white. She has green eyes and a soft, round face. She looks happy in the image, exposing her straight, white teeth with a smile. Her name was Leeva Schacht. Born on Cap Esmay Station on 5 Janus 262.7 on the spatial calendar, which would make her aged forty-one to date.

I lower the pad, focussing my eyes on the crumbled, decapitated mess on the examination table I cannot even assign a gender to, and grab my own pad. Within seconds I find the name “Leeva Schacht” associated with a missing persons report.

“She was reported missing by her mother in 277.6 SC,” I say to no one in particular. “That is twenty-two years ago.”

“She was nineteen,” Thatcher calculates, checking out Briar’s pad. I ignore the discreet gasping sound she makes as her eyes dart between the past and present versions of Leeva Schacht. She covers her paling face with her free hand, keening a little.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I need some air,” she gasps.

I decide not to point out that fresh air will be hard to come by out here. “Go ahead, Lieutenant. Do whatever you require.”

“Sorry,” she mumbles as the door hisses shut behind her,

leaving me alone with Leeva Schacht. And Briar, subsequently.

“I reckon there is precious little you can do from out here?” I ask.

Briar nods her head. “I’ll conclude the preliminary shipboard, but a proper exam will have to take place on-station. And even then... It’s just not much to work with. I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

I sigh deeply and rest my hand on my sidearm, tugged inside its thigh holster. Briar smiles at the movement.

“Not the answer you were hoping for, huh?”

“Sorry. I was thinking about all that is coming.” I thumb my new epaulets.

“Your circus,” she gathers.

“And there certainly are a lot of monkeys,” I admit, nodding my head at the examination table. “Just under twenty years old. Her family...” I shake my head, fearing that uttering the words will break my composure. Heartbroken won’t even begin to describe what they’ll be, digging all this back up.

“You sure you’re okay, Andee?”

“I will be,” I reply, sounding more confident than I feel. “Have you ever worked with bodies from deep space before?”

“Once or twice. Accidents with salvaging or maintenance spacecraft. Mechanical or human error, mostly.” She glances at the body. “Not whatever this is, though.”

“Well, if there is something to be found out, I am confident you will.” I jab my thumb at the door. “I should check on my lieutenant.”

“Right. But... Just a second.” She draws the opaque screen closed, separating us from Leeva Schacht. I frown at the

action. “Andee, I know this isn’t the time or place, but I just want to say that I think—... That you—...” She takes a breath to get her thoughts straight. “You look amazing. A little gray in the face – like I said, not the right time or place – but I’m seeing a different look in your eyes. A stronger one.”

That makes me smile, despite the circumstances. And, fleetingly, I remember how she made me smile all those years ago. Not to mention how she made me feel.

Her hand inches towards me. When she sees I don’t immediately cringe, it lands on my shoulder. She squeezes tightly so I can feel the gesture through my vest. “Thank you.”

I frown. “What for?”

“For letting me do this.” She tracks her fingers down my arm until they link with mine. “Go to your lieutenant. She needs you.”

I straighten my posture and gently pull my hand out of hers. “We will come right back.”

Briar nods and turns away with a certain relief radiating from her, as if she finally found the closure she was looking for. For me, as it used to, her touch lingers all the way out the door. First the contact felt sort of exhilarating, but then it quickly mutated into that familiar burning heat. The kind that completely destroys the skin wherever it comes into contact and leaves every inch of me hurting. Everybody tells me I look better and I *feel* better. But that darker part of me was reawakened following my run-in with Shelley Wright and is lurking at the edge of the light. Watching. Waiting.

For the opportunity to take control.

I find Thatcher in the small galley of *Barton*, where the

viewport is clear of human remains. She's sitting atop one of the stainless steel tables, her back towards me.

"Is everything all right?"

She jumps at the sound of my voice – despite my efforts to make my approach audible – and quickly wipes the tears from her face with the back of her hand. "Yup. Everything's A-OK."

"Scoot," I tell her and perch on the table, rather than sit on it, so we're roughly at eye level. Roughly. I don't say anything else. I just wait.

Thatcher sighs. "Seeing her face, so young and happy, it was just..." She shakes her head as if with disbelief. "We demolished it. Her face is really, actually—" She slams her fist into her palm. "—shattered into a million pieces."

"Not us, Thatch," I say poised. "But we will find who or what is responsible for all this."

She inhales deeply for the verbal diarrhea she's about to unleash. "I-I'm sorry. I'm just not used to this. It won't happen again. I promise you I'll—"

I call for an early halt by shaking my head. "There is no need for you to apologize."

"Sir, my reaction was unprofessional. Leaving in the middle of a preliminary and sitting out here crying like a—" She winces. "Dammit, Dark. Why in the galaxy are you smiling?"

I chuckle at the incredulous look in her eyes and push off the table. Step in front of her so she can read my face clearly. "It is okay to take off the mask sometimes. Good even. I would be far more concerned if you stood there all jaded and treated this as if it were all in a day's work."

"But, Sir—"

I hold up a hand to stop her. "In just one year you and I see

more sorrow and distress than anyone might experience in an entire lifetime. It gets to you and it is okay to show that.” I take a breath. “It is important to stay human; to keep feeling. Even... No. *Especially* when it gets to be too much.”

Thatcher remains quiet for a beat. Then grins. “You’re beginning to sound just like her.”

“Like whom?”

She pulls a face. “Whom do you think?”

My cheeks are glowing and I quickly busy myself with the self-serving counter so she cannot see how flustered that thought makes me. And no, I do not fail to see the irony there. “Do I still sound like her when I say I am in dire need of some coffee?”

She sucks her teeth. “Less so.”

I key the machine. “Would you like something?”

“The usual, thanks.”

When I return with two finger scorching mugs – coffee for me; hot white cocoa for her – she’s slid off the table and dragged out a chair instead. I select the seat across from her, wincing as my holster digs into my leg. Guess I didn’t put it on properly in my haste this morning.

“Did I miss anything vital?” Thatcher asks, holding the mug in her hands to warm them.

“Dr. Stevens will give Leeva Schacht’s body another once-over. Any proper examination will have to take place on-station.”

“Leeva Schacht...” She twirls the mug. “Guess we’ll be making a house call tomorrow.”

The reluctance in her voice isn’t lost on me. What can you say? What can you ask? What should or shouldn’t you do? I’ve practiced it all before; I know all the theory behind it.

But everytime I catch a glimpse of that family through the window, unaware they are living the last minute of their blessedly normal lives, my stomach roils.

Because I will bring them the news that will forever destroy it.

I grunt my confirmation and take a swig of my coffee.

Thatcher says, “Thanks for the... I guess I’ll call it a pep talk. I get what you’re saying about vulnerability and— What? What is it? You’re making a face.”

I spit the liquid back into the mug before I choke on it. “Sorry. This is really sour.”

Thatcher rolls her eyes. “I warned you not to spend a month’s wage on your new machine. Expectations: crushed.”

“I assure you this is exceptionally bad.” I thrust the mug at her in a challenge. “Here. Taste it.”

“Ew. Gross.” She looks at me resentfully, but I’m happy to see the hard lines on her face have softened.

“Sorry for the interruption,” I say, coughing one last time. I put the coffee away – if I can qualify it as such. Damn shame too. I wasn’t joking when I said I needed it. “Please continue.”

“Actually, I think it’s your turn, Dark. You were alone in there with ‘The History’ for a few minutes. Is that something you’ll elaborate on?”

The History. That can be none other than Briar Rose Stevens. I narrow my eyes at my partner. I did not expect to have to spell it out. “You truly cannot pick up on these types of cues, can you?”

“What cues?”

“Oh boy...” I recline in my chair, shaking my head with incredulity. For someone so – how shall I put it? –

experienced, this blindspot of hers continues to surprise me. “Cues, Thatcher. Romantic cues?”

My partner’s face screws up with confusion, but I pinpoint the immediate moment the proverbial light switches on. She beams, looking giddy and excited. “Nooooo. No way. She’s your...?”

I nod once.

“Holy shit. Holy shit!” She squeals with excitement and nudges my shoulder proudly. The mischief in her eyes dissipates quickly, however, when she notices my reaction – or lack thereof. That’s what I like about her: we can laugh together, but also trust each other with deeply personal exchanges.

“Can I ask?”

“You may ask,” I reply.

“Stevens is ‘the history’ for the reason I think she is, isn’t she?”

I sigh again, contemplating how to best formulate my answer. “She tried hard. Very hard. But in the end I was the one who broke it off. She deserved more than I could give her. And...” I remember her hand cautiously coming towards me just now. Ever so cautiously. “Ironically, when we were together, that is when I felt especially isolated and alone.”

I don’t like to be touched. Not by anyone. My body physically rebels when someone does as much as squeeze my shoulder for encouragement. It brings me back to that bad place and I’m scared that if I go there enough times, I’ll get stuck in that part of myself. While my reaction is not as strong as it used to be, it’s never truly gone. From a select few people I just... *tolerate* it better.

“I think I understand the emphasized feeling of isolation.

It's confronting, yeah? Being near each other, but also not." Thatcher pauses. "Do you ever think about picking things back up? Not with her, obviously, but... someone?"

What message does it convey to shrug away from your lover's embrace or, in extreme cases, literally push her away? I had hoped my recent confrontation with Shelley Wright would put an end to it all, but seeing what happened with Briar just now, I think it's even farther out of my reach than I thought. I fear that whatever I start now will end the same way as it did with her, and that is something I can never put someone through ever again. Including myself.

But that is not to say I wouldn't like to have someone. And be with her in every way.

"I, er..." The ship shivers and I can tell from the lower pitch humming and the way the stars blur we're moving again – heading back to Cap Esmay Station.

Thatcher snaps her fingers to draw my attention back, even though she knows I absolutely hate that. Maybe especially. "Give it some thought, will you? A woman has needs."

"Oh, please."

"And if it's what you want, you deserve as much."

"Deserve, huh?" Interesting choice of words. I hunch forward on my thighs so my gaze is level with Thatcher's. "What about you? Are you ready to get back in there?"

"Yeah. I guess," she says slowly. Not to convince me, but to talk some courage into herself.

I rise and beckon my hand at her. "We cannot give Leeva Schacht her life back, Thatch. But we can finally bring her home to her family."

TWO

**CO'S OFFICE, COLONIAL SECURITY BUREAU:
14 FEBRUUM, 307.3 SC**

ANDEE DARK

I've been awake for over thirty hours. If not by the clock, I could tell by the text on my monitor swimming before my eyes and my throbbing head. I've turned on the overhead lighting as well as a little desk lamp, but today's impressions are finally catching up to me. There's the kind of tiredness that simply needs a good night's sleep to disappear, but I predict mine requires so much more than that.

I reach for my fourth cup of coffee. Earlier Thatcher brought an offering of two mugs from traffic control's coffee machine (the best machine in the building by miles) to make up for the disgusting spacer brew I'd had aboard *Barton*.

Both were intended for me.

We kicked off our footgear, got down on the floor and split the full lunchbox *Nani* had prepared for her. It wasn't the first time homemade paratha disappeared during one of our

“talks”. I was afraid the events of last year would drive us apart, but instead they have brought us closer than ever. I guess that’s what partners—*friends* are for.

After she left for home I narrowed my eyes at a third mug and pushed it away, keeping it physically out of my reach – thinking it was getting too late for that and I, too, was heading home soon. That was four hours ago. And now I’ve had as many in as much time.

I recline in my chair all the way, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my hands. For a second I think I hear voices outside my door, but they’re coming from the vidscreen I’d turned on earlier to fill the silence.

“Is the investigation in surrounding space still proceeding, Commander?” an interviewer asks.

“Our forces continue the search for information and clues about the body.”

“You just said ‘the body’. You have not identified it yet, Commander?”

“We do not wish to disclose those details at this time.”

“So you do have a name?”

“We do not wish to disclose those details at this time.”

“Do you think it’s murder? Or do you think it’s an accident?”

“We assume nothing. Neither should you.”

My hand motions the screen off with a vengeance. I don’t have a face fit for the screen.

Knock knock.

My eyes shoot to the clock at the bottom of my screen. Once I make out the numbers through blurred vision I decide to dismiss the sound. The night shift won’t be working on this floor, so I suppose I imagined it like I did with the vidscreen.