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Nowhere

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NOWHERE

Haynes

Petra awoke to smell of gasoline.

The sharp scent brought forth an instinctual, primordial panic. She stirred, moving away from the smell before she had even opened her eyes. She regretted it when she did.

Her ship was on fire.

Petra coughed wetly as she pushed herself away from the nearest flames. Her legs didn't seem to be working, so she used the brute force of the adrenaline surging through her to pull her body across the floor of her ship, shoving away pieces of the hull and burning her hands in the process. She blinked blood out of her eyes as she took in the broken pieces of metal around her. Was she bleeding?

Glancing above, her eyes straining through the thick layer of smoke, she glimpsed purple clouds drifting in the sky and realized two things at once: there were gaping holes in her ship and she was no longer in orbit. Her legs started to tingle, alerting her to their existence. She flexed her toes in her boots. Petra rose shakily to her knees, hyperaware of the flames licking too close to her back and haphazardly crawled in a direction she hoped was away. In front of her, sunlight poked through a sizable rift in the flooring that let out to the ground below. Could she make the jump? She didn't have time—already she felt the heat of the flames at her back again. Petra shoved a sparking control panel out of her way and launched herself through the hole.

The party was in full swing on Ethon. The large, clean room packed with both the inhabitants of the Floating City and a variety of travelers, rang with conversation of at least a dozen different dialects. Petra wore a black set of lacy, formal clothes, expensive enough to get her through the doors and sufficiently nondescript for her true purpose at the Ethonian party. She sighed and adjusted her tight collar, pulling it as far away from her throat as it could go. She understood the need for the elegant suit, but did it have to be so uncomfortable?

"On your left," Vitri muttered. Her webbed hand gripped the glass in front of her only slightly too tight.

Petra waved down the bartender, taking the opportunity to run her eyes casually over the Lecian at the end of the bar. Despite his—or her, Petra was never sure of a Lecian's gender at first glance—formal dress-wear, the alien form was unmistakable. Long, thin tentacles—or sensors as humans had dubbed them—protruded from his oily head. He tapped a viscous pair of claws impatiently on the bar counter.

The bartender looked Petra up and down, his large beady eyes unreadable. Petra wasn't the only human at this gathering, but she was one of few.

"What are you having?" the bartender asked in carefully practiced Terran. His delivery was perfect aside from the way he lingered on the "e" sounds, as many of

the Ethonians did.

“Moon dew, please and thank you,” Petra said quietly.

The Lecian across the bar reached into his pocket and withdrew his telecommuter, narrowing his tiny, beetle-like eyes as he read his screen. Once the bartender moved away, Vitri inclined her head towards Petra.

“We should move now,” Vitri whispered, agitated. The slits of her nostrils flared.

“Patience, friend,” Petra said, as the bartender returned with her drink.

Vitri sighed and adjusted her grey slip. The material flowed over her body like water, defining her green scales and muscular, fluid form. There was a plethora of Saluths at the party, so Vitri had insisted on wearing an enticing dress. “Us Saluths will be dressed far more extravagantly than any of the others, mark my words,” Vitri had said earlier when the two were purchasing formalwear. Petra supposed her friend had been right. Compared to the other Saluths—many of whom donned sinuous gowns made of woven nitrogen—Vitri was dressed tastefully.

The Lecian stood abruptly on its three hind legs and tucked his telecommuter back into his pocket before disappearing into the crowd.

Silently, Petra and Vitri followed.

Petra lay gaping, face down in the dirt, trying desperately to remember how to breathe. She thought for a moment that she must look like a flopping fish when it finds itself on land.

A sharp sting to her cheek enabled her lungs to begin working, and she gasped in pain, her hand going to face and coming back bloody. As she took several ragged breaths, she realized why she could smell the exposed fuel line of her ship in the first place. The glass of her helmet had shattered in the impact. Entire pieces were missing, and a few seemed to be embedded in her skin. What was she breathing in?

She wasn’t sure if she could stand yet. Crawling she could do. She whipped her head back and forth as she moved. The terrain was barren except for a few dried-up bushels of plants and a large rocky structure on her right. She turned her body towards the rock. Her suit, punctured and full of holes, was weighing her down. The sky above her remained purple. The sun was just beginning to set over the horizon, and she could see four moons just to the east.

When she didn’t immediately begin suffocating, Petra calmed down a bit. The air had to be at least part oxygen. She didn’t feel lightheaded. At least not yet. And her skin appeared to be its normal hue, not green or purple, so she could rule out some of the more toxic gases that the outlier planets possessed in their atmosphere.

Where was she?

Petra took a moment to pause and remove her helmet. It was impeding her vision and wasn’t doing its job anyways. She tossed it to the side and continued crawling, moving faster and faster, staring single-mindedly at the mound of rock.

She reached the rocky structure just as the ship exploded behind her. The force of the blast threw her body into the side of the rock. She groaned, overcome with new pain. Slumped on the ground, staring at the ruins of her ship in the distance, Petra let out a single, piteous, choked sob.

“Have you ever been to Salu?” Vitri asked.

Petra looked up from dismembering the Lecian’s body. Vitri leaned against the

window, staring out at the Floating City.

“You know I haven’t,” Petra said. “Now come back here and help me.”

Vitri complied, adjusting her slip so that none of the thick, brown blood of the Lecian stained it. “It’s nice there, is all,” she continued. “So green. The air smells clean and the water is cool to the touch. I think you would like it.”

Petra nodded her head but silently dissented. The aesthetics of the planets made no difference to her. She could visit a planet that was dry, arid, and sweltering or one that was completely covered in rubber trees. The work was all the same.

“Will you bag him?” Petra asked, gesturing to the several hacked off pieces of the Lecian.

Vitri nodded, so Petra grabbed his telecommuter and synced it to her PDA, looking for the most recent message.

MESSAGE RECEIVED: COOLERS. 24:00:00.

“I miss it sometimes,” Vitri said.

“What?” Petra asked. She disabled the tracking on the Lecian’s telecommuter before powering it down.

“Home.”

The incessant beeping came from her PDA.

Petra had nodded off again around the time the flames had started to die down. She sat propped up against the rock, feeling her body pound achingly with each heartbeat. The sun was beginning to rise in the east—two of the moons remained high in the sky—but she wasn’t sure how long she had slept for. The rotation period of this planet could be shorter or longer than Earth’s—she would have no way of knowing.

She needed to reach her PDA, wherever it was, but instead Petra closed her eyes again, trying to concentrate. What had gone wrong? Vitri had directed her to the ship. It was unmarked, but she was sure that it was calibrated correctly. Petra had been flying under the radar—literally—in deep space around the outlier planets. Her escape from Ethon had gone smoothly, and she thought she had left orbit quietly. It was possible that she had been followed...

ALERT: PETRA R. IVANOV

01:17:44

MESSAGE SENT: TARGET ELIMINATED

COMMUNICATIONS RECEIVED

EN ROUTE TO DEPARTURE FROM ETHON

Petra tucked her PDA into her sewn-in pocket as she and Vitri slipped unnoticed back into the party.

“Dance with me?” Petra asked. She grabbed Vitri’s cool, web-like hand and spun her onto the floor.

“The bartender is staring,” Vitri said as they swayed to the music.

Petra turned them effortlessly, so she could catch a glimpse of the bar. The bartender was indeed staring directly at them, slowly wiping a glass clean.

“I forgot to drink my Moondew,” Petra recalled. A foolish mistake. She tried to

keep her expression light. "He must have seen it on the counter and noticed that we were gone. I've just told you a joke."

"We should take separate ships then," Vitri said, after laughing brightly at something Petra hadn't said. She kept a lingering smile on her face. "Hopefully the information that you sent is worth it. The Council should be happy at least."

Petra nodded. They needed to wait a bit longer and leave the party with a crowd. She relaxed their rhythm as the Ethonian strings gradually slowed into a different piece of music.

"Something you said earlier..." Petra hesitated. "Yes?" Vitri prompted.

"When you were talking about home...why did you bring that up?"

Vitri's nostrils flared again. Her yellow eyes didn't meet Petra's. "Do you miss Terra?" Vitri asked instead of answering.

Petra tilted her head. "No." "Why not?"

"I suppose...because I don't spend much time there."

"But your family?" Vitri insisted. "Your Terran friends? Aren't there people or places that you long for on your home planet?"

"Why are you asking me this?" The pleasant mask on Petra's face had dropped. Vitri's long tongue darted out and licked her lips. She didn't seem to be aware of it. "I don't know. I just wonder where your loyalties lie."

"What's that supposed to mean? My loyalty lies with the Council." "But beyond that."

Petra frowned. "Well, with you I suppose."

They danced silently for the next song, pleasant masks having returned to their faces. The bartender was no longer watching them.

Finally, Vitri asked, "Where do you belong?"

Her PDA had slipped into the confines of her suit. Petra wasn't sure how it had managed that. Last time she had checked it, it was tucked securely in the pocket on her left hip. She frowned and shifted her weight. That side of her suit had completely ripped open. Petra unzipped the front. Wincing, she shimmied out of her suit and pulled it away from her body. She grabbed the PDA where it had slipped into the bottom near her feet. She scrolled through the four new alerts.

ALERT: PETRA R. IVANOV 14:28:56
APPROACHING ORBIT AT UNSAFE VELOCITY
SPEED: 29,558 KM/HR

ALERT: PETRA R. IVANOV 14:35:29
IMPACT IMMINENT
ETA: 5 MIN 14 S
EVACUATE SHUTTLE

ALERT: PETRA R. IVANOV
14:43: 57
IMPACT ON PLANET ZOPRETHIA X
SOS CALL: SENT

ALERT: PETRA R. IVANOV 14:44:33
ARRIVAL ON ZOTHEPRIA X

PLANET CLASSIFICATION: TERRESTRIAL, UNINHABITABLE,
NO ATMOSPHERE, AVG T: -55 C
INHABITANTS: 0

Petra shook her head, confused by the last alert. If the planet had no atmosphere, she wouldn't have survived the crash. Looking above her, she could clearly see the fluffy purple clouds that had been drifting in the sky since she had landed. And she was obviously breathing some sort of oxygen. Average temperature -55 degrees Celsius? She wasn't frozen. It was warm out, even without her space suit. Off the top of her head, Petra judged that it was probably about 15 degrees Celsius. Was her PDA malfunctioning? It should have sent out an SOS message to her reporting station when she crash-landed. Hopefully, Vitri had intercepted the call and was on her way to this planet.

As Petra and Vitri slipped into the crowd that was headed for the exit, Petra couldn't help pondering Vitri's question.

Where do you belong?

Petra wasn't even really from Earth. She had been born on a space station hovering somewhere lightyears away from Earth. Amongst the creatures of different planetary systems that lived on that station, it was easy for her to feel alienated, especially after her mother died. It wasn't until she was eight years old that she met another human, a recruiter for the Council, who helped her improve her Terran before shipping Petra off to work for the Council. She had been to Earth only twice in her life, both for work purposes.

She was perfect for the job of course. She knew most dialects, knew how to keep her mouth shut, and had no real sense of morality, something the Council was very keen on. She had been doing their dirty work since she was old enough to fly a ship. The others she worked with tended to avoid her. Sometimes they called her a traitor, or a liar, or a thief. She denied nothing because maybe she was.

I just wonder where your loyalties lie.

Vitri should know that she was loyal to the Council. Petra had been the one to train her after all, to immerse her in this world of secrets and lies and blood. Vitri was the closest thing Petra had to a friend.

Maybe that's not what Vitri had meant. Petra stared at the back of Vitri's head, her smooth scaly scalp glistened. Who was she loyal to? The Council obviously. Petra probably. What would she give her life for?

Home.

Was that what Vitri had been hedging at? That she was loyal to her people? That her people were loyal to her? Petra pursed her lips.

Where do you belong?

The sun was setting again. Judging on the time from her PDA, there was roughly three Terran hours of sunlight on this planet. Petra would just have to wait for the sun to rise again to see what encompassed a full rotation here.

Her throat was parched, but she was hesitant to leave her rock. It felt like a shield from the rest of this cold barren planet. She needed water eventually. And food too. Her first action should be to check the smoldering remains of her ship. It was unlikely that anything useful had survived, but it didn't hurt to check.

Petra rose slowly into a standing position, sucking in air through her teeth to try and control the pain of her injuries. Could she walk that far? Maybe she should just crawl. She shook her head stubbornly and moved a leg forward with purpose. And then her other. Left. Right. It was getting better.

Inexplicably, she thought of Strontam. His bright purple eyes, so like the clouds gathering above. Normally, she tried to pretend as if he had never existed, as though he hadn't molded her into who she was. She tried to imagine the planet he had been exiled to. Was it one as barren as this? Or was it like Vitri's home planet, lush, and full of green. He always loved beautiful places.

Where was her rescue?

Early in Vitri's training, she had asked, in a hushed voice, eyes darting around the room nervously.

"What happened to Strontam?"

Petra paused in her data entry, looking intently at the screen. "We don't speak of such things," she had said.

"He was your partner, though, wasn't he?" Vitri persisted. "Before me? I heard someone talking about him earlier, but he doesn't come up anywhere in the system."

Petra shut off the monitor and briefly disabled the microphones attached in the training room. She took a deep breath to settle her nerves.

"Strontam served his time," Petra had said. "The Council was done with him, and they couldn't risk him spilling secrets. I dealt with it. There was really no one who would miss him anyways. They do the same things to felons you know."

"But...what...happened to him?"

She found a half-burnt grain loaf in a compartment near the wreckage but no water. Petra squinted in the distance, trying to make out any landmarks that she might have missed. It was darker now, and the moons casted a strange purple light over the land.

She was going to have to head out on foot if she wanted to find water. And fast. Petra judged that it might be best to use the rock plinth as a landmark and head Southeast. She searched around the wreckage and grabbed a long, sharp piece of unburnt metal to use as a weapon, just in case the place the planet was inhabited. Her PDA was wrong about everything else after all. It beeped as she pulled it out of her pocket to check just once more. She breathed out a sign of relief. Maybe a rescue ship was finally on its way.

ALERT: PETRA R. IVANOV 23:43:01
IMPACT ON XOPRETHIA X
SOS CALL: RECEIVED
ACTION: N/A

Petra read and reread the alert. Were they not sending a ship for her? Her PDA beeped again. She held it too tight.

ALERT: XXXX X XXXXX 23:43:15
LOCATION: UNKNOWN

STATUS: UNKNOWN

Petra shook her head slowly, not understanding. She'd never seen a message like this. Perhaps the PDA was just broken. But then why had her name been re-dacted? She was breathing too fast. Sharp pains in her lungs told her that. Her shaking hands opened a search bar in the directory.

SEARCH FOR: PETRA R. IVANOV
SEARCHING
SEARCHING
SEARCHING
BASE X EMPLOYEE NOT FOUND

Her PDA beeped.

ALERT: XXXX X XXXXX
XX:XX:XX
PDA#5829 STATUS: OFFLINE
ACTION: ERASE MEMORY
ACTION: SHUT DOWN
ACTION: DISABLE

The screen went black, the purple glow of a moon reflecting off of it and on to her bloody hands. Petra stared, unmoving, unraveling.

Where do you belong?

Nowhere. She belonged nowhere.

Petra and Vitri hurried through the cargo bay, glancing behind them. Petra could only hope that no one had seen them, and that the bartender had written them off as eccentric and forgettable. She couldn't afford to make mistakes like that, especially when her last mission had had been a failure. She was lucky that the Council had even entrusted her with this one. Vitri led her to a small ship tucked in the corner.

"This one's for you," Vitri said, punching in a code to the terminal that opened the ship doors. "I'll take another one shortly."

Petra pulled herself into the ship. "We should be able to meet back up in a day or two," she said, powering it up. "I can send you my coordinates when the coast is clear. For now, I'll hover around the outlier planets."

Vitri stared at Petra like she wanted to say something. The Saluth's nostrils flared, but when she opened her mouth, no sound came out.

"What is it?" Petra asked, hand paused on the button that would seal her ship. "I...nothing," Vitri said, backing away. She raised a webbed hand into a salute.

"Goodbye, friend."

Petra sealed the doors.