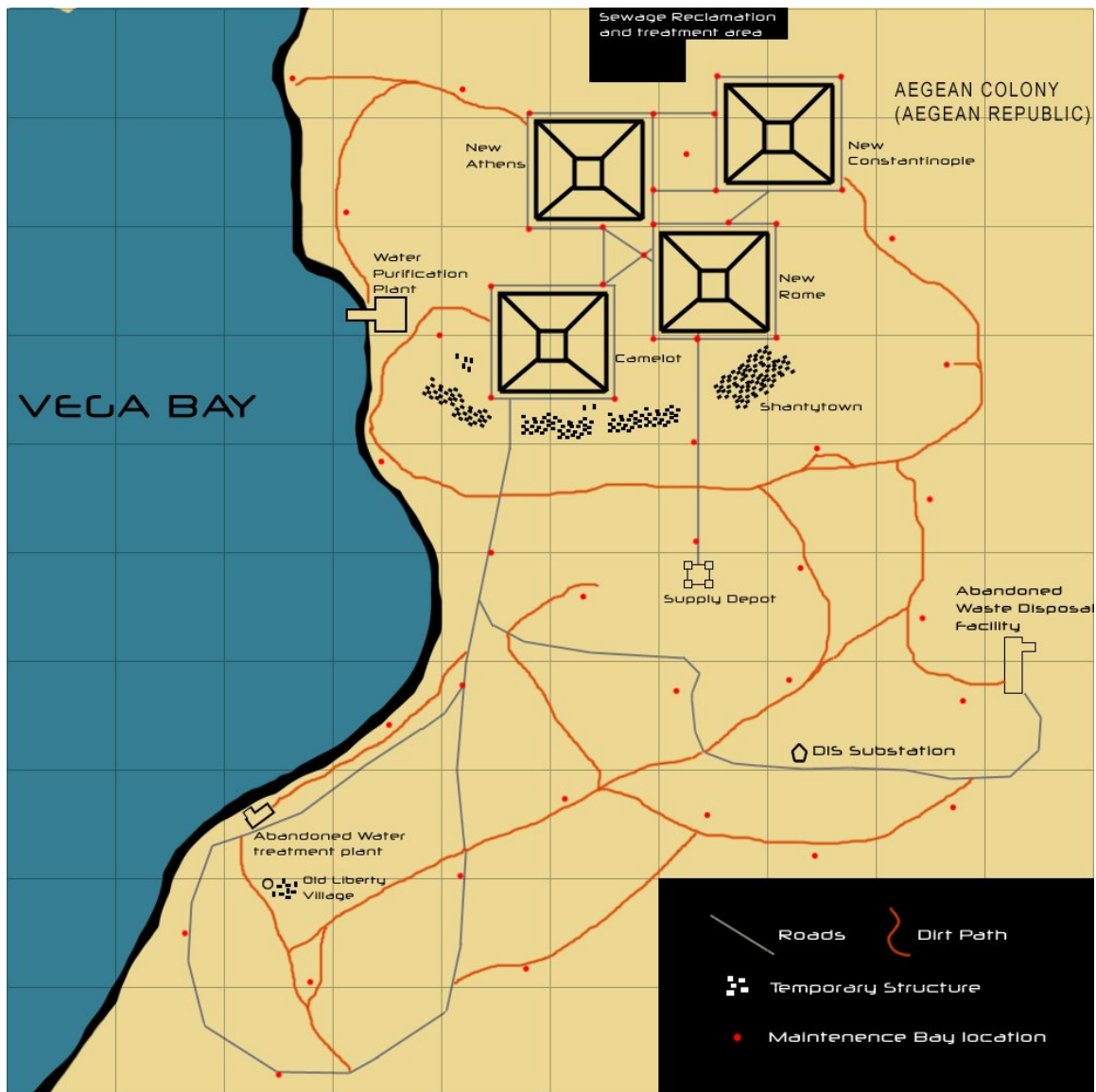


# The Exiled

Based loosely on the novella 'Eudeamon'  
S. Reid



## Part 1

### Prologue

The view was incredible. Even though it wasn't Hayley's first time in space, nor her first time visiting another planet, it was her first visit to Vega IV of the Vega system. The planet expanded around the transport craft she and number of others occupied. After the usual bout of jump sickness passed following the exit through the Vega system's jumpgate, Hayley was able to press her head against the transparent steel passenger window and look upon the beautiful blue and green marble below them.

Vega IV. In the nearly one hundred years of human interstellar space exploration, it was the only world that even came close to Earth. Called a 'Mini-Earth' by some, the planet was roughly three quarters the size of Earth, or slightly smaller than Mars, possessing nearly one and a half times Earth's gravity and was estimated to be about a billion years younger than Earth. Looking down upon it now, slowly growing larger as the transport descended towards its surface, Hayley found it almost surreal to see a planet that looked so much like earth, but had none of the familiar continental formations. Instead, Vega IV had two main continents, each taking up a little over half of the planet's entire surface and separated by two oceans.

Hayley could feel a surge of excitement fill her body. There was something about visiting a new world that always got her revved up. In her relatively short life she'd been to nearly a dozen worlds. She'd seen Mars, Centauri Prime, Sirius V and Luyten III just to name a few. Most of those worlds all had something in common however- their colonies were all fully enclosed. Those planets did not have breathable atmosphere, and while she'd managed to do some exploration in an environmental suit on some of those worlds, it just wasn't the same as actually breathing in alien air, and feeling alien soil beneath your bare feet.

This was going to be an experience of a lifetime.

*"Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be arriving in New Liberty in approximately ten minutes. Please ensure your safety harnesses are on, we'll be hitting atmosphere in three minutes."*

Hayley could feel her heart begin to beat a little faster now the closer they got. Seated just to the left of her was an older woman who seemed rather nervous. Obviously not a spacer. Not like her. She had to grin at

herself. She *was* a spacer, regardless of what her actual profession was. She'd been in space more times than most early astronauts had ever been, and had been on more distant planets than any of them had been. The woman noticed Hayley's glance, offering her a small smile as the transport hit turbulence breaking through the planet's outer atmosphere.

The young, short brown haired girl returned the smile before turning her attention back outside of her window and watching with unblinking eyes as flames licked the outside of the hull for several seconds while the ship passed through the upper thermosphere. The turbulence grew in intensity for several seconds while the ship's internal dampening system automatically readjusted for atmospheric entry. Within two minutes they'd passed into the mesosphere and were now well within the planet's gravity field. Everyone inside the shuttle breathed a sigh as their bodies suddenly became a few pounds heavier thanks to the slight increase in gravimetric pressure.

*"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Vega IV. Landing will commence in six minutes."*

Pressing her face against the window again, Hayley stared out in awe at the new world below her. Soaring through cloudy blue skies, she would have sworn she was back home on Earth. The closer they neared the surface, the more difficult it was for her to distinguish between the two worlds. Passing by a cluster of snow covered high mountain peaks the ship soon emerged over a rather flat yellowish brown region; a place that looked quite similar to the prairie region of her own homeland. She knew the New Liberty colonists had settled in the less fertile area of the planet following the schism that precipitated the Vega Cold War. The original colony, located on the opposite continent, resided in the more resource rich part of the planet. Unfortunately, the original colony, now calling itself the Aegean Republic, had closed its borders some years ago.

The New Liberty colony soon appeared below. Made up mostly of modular mobile housing units, the colony looked very much like most newer colonies looked – a disorganized gaggle of temporary structures encircling one or two permanent structures, usually the headquarter of whichever company or organization had commissioned the colony. The difference here was the New Liberty colony was *vast*. The original New Liberty colonists had once been citizens of the Aegean Colony. However, following the colony's successful bid for independence from the Terran Federation, many disgruntled and disenfranchised colonists decided to leave the Aegean Colony in order to create their own, Federation affiliated one on the other side of the planet.

Now, thirty years after the so-called ‘Vega Colonial Schism’ New Liberty was just under two million colonists strong.

From the sky, New Liberty appeared similar to what Hayley figured ancient Persia must have looked like. Hundreds of small buildings surrounding a few larger ones. The colony seemed to be divided up into neighborhoods, each neighborhood centralized around one of a few tower structures. Each tower stood between 30 to 40 stories high and had that sterile metallic giant headstone look that was common of most modern Federation architecture.

The spaceport came into view. Built around a pair of long steel runways, the spaceport was little more than a cluster of industrial-looking structures that ran along the runway, and included four large square hangars, each large enough to fit a typical commercial transport craft, similar to the one Hayley was on that very moment. Other space faring vehicles occupied space on the tarmac, including Federation military aircraft.

With a jolt, the transport’s forward momentum ceased as it came to a hovering stop directly above the spaceport. Slowly, the vessel began its descent. Hayley kept her eyes outside of the ship, watching as they dipped below the buildings surrounding the spaceport, finally coming to a soft touchdown. The transport taxied to the end of the runway before turning onto the holding tarmac, coming to a complete stop not far from an awaiting mob of people. The crowd, there had to have been at least a thousand or more, were held back by security and barricades.

“Oh my...” the woman seated next to Hayley said as she stared out the window, noticing the crowd. “There must be a celebrity aboard.”

Hayley smiled sheepishly and nodded her head. “Yeah...I wonder who?”

*“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve arrived. Please ensure you have all of your carry on luggage with you before departing the spacecraft. On behalf of Universal Transport, we thank you and hope you have a pleasant day.”*

Hayley unlocked her harness and rose to her feet, tugging on her rather form fitting gray turtleneck sweater, smoothening the wrinkles that had formed after the past two hours sitting. She followed the line of passengers down the aisle between the rows of seats, feeling the cool alien air pouring in from the open access hatch. She inhaled deeply and felt a smile bloom on her face. While the scent of engine exhaust permeated, Hayley knew she was breathing in the air of a new world. As she got to the head of the line, emerging at the top of the deployed ramp, her senses were almost overwhelmed by an array of new stimuli all at once. The cool air on her exposed skin, the beautiful blue sunlit sky, the sight of the various

structures and people surrounding her, the smells of a dozen unfamiliar odors and scents, the sound of a roaring crowd, cheering and chanting. Chanting *her* name.

“Ladies and gentlemen of New Liberty!” a man holding a bullhorn hollered at the crowd. “Give it up for Ms. Hayley Komit!!”

The crowd went into a frenzy and for a brief instant Hayley felt a tinge of embarrassment when the woman she’d been sitting next to glared back at her with a rather confounded look on her face. She supposed it was kind of a rotten thing of her not to tell the lady who she was. Perhaps there was a little bit of conceit there, her just figuring everyone in known space should have known who she was by now. As she stepped down the ramp, her attention turned to the crowd. Men, women, old and young. Hayley’s appeal was universal. In the five years since she’d been on the scene, she had two number one records, and her celebrity had skyrocketed following her Intergalactic Tour. She’d visited every single major Federation colony on that tour, following it up with a thirty-city tour on Earth. She was the first singer to ever perform on more than three planets. That distinction alone had put her on the map as arguably one of the greatest music icons of the past two hundred years, nevermind the music she put out. Not bad for a girl from Montreal, she thought to herself with a smile on her face.

She took time to meet with the crowd, signing autographs as she moved along the barricade. She even took the opportunity to thank the security personnel standing at regular intervals along the barricades. She could tell they appreciated the small gesture as they all beamed wide smiles at her when she spoke to them.

Hayley was absolutely stunned at how many people there were waiting for her. This was the kind of treatment she had come accustomed to on Earth, but never on a colony world. Vega IV was special however. The only near Earth planet discovered so far, people were attracted to like moths to a flame. The promise of a new life in serene natural surroundings, away from the congested super metropolises that now covered Earth’s surface, and with the highly valuable ore Newtonium on the planet, Vega IV was generating the kind of interest that the Yukon and Alaska experienced during the days of the Gold Rush in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the seventy-five years since the planet’s original discovery, nearly eight million people called Vega IV home, making it the single largest and profitable colony world outside of Sol system.

After several minutes of meeting with some of her adoring fans, Hayley was interdicted by the man with the bullhorn; her manager. Max Trainor gave her that look he always gave her whenever she was behind

schedule with something, as if telling her to ‘get a move on’. She’d only ever let him get away with it though. If anyone else, her publicist, her band, *anyone* attempted to push her, she’d snap back on them in a heartbeat. Max had been her manager for just shy of two years, but he’d already proven himself better at keeping a leash on her than her former manager. And she appreciated that. He didn’t have a problem with getting her back on schedule, even if it meant physically pulling her away from a crowd or a fan. She’d snapped at him a few times for doing it, but ultimately she knew he only had her best interest in mind.

She nodded in response to the look he gave her, and followed him and his security entourage down the path between the rows of barricades keeping the gathering crowd separated. At the end of the path was an awaiting all terrain luxury vehicle. Similar to an SUV, it had a large cab that could fit eight people with large wheels that were designed to navigate through the colony’s unpaved streets and beyond. Before entering the vehicle, Hayley turned toward the crowd one last time, and blew a kiss toward them, eliciting a raucous cheer. For a moment, it looked as though the crowds were going to overwhelm the security forces, but they held steady.

With a smile, she lowered herself into the back seat following her manager and followed after by her publicist. The driver closed the door behind them then quickly rounded the vehicle to the front and climbed in.

“Wow,” Hayley shook her head in disbelief as the vehicle started moving, keeping her eyes on the crowd as several of them broke through the barricades and started running for the vehicle. “That was *crazy!* I didn’t think there’d be that many people waiting for me.”

“You think that’s crazy...” Max turned to the short brown haired girl. “Wait until tonight. Your show’s been sold out for three months. Both of them. Hell, your first show was sold out within the first hour that tickets were available.”

Hayley sat back in the vehicle’s comfortable upholstery. “Thanks for the intro by the way. Knowing you, you probably had them going crazy for the past few hours.”

Max grinned. “Well, the first group of fans showed up around 0520 local time. I had to be there. Oh, which reminds me, you’re on Vega time now. The planet goes by a 22-hour clock. You probably notice that the air’s a little cool...well, technically we’re in this hemisphere’s autumn cycle. Daytime temperatures usually range from around 5 to 15 degrees Celsius. Nighttime goes down to about minus 10. They’re expecting snow tomorrow.”

A wide grin blossomed on Hayley’s face. “It snows here?”

“Yeah, a lot,” Max nodded. “Lots of precipitation on this planet. Rains half the time during the day, snows half the time during the night.”

“Reminds me of winters back home.”

“Just remember, we’re on a bit of a tight schedule,” Hayley’s publicist intoned. “We’ve got ten hours before the show, but that doesn’t give you much time to dawdle. Once we’re at the hotel, you can organize your belongings, figure out what outfit you want to wear for the show, then we *have* to get to the auditorium so we can set up and have a rehearsal. Then we need to do your hair, makeup...have you eaten yet?”

“No, I just woke up about three hours ago. I didn’t have time to...”

“Then we’ll get you something at the hotel. No red meat though, because it’ll make you fatigued, and we have a long day ahead of us.”

Hayley sighed heavily, throwing her head back against her seat’s backrest. “I’d *kill* for a hamburger and fries.”

“After the show, my treat,” said Max, giving Hayley’s nylon covered leg a pat. “And hey, don’t worry about exercise. The planet has nearly one and a half times Earth’s gravity, so you’ll be working out just walking. Like wearing a fifty pound rucksack.”

“Still a lot better than on Zeta 2 Reticuli Delta,” Hayley glanced at Max with a grin. “I felt like I weighted about three hundred pounds on that planet...that show was horrible! I just stood there like a statue as I sung...and I was *still* sweating bullets.”

Max chuckled. “I think you lost about ten pounds that night. Not to mention the planet was hotter than hell. Just our luck that their air circulation systems were undergoing maintenance.”

The all-terrain luxury vehicle wound its way through the rough, uneven dirt roads that formed a web work of interconnecting paths between the various structures that comprised the colony. Most of the structures were alike- the standard one or two story boxy-shaped modular structures. Each unit was about the length of a standard rail container and about twice as wide. The two story ones were about half the size in length. The interiors could be altered to serve different functions. Most were simply used as inexpensive housing. People would put up temporary walls inside, then fill it with furnishings, appliances and electronics. Each unit could further be connected to another unit, either by stacking or lining up. Some had created very elaborate configurations, consisting of a dozen or more units.

After a twenty-minute journey, the vehicle finally pulled up to a unique structure; one of the few permanent buildings located within the colony. It was unique for a few reasons. At its base it was quite narrow, no wider than one of the temporary structures. By the second floor however, it

expanded outward and got narrower the higher up the building one got. Hayley's instant impression of the building was as if it were some kind of towering obelisk.

The group disembarked and waited a few moments for the rest of the band to show up before funneling into the hotel. Check in was a simple process as they'd had their reservations finalized months in advance. The hotel staff was more than courteous in tending to Hayley's luggage, which arrived shortly after she did. When she finally arrived in her room on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor, she was pleased by its size, although a little put off by its Spartan décor and rather typically sterile aesthetic. Most Federation structures had that look about them, both internally and externally. White floors, white walls, white ceiling with a synthetic veneer that made everything look like polished ceramic or plastic.

A large flat-screen viewer occupied a section of one wall; presently it was cycling through various works of classical art. Its ultra-hi resolution display made each work of art appear as if it was really hanging off the wall. The fact that the screen was bordered by a wooden picture frame simply added to the illusion.

After putting away her luggage, Hayley settled herself inside the common room, allowing her body to sink into the soft cushions of the solitary loveseat set in the center of the room and flanked by a pair of identical looking easy chairs, all surrounding a glass coffee table. Hayley turned her attention to the large view screen on the wall in front of her.

“Viewer. Display menu.”

The image on the screen shifted from the paintings to a virtual menu that allowed for interactions. Using her hands, she stimulated the screen's external motion sensors, and scrolled down the menu. After a thorough inspection of the menu items, she settled on a chicken salad wrap, water and a cheese plate. She vocalized her order, a message appearing on the screen a moment later saying ‘Order Accepted’.

Barely a second after the order went through her room's door chime went off. She winced in surprise, thinking there was no way they could have gotten her order so fast. Hopping to her feet, she sauntered over to the door, pressing her palm against the access plate. The door slid open with an airy whoosh, her manager standing on the other side.

Wordlessly, Max took one step into the suite, his eyes intently focused on the young woman before him. As the door slid shut, the two lunged at each other, throwing their arms around one another's bodies and madly pushing their lips together. Max's hand ran up under Hayley's sweater and desperately felt around for her supple breasts, finally getting a hold of one



and giving it a squeeze as their tongues played around in each others mouths.

Max guided Hayley to the nearby loveseat, Hayley falling back first into it while Max followed her in. It'd been days since she had felt his embrace and vice versa. The tour planning had kept them apart with Max doing a lot of the running around, making final inspections of the venue, getting to know the planet a little better, ensuring the local authority were well informed of everything that was happening. Meanwhile, Hayley had been back on earth, preparing for the start of yet another tour. Exercising her vocal chords. Practicing new dance routines. Working things out with her band. All in all, in the past month Hayley and Max had only seen each other a handful of times. Things had gotten to the breaking point.

Now, all that tension melted away as they kissed each other passionately, grinded their bodies against one another's and studied the various nuances of the other's neither regions with their hands. When the doorbell rang again some minutes later, Hayley had forgotten all about the lunch she'd ordered. Down to her bra and panties at that point, she quickly slid out from under Max much to his annoyance.

"Shit...I forgot I ordered food," she whispered as she quickly lifted her black skirt back up, fastening it around her waist with a button. She grabbed the sweater she'd thrown across the room and quickly stuffed herself into it before tending to the door.

Max rolled off the loveseat, picked up his pants and shirt from the floor and hurried into the bathroom as Hayley greeted the hotel server. After tipping him through a biometric thumbprint scan, she stepped back into the room carrying her lunch tray.

"He's gone."

Max peeked out of the bathroom first before heaving a sigh and stepping out into the common room. "Damn, this sneaking around shit is getting old."

Hayley offered a shrug as she lowered herself onto one of the easy chairs. "Don't blame me, you were the one who said we should keep our relationship a secret. I wanted to tell everyone, but you said..."

"I said it'd hurt your career if everyone knew you had a boyfriend," Max rolled his eyes, as he wandered back over to the loveseat and dropped down onto it. "Actually, my predecessor said that...he was right of course, but it still doesn't make it suck any less."

Hayley took a small sampling bite of her wrap, nodding her head approvingly at its agreeable taste. "Well, you're the manager. Supposedly you know what's best."

Max smirked as he glanced at the younger girl. “Believe me Hayley, I’d like nothing better than to tell everyone I’m dating one of the greatest singers of our time...not to mention one of the sexiest.”

She glanced at him giving him a wink.

“But the tabloids would have a field day,” Max shook his head, reaching for the glass of water that came with Hayley’s food and taking a sip. “First come the accusations that you fired your old manager for me, just because we’re dating...then comes the whole age issue.”

“C’mon, you’re only ten years older than me,” she said between bites. “Back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was another famous singer from Quebec who ended marrying her manager, and they were like *twenty* years apart.”

“You French girls...bunch of grave robbers,” Max chuckled.

“And you Irish boys are just a bunch of cradle robbers,” she retorted with a snicker.

Max could only shrug and grin sheepishly at the accusation.

“So...what you were saying before about your manager knowing best...does that mean you’ve decided not to attempt to get into the Aegean colony?”

Hayley paused and stared at Max in silence for a handful of seconds. She knew he had her well-being in mind by trying to dissuade her from going, but that’s *not* what this whole tour was about. Part of her whole reason for coming to Vega IV on her ‘Viva New Vega’ tour was to make people aware of what was really going on in the Aegean Republic. It was well documented that their semi-autocratic oligarchy government was essentially a totalitarian regime. Despite claiming themselves a ‘Republic’ they were a dictatorship, ruled with an iron fist by a Supreme Chancellor and his Administrative Council. From high atop their towering arcologies, the Council controlled everything. They *knew* everything. They *saw* everything and would punish anyone and everyone for even the smallest infraction.

Most disturbing however was the manner in which they maintained order and control. A secret police force known as the Directorate of Internal Security was responsible for crime prevention, but from what Hayley had read of them, they were more like thugs- hired muscle for the Council who excelled at getting rid of anything and anyone that contravened with the Council’s ideals and agendas. While executions were few and far between, the manner in which they imprisoned those found guilty of crimes was truly horrifying. While there was little information on the process or method, the Republic turned their prisoners into walking, self-contained prisons. Individuals were stripped of their identities and made to wear special suits that essentially took away their individuality- made them all appear nearly identical, concealing their heads with helmets and locking their bodies into

black skintight bodysuits. These individuals, known as Exiles, would then be released into the wild, left to shamble aimlessly for the duration of their sentence...sometimes months...sometimes years. It was a horrifying prospect, and one that served well to keep the population in line.

But Hayley still wanted to see it all for herself. She wanted to witness the atrocities so she could bring awareness back to the rest of the Federation who were essentially allowing these activities to go on, unobserved and unpunished.

“I still plan on going,” Hayley admitted at last after a long contemplative pause.

“Hayley...”

“Max, don’t try to talk me out of it,” she stared at him through dark narrowed eyes. “This is the whole reason I’m doing this thing. People need to know what’s going on behind those walls. People are suffering on this planet and half the Federation doesn’t even know *or* care. Max, I didn’t become a singer just because I like singing...I knew if I became a singer I could get a message across to people. Well, I need to get this one across.”

Max sighed and shook his head. “You don’t know what those people will do to you though. You know they’ve cut off all contact with the Federation and New Liberty? They’ve closed their borders, and they consider anyone from New Liberty a traitor. How do you think they’ll feel about you when you wind up on their doorstep?”

“I don’t care. I’m a Federation citizen. Even if they arrest me for anything, they’ll have to extradite me. They can’t legally keep a Federation citizen locked up.”

“Christ Hayley, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Max shot to his feet, and marched over to the window, staring out into the city stretching out below him. “If the rumors about that place are true, they can come up with any law they want. They don’t care if you’re a Federation citizen. They’ll charge you and find a way to make it stick, I guarantee.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to not get caught,” Hayley smirked. “And hope if I do, my boyfriend will be there to get me out.”

Max glanced back at her. “You’re out of your mind Hayley,” he sighed and turned toward her. “Look, we’ve got enough on our plate as it is. Lets just concentrate on getting through tonight and tomorrow night. Maybe after you’ve been here for a few days you’ll come to your senses.”

Hayley just nodded, deciding to keep her next thoughts to herself. *Not likely...*

The first night had been amazing. The second night was shaping up to be simply phenomenal. Hayley Komit looked out across the sea of humanity that stretched from stage to the bleachers with barely enough space between the bodies to drop a penny. Over 80,000 fans filled the large arena-sized auditorium, and all were on their feet, screaming, cheering and chanting. It was an incredible sight. Despite having been at the concert game now for nearly five years, she had simply never seen this kind of a turnout on a colony. It made her feel very at home.

The music started again and Hayley began swinging her hips rhythmically. The band, an 18-piece group that was one part rock band and one part big band, had a sound that seemed like a mix of orchestra and rock. Half the band played on synthesizers, while the rest played on contemporary instruments such as drums, rhythm guitar, bass, brass and woodwinds. The sound they generated along with Hayley's singing was a bombastic mix of the modern with the classical. It was part of why her appeal was so broad. Almost everyone could find something to like about her music. The older folk liked her contemporary takes on classic music, while the younger fans enjoyed the modern sound. She figured most of the young male fans could care less about her music and were perhaps more enamored with her appearance than anything else.

That night she was wearing one of her better-known outfits. It was a strapless black single piece dress with a very short bifurcated skirt with individual leg holes that wore more like shorts. Matching long gloves and thigh high boots. The material the various articles were made of was a type of synthetic that glittered when the light hit it, making it appear as if she were covered in stars. Using a special imaging system, the lighting team could actually make her clothing glimmer more or less, make it appear as if it was twinkling or cause an almost hypnotic vortex effect. A small digital receiver, hidden beneath her dress enabled the lighting system to stay focused on her, regardless of where she stepped or moved.

As the music tempo increased, so did Hayley's movements. Swinging her hips she stepped back and forth, moved her hands over her body and rocked her head from side to side. With each step she took, the stage lit up where her foot touched, causing a luminescent glow to appear around her, one that changed colors and consistency as she moved around the glowing stage.

*Goddess on the mountain top...*

*Burning like a silver flame...*

*The summit of beauty and love...*

*And Venus was her name...*

The crowd went into an uproar. Many sung along, while others just screamed and cheered. It was an older song she sang, and not one of her own, but perhaps one of her more popular covers. As the words flowed from her lips, her gyrations became more forceful. She leaned her body back and forth, her back curving like a slithering snake.

*She's got it...*

*Yeah baby, she's got it...*

Spinning on a heel, she turned her back to the crowd, wiggling her butt and swinging her shoulders before turning around and gesturing an arm toward the crowd.

*I'm your Venus...*

*I'm your fire...*

*At your desire.*

The crowd went wild, their noise nearly drowning out the amplified sound of her voice and the band's instruments.

*Yeah I'm your Venus...*

*I'm your fire...*

*At your desire.*

She sung the last part in a whisper as the band stopped playing for a brief instant. The crowd noise died down during the short pause, but exploded as the band hit the next note, entering into the next verse. Despite being two hours into the show, the crowd was still acting like she'd just started her first song. Their energy only enhanced Hayley's own. Her movements became more animated, her singing fiercer. It was give and take all night. She was glad that the auditorium was as cool as it was, otherwise she may have been drenched in sweat by now.

When at last the song was over, a holographic fireworks display exploded over the stage, sending billions thousand of twinkling points of light fluttering down toward the stage like glittering snowflakes.

*"Thank you New Liberty!! Je t'aime!"*

Rushing back stage with the band following shortly after her, she found Max waiting for her near the doors to her dressing room. He gave her a pair of thumbs up and an elated look as she neared. But that wasn't enough for her. She threw herself into his arms and wrapped him in hers, pressing her lips against his in full view of everyone in eyeshot. She didn't care. It'd been a great two nights, and Hayley was feeling invigorated. The next two days would be hers to do as she pleased on Vega IV, with her next show on Sirius VII not scheduled for another three days. She intended to use that time to visit the Aegean colony, with or without Max's approval.

She didn't speak of it though at that moment, and simply enjoyed the embrace with her lover. Eventually he managed to get her into the dressing room and pull her off of him with some degree of effort.

"You *are* playing with fire, aren't you?" Max shook his head as he wandered over to the small refrigeration unit and pulled out a bottle of imported water. "Here," he said, handing the bottle over to the girl. "Douse yourself off."

She flashed a rather coy smirk at him as she took the bottle and popped open the top with her thumb, squeezing the bottle and letting a jet of water fill her mouth. "Wow, you really are a prude, aren't you?"

"Prude!?! Hey come on," Max lowered himself into a sofa chair. "I was the lead guitarist for the Mass Drivers for crying out loud. I was getting action when you were still in grade school learning how to add."

Hayley snickered and stuck her tongue out at her manager. "Cradle robber."

Max sighed and rolled his eyes, drawing his hands back behind his head. "Well, what do you want to do? It's still pretty early, and I have it on good authority that there's a nice little bar not far from here."

Taking another mouthful of the cool water, Hayley perched herself on the stool in front of her dressing mirror. "I want to head over to the other continent. Tonight...that way it's day time over there."

"Not this again," Max groaned, squeezing his eyes shut tightly. "Hayl, we talked about this. The Republic is not a safe place to be...at least for outsiders. They could arrest you the second you step foot in their territory and..."

"*Max!*" She snapped at him loudly. "I've already decided. I'm *going*, and I already found someone who'll take me."

The reddish-blond haired Bostonian jumped to his feet. He opened his mouth to speak, but seeing the look of utter conviction on Hayley's face, he knew there was no talking her out of it now. She'd made up her mind, and short of him handcuffing her to her bed, there was no way he was going to stop her. Gritting his teeth under tightly pursed lips, and shook his head and threw his arms up in surrender.

"Have it your way. I guess I'm going with you."

"No..."

Max's eyes widened. He threw a sideways glance at her. "No?"

"Max, if something *does* happen and I get detained or arrested or something, I'm going to need you out here to help me. If you're with me and we both get caught, well...that's it. You're the *only* one I trust."

"What about Miranda, your publicist?"

“I’ll need both of you. Miranda is great, but she’s lousy at confrontation. You on the other hand,” she snickered and shook her head. “How many arguments have we had on this trip alone? You’re a fighter. And you’re Irish, so confrontation is in your blood.”

Max smirked. “You know, you are certifiably insane. You know that, right?”

“Just part of my charm,” she gave him a wink. “Listen, I talked to the guy who said he’d transport me to the other continent this morning. He’s a courier pilot under Federation retainer.”

“Okay, so?”

“Don’t you see?” Hayley pushed herself off the stool. “Couriers are among the only non-Republic citizens allowed to get in to the Aegean colony. There’s a landing pad not far from the main arcologies where couriers and merchants are allowed to deliver and pick up supplies. So, I hitch a ride with the courier, get dropped off and then walk the rest of the way. He said he’d even come back the next day and pick me up.”

Max rubbed his face in deliberation. “Are you sure you can trust this guy?”

“He’s a Federation contractor...come on. What more do you need?”

Max couldn’t believe he was actually going along with any of this. But there was no sense in fighting with the girl. She had that French stubbornness about her. She was right though...it was one of her endearing qualities. She was strong willed, and despite being a singer, she had an adventurer’s spirit inside of her. With reluctance, he finally nodded his head.

“Well...when are you going?”

“The pilot said to meet him at the spaceport at 2200 local time.”

“That’s only about a half hour away,” Max replied, glancing at his digital wristwatch, currently set to local time and date. “You wanna change first?”

She shook her head. “No, there’s no time. I don’t mind going like this. It’s actually surprisingly warm with the gloves and leggings.”

“Well, if it’s alright with you, I’d at least like to accompany you on your flight.”

“I was hoping you would,” she gave him a small smile as she walked over to him and put his hand into hers. “Come on, I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

From the auditorium building, it was a thirty-minute trip by taxi to the spaceport. Like most of the terrestrial vehicles on Vega IV, at least the ones

Hayley had encountered, the taxis were repurposed loader vehicles, their original purpose to transport equipment and material to and from mines. They had large all terrain wheels, metal frames and were rather boxy in shape. They did have ample passenger space however. The rear cargo compartments had been covered, upholstered and furnished and could easily fit four. The driver and front passenger section was divided from the rear passenger section, though the driver could slide open a part of the glass divider if he needed to speak with his passenger.

The vehicle rumbled down the dirt roads, navigating between the densely packed temporary structures that made up well over three quarters of the colony's city infrastructure. Many people were out and about that night. Those not driving, walked along the railed walkways, though some did walk along the middle of the road, darting between passing cars, sometimes even walking along side vehicles. It was organized chaos for all intents and purposes. Though there were several major thoroughfares in the city with proper signage, most of the roads in New Liberty were completely unregulated. Pedestrians were just as free to use them as vehicles were. It made travel a somewhat trying if not hazardous affair, but those from New Liberty seemed quite adept at it.

Eventually they came to the spaceport, the taxi dropping the two off just outside the entrance. As per her instructions, Hayley made her way around the spaceport facilities to the cluster of smaller private hangars where her pilot contact said he'd be waiting for her just inside the entry gates. As expected, he was there dressed in a olive green flight suit with black boots and black gloves he had stuffed into his webbing. Meeting eyes with the girl, he gave her a nod before turning his attention to the man with her.

"Who's this?" he called out as the two neared the chain-linked gates.

"This is Max Trainor...my uh..." she peered at him through the corner of her eyes.

"Her *boyfriend*," Max jumped in, cocking his head at the girl.

The pilot twisted his lips and folded his arms as he studied the pair. "Well, I didn't agree to carry two of ya. That's gonna up my fee."

"Name your price. I'll pay it," Hayley's dark brown eyes narrowed slightly.

"Well, since there's two of you now...double it."

Without hesitation, Hayley agreed. It wasn't as if he was charging her a lot to begin with, seeing how there was nothing illegal about him taking passengers. What they did once they were off his vessel was not his problem. So it would be a 5,000-credit trip, plus another 5,000-thousand for the return trip. 10,000 credits for a round the world trip. It was small



potatoes considering you probably couldn't get a commercial ticket for that price.

Opening the gate, he motioned for the two to follow him in. From the gates, they rode a small loader truck a short distance up the holding tarmac to a small vessel parked on its own near a loading bay. The vessel was long and sleek with a hawkish front end that narrowed toward the rear. Its engines were mounted just slightly ahead of the tail within a pair of round thrust-vectoring nacelles. The vessel's wings were wide and were on a slight downward angle.

The pilot led the two to the rear of the ship where its rear loading ramp was presently deployed. Within the narrow confines of the ship's holding bay were a number of crates, each marked with a corporate emblem and labeled 'Medical'. The pilot haphazardly tossed a number of smaller boxes off of a row of seats that had been buried beneath them.

"Take your seats, we'll be taking off in a few minutes."

Hayley and Max nodded, worming their way between the cargo crates and lowering themselves into the stiff, uncomfortable chairs. As the pilot climbed the ladder to the cockpit, he glanced past his shoulder at his two passengers.

"It's a four hour trip in atmosphere and there's a ten hour time difference. It'll be about high noon by the time we get there, so if you're going to be sneaking around the colony, I suggest you stick to the shanties."

Hayley nodded and offered the pilot a smile. He nodded in return before disappearing into the cockpit. Max traded glances with his lover, and gave her a pat on the arm, giving her some reassurance. She appreciated the small comfort, and rested her head on his shoulder as the access ramp whined loudly, slowly rising to its closed position. Soon the whine of engines filled the transport interior, with a vibration steadily building up as power was applied. Within minutes, the ship was lifting into clear starlit skies. As it reached the peak of its ascension vector, its engine nacelles slowly reoriented to a rear facing position, and the ship was off.

## Chapter 2

Despite her years of traveling as a pop music superstar, Hayley had never quite mastered the art of being able to fall asleep on a flight. The same could not be said for Max however, who was out like a light within the first hour of the trip. With else little to do other than stare at the crates a few inches from her face, Hayley slipped Max's DPAD (digital personal access device) out of his jacket pocket, activating its touch sensitive screen with her thumb.

She'd managed to do some homework on Vega IV prior to her venturing to the planet. She'd always found learning of a colony's history to be one of the best way to become acclimated whenever she was on tour or just visiting new worlds for interest sake. During her first intergalactic tour, she'd missed Vega IV, mainly due to its distance from the core of Federation space, but also because the Federation had listed a travel advisory on the planet. At the time the Aegean Republic was suffering from a considerable degree of civil unrest and outbreaks of violence. Although the New Liberty colony wasn't directly affected by any of this, the advisory nevertheless meant there was a travel embargo on the planet, and only authorized personnel were allowed on or off by Federation mandate.

Though there still remained a travel advisory on the planet, the Federation's recognition and support of the New Liberty colony at least made it possible for people to visit the planet again. Visitors were however barred from entering the Aegean Republic, but not because of a Federation mandate, but because the Republic had closed its borders.

What Hayley found most fascinating though were some of the rumors regarding the Republic's incarceration methods. During their formative years, as crime and civil disobedience began growing rampant, the Republic was suffering from overcrowding in their prisons. By the end of the 2180s, there was an estimated twelve thousand inmates interred within the colony. Out of a population of just shy of six million, twelve thousand seemed like a relatively small number, but what the number represented was a terrible growing trend. In the fifty years prior to the formation of the Aegean Republic, there had only ever been ninety people charged with a criminal offense and incarcerated. And in each of those cases, the accused served no more than a 12 month sentence. With the formation of the Republic, average sentences were between 5 and 10 years, and the prison population was skyrocketing.

Unfortunately, the colony's arcologies had not been built to support the massive numbers of prisoners that were being dumped into them. And, with the colony's population growing, space was becoming a real concern, even with the most recent addition of a fourth arcology. At some point in the 2190s, the Administrative Council had decided on a new form of punishment. Though they'd toyed with the idea of carrying out mass executions, they were also worried about the potential repercussions of such an act- specifically, they were concerned that it might simply lead to further civil dissent, potentially escalating into a civil war. They were also concerned with the Federation getting involved. So far, since the Republic wasn't actually killing its citizens, the Terran Federation maintained their

distance, despite their support of the New Liberty colony just on the other side of the planet. Instead, they came up with a system of incarcerating individuals within their own bodies. The Exile Program...more precisely the Self-Confined Incarcerated Exile Program, or SCIE (pronounced – sky).

There was limited information on SCIE. What information there was on the public database was piecemeal, cobbled together from conjecture, speculation and some evidence, but not enough to come to a full, accurate conclusion.

Based on what information there was, Hayley gathered SCIE placed prisoners into special confinement suits. These suits were designed to effectively isolate and individual from the outside world by nullifying their senses, eliminating his or her individuality and identity and controlling their behavior via some sort of computerized system called ‘Warden’. Much of the technology was based on a mid 21<sup>st</sup> century program known as the Banishment Program- created by a long defunct corporation and utilized in another planned utopian society on Earth.

The Administrative Council essentially revived this program, reinvented it and modernized it to suit their needs, utilizing many of the same methods although now with much more advanced technologies at their disposal.

The first thousand test prisoners would be admitted to the SCIE program in 2197. After a year, the program proved so successful, that the Administrative Council ordered a second batch be processed. By 2200, the entire prison population had been Exiled. That same year, the Republic declared that all individuals convicted of criminal acts be Exiled. Conventional imprisonment ceased to be in the Republic by the 23<sup>rd</sup> century. Not only that, but the council had effectively culled criminal activity in their colony. People became terrified of becoming an Exile. The sight of Exiles wandering the grounds outside of the arcologies and through the shanties served as a constant reminder to every Republic citizen what would happen to them if they did anything in contravention of the Republic’s laws. Furthermore, anyone discovered aiding an Exile, even interacting with an Exile would be charged. The Exiles were to be left alone to suffer and serve out their gratuitous sentences in total isolation.

What happened with these people once their sentences were done was anyone’s guess. So far, there was no evidence to suggest than any Exile had completed their sentence yet. If any had, none were talking.

Setting the DPAD on her lap, Hayley’s eyes drifted up toward the fuselage ceiling. She couldn’t imagine being forced to live any amount of time in the kind of isolation Exiles were forced to endure. Not able to talk to

anyone. Not able to touch anyone. Forced to live outside like an animal. It was inhumane. She wanted to see an Exile for herself. These were the people she wanted to make others aware of...these forgotten, lost souls.

“*Hey back there,*” the pilots voice buzzed electronically through the ship’s intercom system. “*Just a heads up, we’re about twenty minutes away from our destination.*”

Hayley’s heart began beating faster in her chest. She was beginning to feel nervous about this, and started regretting doing that extra bit of research. All it did was serve to unnerve her. Shutting off the hand-held digital device, she shoved it back into Max’s jacket pocket, the abrupt movement causing him to stir. Groaning tiredly, his eyes slowly blinked open. Sitting up straight, he threw a glance at the young singer.

“Hey Hayl. We almost there? How long was I out?”

“Yeah, we’ll be landing in twenty minutes,” she told him plainly, twisting her lips in mildly contemplative manner.

“I know that look,” he told her, gesturing at her crooked mouth.

“What’s the matter? Having second thoughts?”

She breathed a light sigh, conceding with a nod. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t.”

“Well, then don’t go through with it,” Max offered a shrug. “You don’t have to do this.”

“No, I do,” she turned her deep brown eyes at him. “This tour will be for nothing if I don’t see what’s going on here with my own eyes. Look, we can’t just believe the New Liberty propaganda...I mean, it’s probably all true, but we won’t know that until I’ve seen the way things really are in the Republic.”

Max heaved a deep sigh, craning his head back and staring blankly through the cargo bay’s metal ceiling. “Figured it was too much to hope that you’d change your mind. You *never* change your mind.”

“I know, I’m stubborn,” she said with a hint of a smile on her glossy pink highlighted lips.

“Well good, at least you admit it,” Max replied with a snicker.

The transport shuddered as it entered a hovering position above the shipping depot’s landing pad. As its landing gear deployed, the hawkish nosed vessel slowly descended, its jets howling as they eased the craft onto one of the depot’s four topside landing pads. The depot itself was a towering structure of metal and concrete. The primary facility was atop four large reinforced pylons, like the legs of a table. On the roof of the structure, situated along the corners were large landing platforms, each capable of supporting the weight of a medium transport craft, similar to the one Hayley

first arrived on the planet in. The entire facility had the look of a massive oilrig, similar to the ones found on earth's oceans before petroleum ceased to be a viable energy source.

As Hayley, Max and the pilot disembarked, they were greeted by number of dockworkers, including the dockmaster. He gave the pilot a nod, and seemed to know him on a personal level.

“Carter. Passengers today?”

The pilot bobbed his head in a nod. “Yessir. Were interested in getting a look at the arcologies.”

“Well, tell em to get a good look,” the dockmaster gestured past the pilot's shoulder. “Won't get much closer to them then here if they're coming in from New Lib.”

Hayley and Max both turned around, looking past the ship to the four massive structures that covered the horizon. Hayley's jaw became slack as she moved toward the edge of the landing pad, staring out toward the four identical pyramidal structures that rose into the sky like massive ominous metal spikes. Each structure stood 250 stories tall, and sat nearly a mile across at the base. Hundreds upon thousands of tiny pinpoints of light covered each structure. With the sun blocked out behind them, the arcologies cast long deep shadows across the untamed grasslands spreading out beyond them. Even at several kilometers away, their sheer enormity of the structures was simply awe inspiring and intimidating. The hollow clanking and buzzing of industrial work echoed ominously throughout the area, mixed in with the unintelligible droning of various voices speaking over a PA system.

Though barely distinguishable in the dark shadows covering them, surrounding the base of the arcologies were the shanties; a collection of temporary modular building units, not unlike the ones found in New Liberty. Though not quite as expansive as New Liberty, the Aegean colony shanty town was still quite large. As far as she knew, nearly a quarter of a million people lived in the shanties...most of whom were part of the labor class.

“Listen friend,” the pilot spoke in a low tone to the dockmaster. “One of my passengers here really wants to get a closer look at them arcologies. What do you say we let her?”

“Sorry Carter, can't do it,” the dockmaster folded his arms, shaking his head. “You know the rules. Border's closed, nobody goes in or out without proper authorization. Unless she has a pass I can't...”

The pilot pulled out his DPAD, bringing up his credit scan program. “I think I got her pass right here. How's three thousand?”

The dockmaster affixed a cold stare on the other man. For a moment the pilot thought the dockmaster might turn him in to DIS right then and there. Instead, he twisted his lips, considered it for a moment then pulled out his own DPAD. "Make it five."

"Four."

"Forty-five, and that's as low as I go."

The pilot tapped a finger against the DPAD's touch sensitive screen. After selecting an amount to transfer from his credit and then finding the dockmaster's DPAD in the local devices directory, he authorized the transfer of payment with his thumbprint ID. The dockmaster's device emitted a series of beeps, letting its owner know that the bank transfer had just gone through and he was now forty-five hundred credits richer. With a smile, the dockmaster stuffed the device into his pocket, then pulled out an access card.

"24-hour pass," he said, handing the card to the pilot. "Tell her it'll let her get in and out of the New Rome arcology, but it'll only work for the next 24 hours. I assume you or someone else will be back here tomorrow to pick her up?"

"I'll be here," the pilot nodded. "Thanks Chuck."

"Pleasure doing business with you," said the dockmaster, giving the pilot a firm slap in the arm, before heading off to claim the latest shipment.

Carter marched briskly over to Hayley and Max who were still admiring the triangular silhouettes in the near distance. Detecting the pilot's approach, Hayley turned to greet him and was handed a card.

"What's this?" She queried.

"24-hour access. It'll let you get into the New Rome arcology. Just don't get caught with it. They're all encoded and registered, and without the paperwork, they'll know you have it illegally. If anything, find somewhere to hide it once you're inside. But you will need it to get back in here tomorrow. Just remember that."

Hayley took a deep breath as she tucked the card into the rim of her legging. She turned and faced Max. "Well...this is it."

He nodded in a deliberate manner. "You watch yourself out there. Don't make me regret letting you do this, *n'est-ce, pas?*"

"*Oui, mon amour.*"

"Oh, and take this," Max fished out his DPAD, and handed it to Hayley. "You never know when you may need it. You call me if you need *anything*, okay? I don't care what it takes, I'll be here in a heartbeat."

Hayley smiled and took the hand held personal computer. The two then shared an impassioned embrace, their lips locking and their hands clinging tightly together. After a long moment, they pulled apart, their lips

smacking loudly as they separated. For some strange reason, Max felt it might be a long time before he'd see her again. For an instant he didn't want to let her go for that reason. He figured he was just being paranoid.

Minutes later, Max was back on the transport and slowly lifting back into the cloudy blue skies. From the ground, Hayley watched as the shuttle carrying her manager and lover rocketed into the sky. She suddenly felt very alone and very exposed. Despite having always been a very independent young woman, she did like the security Max's presence in her life provided. When she was with him, she felt safe. She knew she could handle herself, but also knew there was nothing better than having that extra security blanket just in case things got out of control.

Pushing the feelings to the back of her consciousness, she focused on her task at hand. A wide paved strip, the first paved road she'd come across so far on Vega IV, ran from the depot, across the untouched landscape and to the colony. With her normally quick pace, she figured she could be at perimeter of the shantytown within twenty minutes. Fueled by her convictions, she started walking.

### Chapter 3

The air was comfortably cool and a little breezy, perfect weather for walking Hayley thought to herself. Her pace was steady; she wasn't rushing but she also wasn't dawdling. In her mind, she was on a mission and couldn't waste time taking in the scenery. Though the scenery was certainly beautiful. Plains of tall bluish-green grass spread out around her on either side of road, dense wooded areas just a little bit beyond those plains. On her way toward the arcology, she passed a number of dirt paths branching off from the main road with signs indicating where the paths led. One of the signs Hayley took note of read 'Vega Beach'. A colony with its own beaches, she wondered to herself with a smile. *This place would probably be paradise if such an oppressive regime wasn't controlling everything.*

Eventually, Hayley came to the shantytown's perimeter line. While there was a chainlink fence surrounding it, there were no gates, guards or anything designed to otherwise prevent someone from getting in. It didn't surprise her much. As she understood the shanties were considered by many to be the colony's ghetto, where the dregs and lower classes called home. No reason to waste effort at protecting them. She could only figure that the

Administrative Council found those living in the shanties to be an administrative burden.

The shantytown reminded Hayley of what most new colonies looked like. Clusters of temporary structures spread out haphazardly with little design as to where they would stand. A number of the structures were stacked or conjoined along the sides as per their design, forming larger structures. As Hayley got deeper into the shantytown, pedestrian traffic picked up. Men and women wandered about and children played. She noticed there were a few parked vehicles here and there, but it didn't seem like there was a particular need for vehicle ownership among the majority of the town's inhabitants. The arcologies were a quick jaunt away, and what with the closed borders, it wasn't as though anyone could go for a Sunday drive.

A few people spotted Hayley walking down the street. Her fancy clothes quickly distinguished her from the town's residence, nearly all of whom wore the drab brown and gray worker coveralls, or some variety of featureless casual clothing. She began attracting a crowd, although no one had yet said anything to her. A young man, probably no older than 18 appeared out of a gathering group of gawkers and took a few cautionary steps toward Hayley.

"Are you...Hayley Komit?"

She stopped walking and turned to face the young man, giving him a broad smile. "Yes as a matter of fact. I am!"

A buzz of chatter filled the group of onlookers, along with a spattering of applause and restrained hoots. Some appeared confounded, not quite sure what to make of her or what all the fuss was about. A wide grin formed on the young man's face as he took another step toward her.

"Wow! I heard that you were coming to Vega IV, but I figured you'd just be going to the New Liberty colony!" He said excitedly. "What are you doing here!?"

"Well, part of the reason for my tour is to bring awareness to the plight of the people on this planet. It seems like most people don't know or just don't care, but I think it's important that people *do* care."

"You shouldn't have come here," another of the onlookers spoke, stepping forward. The middle-aged man moved behind the younger man, clearly his son, and put his hands on his shoulders. "You don't realize the position you've put yourself in by entering the border."

"I understand the risks," Hayley shrugged. "Risk or not, it wasn't going to stop me from coming here."



The young man turned to face his father. “Dad, do you even know who this is? It’s Hayley Komit! You think the Directorate would try to arrest her for anything? Come on, she’s like the most famous singer in the galaxy right now.”

“I don’t care if she’s the Federation President...and neither do they,” the older man narrowed his eyes at his boy before turning them back up to Hayley. “Young lady, do yourself a favor. Turn around and go back the way you came. You’re putting all of us at risk by talking to us. Come on Lucas.”

“But...dad!” The teen pulled free of his father’s hands and spun around to face him as he and the other onlookers began to disperse. Sighing, he turned to face Hayley again. “Forget about them. They’re all a bunch of damn cowards anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Hayley folded her gloved arms.

“It’s...it’s complicated. Look, are you hungry or thirsty? We can hit the food shack, and I can tell you all about it.”

Hayley gave the young man a wink. “Sure, sounds good.”

The boy grinned widely. “Oh, cool. It’s just around the corner. C’mon!”

With a return smile, the singer followed her young fan off the main road and down one of the dirt paths that wound through the town. After a short hike they entered a partially enclosed area set up in a space between several mobile structures. A cluster of circular picnic tables were set up beneath a roofed section, a number of them occupied at that moment. One of the temporary structures making up the walls of the enclosure had a neon sign affixed to it, the word ‘Gus’s’ blinking and buzzing incessantly on it. The aroma of cooked food filled Hayley’s nostrils as she and Lucas neared the establishment. Inside they found a cafeteria-style serving line, a kitchen set up behind a long counter with a man, a woman and a young girl presently manning operations there. The young girl, who was probably a few years younger than Lucas, greeted the two as they entered. Her eyes seemed to light up as she made eye contact with Hayley.

Gasping, she could barely speak. “You’re...you’re...”

“That’s right, it’s Hayley Komit!” Said Lucas, grinned from ear to ear. “And she’s having lunch with me!”

“Ohmygosh!” The girl covered her mouth with her hands, and made a noise that sounded almost like a piglet squeal. “Can I have your autograph?” She managed to mumble through her fingers.

Hayley smiled and nodded as the girl offered her a pen and a pad of paper. “What’s your name?”

“Laryssa...with a ‘Y’ and two ‘S’s’.”

“That’s such a pretty name,” Hayley told her, as she wrote a small note for the girl, along with her signature. “Here you go Laryssa.”

The man behind the counter noticed the exchange and turned his back to the grill as he glanced at Hayley with a pleasant smile on his face. “Ms. Komit...my daughter’s a big fan of yours. You really made her day. Anything you want, it’s on the house.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t do that,” Hayley offered the man a sheepish smile.

“It’s perfectly alright. Now what’ll you have?”

“Well,” she turned her attention to the small digital screen atop the counter which listed the menu items. Her eyes locked onto the one thing she’d been hankering for all week. “Oh, the cheeseburger, definitely! And fries. And a water.”

“Domestic or import?”

“What’s the domestic water like?”

“It’s fizzy...something about the purification chemicals they put into it. Perfectly safe to drink, but you may want to stick to imported.”

“I’ll do that, thank you.”

With her tray of food, she followed Lucas out of the building and to one of the picnic tables outside. Dousing her burger and fries with ample amounts of ketchup, Hayley felt her glands ache for a moment, anticipating the flavor explosion that was imminent. The first bite was a glorious one. It’d been so long since she’d had any junk food. Her career typically prevented her from such indulgences, which was punishing for her considering she was quite a ‘foodie’. Were it not for the constant exercising she did as a child and then the dietary therapy she took as a teenager she figured she’d have weighed in excess of a two hundred pounds considering how much she used to eat when she was younger. Thank goodness for modern technology, she thought as she wolfed down the burger in a manner that was not entirely lady-like. The young boy sitting across from her seemed mildly humored by the voracity at which she ate.

“So where does this meat come from anyway? I assume you must have to grow livestock yourself...?”

“It’s all cloned,” the young man shrugged. “They only clone the parts of the animal they need.”

“I’ve never tasted cloned meat this good. Usually cloned meats have a kind of synthetic taste.”

“Well, we have the benefit of living on an earth-like planet...so we can uh...*enhance* our food with some local. natural flavors.”

Hayley finished off her burger then picked at the fries. “So, getting back to what we were talking about before. You called your dad and some of those people cowards. What’s up with that?”

“They *are* cowards,” Lucas narrowed his eyes. “The DIS...the Directorate of Internal Security, they basically get away with doing whatever they want around here. They rough people up, they shakedown businesses, they detain people for *no reason* whatsoever! And nobody does a damn thing to stop them. They get their authority straight from the Administrative Council, which means they have unlimited power to do as they please. And then there’s the Exiles...”

Hayley’s attention perked. “The Exiles...yes, I wanted to know about them. I haven’t seen any yet.”

“DIS keeps them away from the shanties. Apparently *we’re* even too good for them. A few get in now and then, but they just wander around aimlessly. They’ve got these things in their heads see, that prevent them from entering buildings and from going too far outside of the Republic. It’s almost like an invisible electrified fence. If they stray too far away, their suits start hurting them...I don’t know how exactly, but you just see them recoil in pain.”

“Have you ever tried communicating with one of them?”

Lucas shook his head vehemently. “No, never! It’s a felony to attempt to interact or communicate with an Exile. If you talk to them, touch them, heck even if you wave at them DIS will find out and will arrest you. It happened to a friend of mine. He saw one that looked like it had broken its leg...”

“You call them *it*,” an eyebrow perked on Hayley’s forehead. “They’re people too aren’t they?”

Lucas sighed scratching his head. “Yeah, I keep doing that. It’s part of the conditioning. After they started Exiling prisoners, we all had to go through a two-week virtual seminar. Every night before bed we had to watch these stupid programs that were designed to make us regard the Exiles as nothing more than objects. Most of us still know they’re people, but it’s gotten to the point now after seven years that we actually have stopped seeing them as people. It’s terrible, and I feel like crap everything I think about it...”

Hayley reached out and put a hand on Lucas’s shoulder. “It’s alright. I can understand. As a singer I’ve gone through a similar type of ‘conditioning’ designed to keep me from getting nervous on stage. I’ve basically come to see the crowd as not real. I mean, it’s not like I had to

take a seminar or anything, it's just something that came about after years performing in front of people."

Lucas nodded slowly. "Yeah...it's just one of those things you stop thinking about after awhile and just accept. Even if it makes you feel crummy. Anyway, like I was saying about my friend...he saw this one Exile that looked hurt. It was on the ground and kind of crawling, like it'd broken its leg. Anyway, my friend goes to help it, and the Exile starts going crazy as if it's being electrocuted. Well, my friend goes to tell the local DIS garrison, and they arrest him *on the spot!*"

"What happened to your friend?"

A forlorn look appeared on the young man's face as he stared off into space. "Now he's out there...one of *them*."

"He was Exiled? Just for trying to help an injured person? That's crazy!"

"That's how it is in the Republic," Lucas shook his head. "Our lives are so regimented and controlled...any infraction will result in arrest and potential Exile. But what pisses me off the most is that nobody will do a damn thing! Well...not anymore. There were people, friends of mine, who used fight back. They're all gone now though. Arrested and Exiled. A and E we call it."

"No trial?"

Lucas puffed a sarcastic snicker. "Trial? Oh sure, there's a trial. They usually don't last more than a few hours. And I've never heard of anyone who was arrested ever being found not guilty. The way the DIS sees it, if you were arrested then you *have* to be guilty. It's up to you to prove your innocence, but no one can because it's your word against theirs."

"This is unbelievable," Hayley sat back. "Well, I'm more convinced then ever that what's going on here has to stop. But I was wondering...do you think you could take me to wherever the Exiles are? I want to see one."

Lucas nodded. "Yeah. They mostly hang around outside the arcologies. That's where their buildings are."

"Buildings?"

The young man nodded again. "They have these buildings all over the place, mostly around the arcologies, but some around the perimeter. They look almost like public washroom facilities, you know that you might see at the beach or whatever. We're not supposed to go in them, but I did once. Each has maybe a dozen of these narrow stall thingies with these weird looking stools inside. The Exiles sit inside the stall and I guess go to the bathroom or something. The only thing is the stools aren't toilets, I checked."

“Alright, well do you mind taking me over to the New Rome arcology then? I have a pass to get in there.”

“Sure.” Lucas hopped to his feet and Hayley followed him.

The walk from the shanties to the arcology was a brief one. Traveling down the main road, Hayley and Lucas reached the towering structure’s outer perimeter walls within ten minutes. Uniformed security presence became more evident as they neared. DIS agents were instantly recognizable by the long leather trench coats they wore and the gasmask-like devices they wore over their faces, giving them a frightening if not alien look. They wore red sashes around their left biceps containing the letters DIS in square black lettering within a white circle. Most, if not all of them were armed with weapons Lucas identified as repulsor rifles. As opposed to firing conventional ordinance or plasma discharges, repulsor rifles fired bursts of concussive energy that could do anything from stun a person, to punch a hole through solid metal depending on how high the compression field is set. It made the weapons good as both a non-lethal crowd control weapon or for lethal takedowns.

The pair avoided the DIS sentries, following the wall along to a clearing between the arcologies that had been turned into a parkette. The grass there was neatly trimmed, and was surrounded by a smooth granite walkway and a number of granite blocks that served as benches. It wasn’t the parkette that Hayley was interested in however; it was what dwelled within. Scattered along the grassy promenade was maybe a dozen black clad figures. Hayley was frozen in shock as she absorbed the image before her. Each was covered from head to toe in what looked like a skin made of glossy black latex. The suits left almost nothing to the imagination as they tightly clung to the bodies of their wearer, forming to every contour like a second skin. Aside from the differences in body types and sizes, they each appeared identical. The only distinguishing features were the fact that the female Exiles had larger breasts than their male counterparts. Beyond that, they were all anatomically androgynous, with their reproductive organs flattened and smoothened beneath the latex-like material.

There was no way to individually recognize the Exile as their faces were concealed behind smooth rounded helmets with full facial covers. The helmets seamlessly blended in with the rest of the suit- in fact there were no seams of any kind visible anywhere on the suits, as if they were painted on.

None of the Exiles seemed aware of Hayley or Lucas’s presence in the area. They didn’t seem to be particularly aware of each other’s presence at that. They all seemed to maintain their distance from one another. A few of them sat on the benches, some on the ground. Their body language said

more than any of them ever could. Shoulders sunken, heads down, these people looked to be in absolute misery. A few of them sat with their hands pressed against their helmets where their eyes would have been and gently shook as if sobbing. Another had her arms wrapped around herself and was gently rocking from side to side with her head craned backed. None made any noise whatsoever.

“My god...” Hayley whispered, eyes widened in shock. “This is...this is...”

“This is nothing,” Lucas spoke in a low voice. “These ones are probably only a few weeks into their sentence. Most new Exiles tend to hang around here. The older ones tend to get as far away from the arcologies as they can. A lot of them tend to go out into the sewage system behind the arcologies. It’s easy to get lost out there, and since they’re all automated, there’s no people for the Exiles to bother or be bothered by.”

“This is so horrible...” Hayley couldn’t help but be saddened by what she was seeing. Despite not being able to see into the eyes of the Exiles, or see their facial expression, the despair in their body language was enough to bring a tear to her eye. “Lucas, thank you for showing this to me.”

“No problem. Anything I can do to let the rest of the Federation know what’s really going on here. Look, I need to get back. I have classes in an hour. If you want to get into New Rome, there’s an auxiliary entrance along the western side. It’s usually not guarded and accepts card key entry. It may be your best bet. Just be careful you don’t get caught.”

Hayley nodded, thanked her young friend and gave him a hug before they parted ways. Unclipping her DPAD from the hip of her skirt, she activated the device’s camera mode and took a number of photos of the Exiles in the park along and some of the arcology as a means of giving the pictures a point of reference. Satisfied with the pictures, she followed the walkway out of the parkette and around the arcology to its western side. Along the way, she spotted more guards. They didn’t seem to pay her much mind as they were busy with an Exile. One of them was speaking to the Exile, apparently through a DPAD-like device. She couldn’t make out what any of them were saying.

She passed by them with barely a glance exchanged between any of them. She soon found herself in a type of outdoor concourse area or quad with paths that ran to the other arcologies. This area was populated with more than just Exiles, although a few of the black-bodied prisoners could be seen here and there. Within the concourse there were a number of small structures- vendors as far as Hayley could tell, mostly serving food and beverages. Among the structures was a larger one where there was currently

a line up of Exiles attempting to enter, the word 'MAINTENANCE' appearing in large font along the side of the structure. The singer figured this was one of the buildings Lucas had told her about where Exiles apparently did their business.

It occurred to her that there didn't seem to be any way for the Exiles to eat. Their mouths were completely covered, and there didn't appear to be any holes or where a feeding tube or some such a device might be inserted. For that matter, there were no holes in the suit for an Exile to relieve themselves through. She couldn't quite figure then why they'd need bathrooms, if that's what they were, or if perhaps by maintenance these were like Exile hospitals.

Realizing she was staring, Hayley quickly turned away and kept walking. Few of the regular citizens occupying the concourse paid her much mind. A few did glance at her, some looking at her as though they may have recognized her, but none of them approaching her. She continued on her way, attempting to appear casual as if she belonged there. Thankfully she didn't seem to stand out quite as much there, as there were others as finely dressed as she, though most of those that were had their own personal entourages.

It took another twenty minutes of searching before Hayley found the entrance Lucas had told her about. As he'd told her, it was unguarded although there was a spherical surveillance camera affixed to a nearby street light. She wasn't concerned about the camera. She figured she'd probably been detected by numerous surveillance devices already- the fact she hadn't been stopped yet suggested they didn't consider her to be a person of interest.

Slipping the access card out from her legging, she held it over the biometric scanning device, a thin arc of light projecting onto the card and running down its length. With a receptive tone, the reader recognized the card and the steel door rolled open like an automatic garage door. Stepping inside, Hayley found herself within a long steel industrial corridor. Fortunately, she was alone, making her entry that much easier. She moved briskly down the wide corridor, taking note of some of the vehicles and devices stored within. She figured she must have been near the manufacturing wing of the arcology, as she could hear the drone of machinery and the clanking of metal on metal contact echoing through the corridor.

The corridor split off into three different directions as she came upon an intersection. Fortunately, there was signage hanging from the ceiling in the center of the intersection which identified where each path led. She

decided to follow the path marked 'Commercial Center'. After a quick hike, she came to the end of the corridor and to a set of sliding proximity doors. As she entered the door's sensor range, they split open with a metallic grinding nose.

As she passed through the doors, and then through a short connecting hallway, Hayley's eyes widened at the sight of the arcology's sprawling commercial center. It was like an enormous mall interior with a central annex that was about two city blocks wide and easily over 30 stories high with hundreds of shops, boutiques, offices and eating establishments along the edges. Thousands of men, women and children moved about the commercial center interior, popping in and out of the various establishments, some just walking, others conversing, laughing, and genuinely seeming to be enjoying themselves. It was a stark contrast to what Hayley had expected. These people were supposed to be oppressed and downtrodden and miserable! Instead these people looked no worse off than those back at home.

Hayley had barely managed to take a full step into the sprawling business center when a pair of leather coat and gasmask wearing men suddenly appeared directly in her path. One had a pistol in his hand and pointed at the young singer's head. Her heart sank and her stomach cramped as the DIS agents took custody of her.

"Don't move," one of the agent's deep voice droned through some sort of electronic vocoder device around his neck. "You're under arrest."

"Huh!? What for? I didn't do anything!"

"You're being charged with espionage and attempting to incite seditious activity," one of the agents moved around to her back and bound her wrists with plastic restraining bands. "Lets go."

Hayley was in a state of shock as the agent pushed her forward. She couldn't even think of anything to say. Fear gripped her heart, causing her vision to tunnel and the ambient noise around her to turn into a hollow, distant hiss.

## Chapter 4

It'd been two days since Hayley's arrest. In that time she hadn't been allowed to speak to anyone, call anyone, or even make a statement regarding her arrest. She'd been processed, stripped, searched and then placed naked into a holding cell. And for two days, she sat in that holding cell awaiting trial. Though she'd been fed and allowed to wash, they had not provided her with any clothing. She was thankful she was the sole occupant of her cell,



though still felt the treatment to be beyond humiliating. At last, her trial date had come, only two days after her arrest. There was no arraignment. She had not met with an attorney to discuss her case. No one had even given her so much as an explanation as to why she'd been charged with the things they'd accused her of. Espionage. Inciting seditious activity. They made her sound like a spy!

When her trial came, she'd been given a drab gray coverall to wear. She was then taken to a large room somewhere within the arcology that looked like some kind of non-descript boardroom. The only furnishings inside were a podium placed in the center facing a long table with three chairs behind it. Behind the podium and to its left was a smaller table with two chairs.

With restraints around her wrists, Hayley was escorted into the room and made to stand at the podium. Waiting for her were two men and a woman seated at the table in front of her and two men in dark suits at the table behind her.

"Will the accused please state their name," one of the three members of the judicial board facing Hayley spoke in booming voice that made her wince slightly.

"Hayley...Hayley Komit..er...Hayley Cormier."

"Well which is it? Komit or Cormier?" The judge barked angrily.

"My birth name is Cormier...but legally its Komit, now."

"Fine. Ms. Komit, the state has accused you of the following; espionage, consorting with the enemy, willfully attempting to incite seditious activity, unlawful entry and illegal association. How do you plead?"

"Your honor...I...I don't know what's going on. If I could just..."

"You will enter a plead Ms. Komit, or I will find you in contempt!"

The judge raged, banging a fist on the table.

Hayley shrank, hiking her shoulders and shying her body away slightly. "N-not guilty!"

"The accused has entered a plead of not guilty. State Prosecutor, you may make your opening remarks."

"What!? Don't I at least get a defense council?"

"Ms. Komit, whether you are aware of it or not, the Republic has abolished lawyers," the female judge spoke in an even tone. "It is therefore the onus of the accused to prove their innocence to the court. Now, one more outburst and you *will* be found in contempt."

Hayley felt as if she'd awoken into a nightmare. What kind of a place was this? No defense for the accused. Guilty until proven innocent. No

arraignment. No communication with the outside world. This place truly was as horrible and oppressive as they said. She could hardly believe anyone would choose to live in a place like this. Yet from what she'd seen, the only people really suffering were those who chose to live in the shanties and those who'd been sentenced to Exile. Everyone else seemed content. It was madness! She wondered how a society could possibly exist like this.

For the next four hours, she was forced to listen as the State Prosecutor hammered away at her. He brought in witnesses. The dockmaster from the depot who the pilot had bribed to get her a pass. He testified against her, claiming *she* herself had bribed him for the access pass. As it turned out, he had contacted DIS shortly after she'd left the depot and they'd been waiting for her to use the pass.

Further, the Prosecutor brought up surveillance footage of her speaking to members of the community, and then footage of her taking pictures of the Exiles. They even had her DPAD, which they used to further incriminate her by forcing her to show the pictures she'd taken with it.

After four hours of being battered with evidence to implicate her, the State rested and it was Hayley's turn. But she was no legal professional, and she certainly didn't know much about the laws of the Aegean Republic. She had only one defense, and argued that as a Federation citizen, she had the right to choose extradition and be tried in Federation court for her crimes. The Judiciary board disagreed. She then argued that as a Federation citizen, she had the right to speak with a Federation representative before the trial could be concluded. This they conceded.

And so, stripped again, she was placed back into her holding cell for another two days. On day 4, she was dressed and escorted to a small conference room within the DIS station in the New Rome arcology. There, four individuals awaited her, including one familiar face.

"Max!" She tried running to him but was held back by her guard.

"Hayley!" Max jumped to his feet and had to fight back the urge to strike back at the guard. At the urgings of the Federation ambassador, he slowly lowered himself back into his seat. "I promise, we'll get you out of this!"

Hayley was sat down across from the Ambassador, his aides and Max. The Ambassador, a middle aged dark skinned man with glasses wore a look of apology on his face as if it were somehow his fault Hayley was in the predicament she found herself in.

"Ms. Komit, I'm Ambassador Davin Kurtis. First, I would like to let you know that we are completely aware of your situation and charges, and

are doing everything within our power to see that you are released into our custody.”

“Thank you, Ambassador,” she tipped her head in an appreciative bow. “What’s going to happen to me?”

Kurtis drew his hands together atop the table. “I’ve been speaking with the Senior Chairman of the Colony, a mister Elias Spender at considerable length regarding these proceedings. I’ve been attempting to negotiate your release but...well I’m afraid they’re not willing to negotiate until the trial is complete. The problem is you see, the Federation is at a critical juncture with the Aegean Republic. This incident could not have happened at a worse time. Tensions are high due to the Federation’s support of the New Liberty colony and our position toward the Aegean Republic’s status as a Rogue State.

“To put it bluntly Ms. Komit, I believe we may have no choice but to allow the trial to conclude for better or for worse,” Kurtis cleared his throat.

“Then what!? Let them throw me in jail or worse?”

“We won’t let that happen. As I said, the Senior Chairman has said he will not negotiate until after the trial. Once the trial is concluded, I have faith that they will allow you to be extradited back to the Federation. I promise, you will not serve any prison time on this planet.

Tears rolling down her cheeks, Hayley turned to Max. She tried reaching out to him, but her arms were pinned down by her restraints which were connected to her belt. “Max...”

“Be strong Hayley,” he spoke in a reassuring voice. “Let these fools have their day in their little kangaroo court. Then we can get out of here. They just want to make an example out of you, that’s all.”

Hayley breathed a heavy sigh, sniffing as she wiped the tears from her cheeks with her shoulder. She wasn’t convinced though she prayed Max was right. After speaking with the Ambassador for a few more minutes, the young singer was escorted back to her holding cell. 24 hours later, she was standing before the Judiciary board once again.

“Ms. Komit, do you have anything left to say in your defense before we make our verdict?”

She simply shook her head. She had nothing to say to these people anymore. She stood with a defiant look, her head held high and shoulders straight, as if daring these bastards to do their worst.

“Hayley Cormier Komit, we the Judiciary board of the Vega IV Aegean Republic, New Rome district, hereby render our verdict. On the charge of espionage, in a two-to-one decision finds you not guilty...”

Hayley breathed a sigh. She knew she was far from being out of the woods though.

“On the charge of attempting to incite seditious activity. The board unanimously finds you not guilty.”

Hayley’s heart skipped a beat. Two out of five! Perhaps this show trial wasn’t as showy as she’d originally thought it would be.

“On the charges of consorting with the enemy, illegal entry and illegal association, the board unanimously finds you guilty as charged.”

A sharp gasp escaped Hayley’s lips as the final verdict was blurted out. It felt as though her heart had dropped into her stomach like a stone. A wave of nausea filled her body, threatening to keel her over. Grabbing onto the sides of the podium, she steadied herself as the judges looked on, unfazed by her physical reaction.

“Due to your status as a Federation citizen, the maximum possible sentence for your crimes, 40 years in exile, is commuted. It is the decision of this court however that you undergo self-confined interred exile for a period of no less than eighteen months, to be carried out immediately. Court is adjourned,” with a bang of his gavel, the judge and the other members of the board rose to their feet and shuffled out of the room.

“NO!” Hayley screamed as her guard escorts grabbed her by the arms. “Don’t put me in one of those things! Please god, NO! NOOO!”

Her screams carried through the corridors as she was dragged off for processing.

Within two hours of her sentence being handed out, Hayley found herself stripped again and laying on an examination table in what appeared to be some kind of high tech doctor’s office. The smell of disinfectant hung heavy in the air, and the bright overhead lights were causing Hayley to grimace. Padded straps crossed over her neck, breasts, waist, thighs and ankles, pinning her to the padded surface of the raised table. The doctor had injected her with something that made her woozy, but didn’t completely incapacitate her. Her body felt like it weighed a ton, and in the higher than earth’s gravity, it felt that much heavier. Even moving her mouth to speak was difficult, as if lead weights were attached to her jaw bones. Not that she had much to say at that moment...at least to any of these people.

The doctor, a young woman with tan skinned and Asiatic features with a nametag reading ‘Savan’ ran a number of tests on Hayley including blood work, a urine sample and even a dental examination. She seemed pleased with how she was checking out, smiling and telling Hayley she was doing a ‘good job’ through the examination, which greatly unnerved Hayley.

How could this woman be so callous? Did she not know what was happening here?

“Don’t worry Ms. Komit, Exile is nothing to be afraid of. It may seem inhumane to you, but you weren’t here when our prison population was out of control. 12,000 inmates crammed into detention centers designed for not even a quarter of that number. By comparison, the SCIE program is a god send for those poor souls who had to endure those conditions for so many years.”

The attempted consolation angered Hayley. She wanted to lash out, but the drugs in her system kept her compliant.

The doctor walked out of sight as she rounded the table to Hayley’s head. Pressing a button, she caused the table to readjust its position like an easy chair, snapping Hayley into an upright position. The motion was jarring, but her body was so numb she barely felt it. She felt the doctor take a handful of her hair, her scalp being tugged gently as the doctor ran an electric shearing knife through her shoulder length locks, giving her hair a short uniform look similar to a fade and a pixie cut. She then shaved a small patch at the base of her skull completely before turning to retrieve a sleek looking jet injector.

“I’m about to implant your Warden receiver. Now, you’re going to feel a crunch. It might feel like you just bit into a piece of hard candy.”

The doctor placed the nozzle of the jet injector just below Hayley’s skull over the shaved area and depressed the trigger. With a loud *pop-hiss* the injector fired. Hayley grit her teeth and her muscles contracted as her ears filled with a crunching sound like someone had thrown a snowball at the back of her head. A sharp pain ran up her spine for a few seconds, eventually returning to numbness. With a heavy sigh her body relaxed again.

“Good. Lets see if it’s working,” Doctor Savan picked up a tablet-sized DPAD from a nearby table. “Reading 100% network efficiently. Very good. It should take Warden about four hours to calibrate and get you fully registered on the system. In the meantime, it’s time to get you up, showered and get one last meal into you.”

Savan picked up another jet injector from her tool tray, pressed it against Hayley’s neck and depressed the trigger. The instant the drug entered her system, she could feel the drug induced numbness begin to dissipate. Her body was stiff and aching from the various physical examinations she’d undergone over the course of the past few hours, and her head was aching. It wasn’t a terrible pain; it felt somewhat akin to a mild hangover. She felt fatigued and a little droopy. As a pair of armed guards

entered, Savan released Hayley from her restraints and helped her to her feet. Hayley pulled sharply away from the doctor with a grunt, wanting nothing at all to do with her. Much to her anger, the doctor dismissed her resistance with a small smirk. Never before had Hayley wanted to strike another person than she did at that moment. The insensitivity and complete lack of empathy this woman was displaying was in a word, repulsive.

She was glad to be out of the doctors office, if only briefly. The guards placed her in a stall in an adjoining section of the medical bay, one that sealed closed with an automatic glass door. Above her head, a shower faucet turned on but did not release water as she'd expected. Instead, it deposited a thick, milky white gel-like substance that had an odor not unlike kerosene. The sight of the substance caused a wave of mild panic to fill Hayley's body.

"What is this stuff!?" She cried, as the fluid continued to pour onto her, completely coating her body after several seconds.

*"It's a mild dermal inhibitor, designed to slow the growth of your hair, fingernails and so forth."* Doctor Savan's voice droned over a PA system. *"It depresses your hair follicles and skin cells. It's normally used for cosmetic procedures- keeps people looking young and such. Consider that an added bonus."*

After several minutes of having the greasy liquid pumped onto her body, the shower nozzle switched to water, rinsing the excess gel off her body. When the water stopped flowing, the glass door slid open and the guards ushered her out. Still sopping wet, she was then taken to a holding area within the medical bay, given some food and allowed a few hours to rest. In no mood to eat, but desperately wanting to exorcize some of her aggressions, she hurled the tray of food across the small room. The tray hit the wall with a satisfying metallic clank, sending food particles in every direction. With her head buried in her hands, she dropped down onto the floor and began to sob uncontrollably.

The reality of her situation was quickly coming into focus. She was going to be exiled...turned into one of those wretched, faceless, black latex clad souls. Fear, sadness, hopelessness and despair were her only company in the small holding cell she occupied. She couldn't believe this was really happening. After all the warnings she'd arrogantly defied, all the boasting she'd said about being able to take care of herself, all of the assurances she'd made to not only her manager but her own family, here she was, a prisoner of the Aegean Republic.

It was at that moment that her thoughts turned to her mother and father, both of whom were so far away, on a whole other planet. She

wondered if they knew what had become of their daughter, and wondered what they were thinking at that moment if they did? She would have given anything to be at home in Montreal at that moment, wondering if she'd ever see it again.

She let out an agonizing wail as all of her anger, fear and desperation bubbled to the surface.

## Chapter 5

With each passing hour, Hayley became more and more convinced that she was not going to get out of this- that the Federation ambassador wasn't going to storm in with a squad of Fleet Marines and demand her release. Her feelings of hopelessness and isolation only grew in intensity.

Roughly twelve hours after being deposited in the medical bay's holding room, the guards returned. Attempting some passive resistance, Hayley refused to cooperate with their orders and remained seated in the corner of the room. It was the last time she'd attempt to defy her captors. While one of the guards forced her onto her feet, the other raised his repulsor rifle, and on the lowest setting fired a shot of concussive energy directly into her body. The feeling was like getting kicked in the stomach by a professional punter. Air rushed out of her lungs, and pain ripped through her, causing her to keel forward. She wretched, unloading the contents of her stomach all over the highly polished floor.

"Get up," one of the DIS agents barked. "Or the next one's going into your head."

She complied...at least she attempted to. Struggling to get to her feet while gasping for air, she slipped on the puddle of her own stomach fluids and crashed into the floor. Growing impatient the guards hauled her up onto her feet and basically dragged her back into the medical bay. They passed through a series of rooms before winding up in a large chamber that appeared more like a computer room than a medical station. A number of computer consoles with holographic displays were set up along the room, each apparently hooked to other devices. The other devices consisted of two large disc-shaped pads, one on the floor and one hanging from the ceilings and two long curved panels that stretched from the upper pad to the lower one. Along the lower was a deep circular groove about two inches wide. The floor on the inner part of the circle was jet black while the rest of the pad was that typical pasty white seen everywhere else throughout the medical bay.

Hayley was placed on an examination table within the chamber and once more restrained. Doctor Savan appeared a few moments later pushing her instrument tray with her.

“Ah, good morning. It’s a big day today, Ms. Komit how are you feeling today?”

“Fuck you!” She spat her words like acid at the doctor.

The raven-haired woman smiled, picked up her DPAD from the tray. She pressed something on the screen, causing a strange high pitched whine to fill Hayley’s head, as if the sound was originating from somewhere within her. It lasted but a second, and wasn’t painful or uncomfortable in the least, it was just strange.

“Now, I’ll ask you again...how are you feeling today?”

“Go fuck yourself!”

“Warden HK14. Punishment protocol, level 4.”

Hayley’s body suddenly became very stiff as every muscle in her body contracted tightly, as if an electrical shock was running through her. Her lips curled back and her teeth clenched tightly. Her hands balled into tight fists and her toes curled as she let out a painful grunt. The sensation ceased after a good ten seconds, but what felt to Hayley like an eternity. She let out a deep heaving sigh as her muscles relaxed, the pain totally dissipating. Aside from a little bit of stiffness and being out of breath, there seemed to be no residual pain left over from the attack, whatever it had been.

“That’s better. Now Ms. Komit, how are you feeling today?”

“Like shit, okay!?! What the hell was that!?” She gasped for air, her face wracked with a look of fear.

“That was the Warden system in effect. The implant that was placed inside of you is a neural receiver. It can transmit and receive information to and from the Warden central computer. Think of it like a wireless router connected to your brain and to the Warden computer. Warden sends commands directly to your brain through the implant and can trick your central nervous system into believing you’re experiencing a number of different kinds of stimuli. There are ten levels of pain threshold. What you experienced was level 4, which is roughly the equivalent of a tazer. It causes all the muscles in your body to contract as if you’re being electrocuted.”

Hayley swallowed hard. Given how intense the pain of level 4 had been, she couldn’t even imagine what the higher levels felt like.

“Now, lets get your plumbing hooked up.”

Savan disappeared for a moment, returning a few seconds later with a nurse and a strange object in her hand. The object, or rather objects as there



were two of them, were approximately 20 centimeters long and shaped like phalli. They were connected to a long thin pad-like strip, and separated by about three inches. Hayley stared through terror filled eyes as she quickly realized exactly where they was going.

“Resist and you’ll be punished,” said Savan, as her nurse reconfigured the position of the examination table so Hayley’s legs were in the air. The nurse undid several of Hayley’s restraints, forcing her legs apart while holding them up. Savan slowly moved the lubricant dripping device down to the young woman’s clitoris and anus and gently shoved the two ends in.

She let out a painful and deeply humiliated cry. Her body writhed in both discomfort and to her shame, arousal as the two rubbery phalli penetrated deeply into her body. She moaned, tears streaming down her face as Savan sealed her clitoris and anal with the device’s padded end, leaving a smooth, black rounded surface between her legs. The nurse released Hayley’s leg, repositioning her into a flat laying position. Letting her writhe and squirm with the two devices buried deeply within her.

“Wh...why?” She could only mutter, looking at Savan through tear soaked eyes.

“Waste reclamation units. They interact with the Exile maintenance stations. Don’t worry, you’ll get an orientation before we send you out,” Savan crossed the lab, entering a nearby cabinet. “Now then, Ms. Komit, lets get your new eyes put in.”

Hayley breathed a shallow gasp. What could she mean her *new* eyes? Did they intend to remove her eyes and put new ones in? Everything she’d read about the SCIE project, there had been no mention of major invasive surgery. But then there was plenty about the project she didn’t know, and most of what she read was conjecture anyway. She began to panic, but the drugs and restraints kept her from doing anything but squirming. As Savan returned, she noticed the girl’s frantic behavior.

“It’s not what you think,” she said with a pleasant smile as she held up a small box in front of Hayley. Inside were two small convex lenses. Like contact lenses, only their surfaces were totally opaque. “Optic sensor receivers. They will enable to see once your helmet is on by linking your visual receptors the helmet’s exterior sensor network. Now just relax.”

Easier said than done, Hayley thought bitterly to herself. She was breathing heavily for all she’d endured so far the last hour alone, sweat was dripping down her body. The nurse held her eyes open as Savan dropped the contacts in one at a time. They stung furiously for several seconds, causing Hayley’s blood to burn. She moaned loudly as she thrashed against her restraints.

“Warden HK14. Engage optic sensor and compensate for contact stimulation.”

The stinging sensation in Hayley’s eyes abruptly came to a stop. As she opened her eyes, she found herself in a gray, under-saturated world where colors seemed muted, shaded areas were black and devoid of detail, and well lit areas were almost too bright to look at. Grunting, she squeezed her eyes shut, turning her head away from Savan who was looking down at her.

“Very good so far,” said the doctor as she undid her patient’s restraints. “Now, please stand up and come with me, Ms. Komit.”

Hayley was hesitant, but then remembered they could induce pain whenever they wanted. She didn’t want to experience level 5 or above. She didn’t even want to experience level 4 again. With some discomfort, she crawled off of the examination bed, opened her eyes a crack and hobbled after Savan over to one of the four circular platforms within the room. Savan guided her to the center of the platform within the black circle on the lower pad.

“Good, now just stand there. Warden HK14, ensure compliance.”

Hayley felt her body stiffen. Though there was no pain, she couldn’t move in inch, not even wiggle a finger or toe. The loss of bodily control was a horrible feeling. Already she was feeling like a prisoner in her own body, yet she knew this was only the beginning. Savan moved over behind the computer with the holographic display and began manipulating the projection with her hands. The two panels on either side of the platform running from the overhead pad to the underfoot one suddenly came to life, crackling with electricity. Hayley could feel the static discharge on her body, feeling what was left of the hair on her head stand up.

From the groove cut into the lower pad a ring, about a meter wide in diameter, began lifting into the air, drawing a thick clear liquid-like plastic film over Hayley’s body. Looking down, she watched in muted shock as the film sheathed her body, the static field causing it to congeal smoothly and tightly over her skin. Hayley squeezed her eyes shut and pursed her lips as the ring lifted the film over her head, forming a seamless seal at the top of her skull.

The sensation of the laminate tightening around her body filled Hayley with mix of dread and panic. Her eyes opened widely as did her mouth. As she inhaled sharply, her mouth and nostrils filled with the plastic film, the material stretching deeply into her open mouth, clinging to her lips tightly and forming a mold around her teeth and tongue. Unable to move, she could only stand as she was suffocated.

Savan stepped out from behind her console and took a step onto the raised platform. “Warden HK14, adjust membrane and conform to subject body. Ms. Komit, take a deep breath and move your arms. Then take one step forward.”

Hayley felt the seal in her throat open, gasping deeply for air as she began pulling her arms off her sides. As the membrane stretched, it filled in and sealed the tears left along the sides of her body, seamlessly rejoining together. She did the same with her legs taking a step and creating a gap between them. Again the membrane resealed, tightly forming to the curves and contours of her body.

“How do you feel?” Savan asked, her voice coming through slightly muffled thorough the clear plastic-like substance covering the girl’s ears.

“Weiod...” Hayley muttered in reply, her inability to move her tongue beneath the plastic sheath making her ‘R’s’ sound like ‘aw’s’. “What is it?”

A small, pleased smile appeared on Dr. Savan’s lips. “Plasmic membrane. Made of a cocktail that includes semi organic material and the latest in nano-technology. It prevents sweating, saliva production and will maintain your body temperature. Further, it dulls sensation by inhibiting your tactile sensors. Please return to the examination bed.”

Hayley took a single step. The sensation of moving within the clear plastic sheath was a bizarre one to say the least. The membrane stretched with her body like a second skin and didn’t bunch up anywhere as she swung her arms and legs. Though her toes were conjoined, her fingers were all individually sealed. She brought a hand to her face as she stepped down from the platform, and slid her fingers down her tightly sealed face, letting out a small whimper at the lack of sensation in either her fingers or her cheek. There was no friction as she traced her hand down her cheek and down her chest, over her breasts and to her stomach. It was like being covered in a thick layer of baby oil, but with no residue.

Stepping back onto the padded table, she laid herself down, only to be sat up as the doctor adjusted its position. The nurse appeared, carrying with her a pair of smooth insole-looking objects, both covered in some kind of gummy pink looking substance on their topside. The nurse placed both of the padded soles on Hayley’s feet, pressing them firmly against her base of her membrane-covered feet. The soles made a rather unpleasant squishing noise as the nurse worked them in, ensuring they were perfectly conformed to the young woman’s feet.

Once the nurse had finished, Savan reappeared from a side room carrying with her two long ovular sections that resembled two perfectly halved eggshells. The outwardly rounded portions of the two halves

contained a number of small round dots, each the approximate diameter of a ten-cent piece.

“Now just relax,” said Savan as she slowly drew the two halves of the helmet on either side of Hayley’s head. “Warden HK14. Ensure compliance and prep for helmet application.”

The membrane coating the inside of Hayley’s nose suddenly sealed as Savan pushed the two halves of the helmet together. The young singer felt her head sink into the semi-fluidic insulation that filled the interior of the two halves. The excess squished out of the narrowing gap between the two halves like a jelly filled donut being crushed. The pressure buildup around Hayley’s head was becoming quite intense, like a pair of large jaws enclosing around her skull. A considerable amount of the paste-like insulation filled her mouth, forcing Hayley to swallow it. Though she couldn’t taste it, the paste did have a gritty quality about it that made swallowing it unpleasant. When at last enough of the excess filling had been displaced the two sides of the helmet joined together with an audible click that Hayley felt down her spine. The feeling of her head being locked into its own personal casket was a horrible one. Hayley couldn’t move her jaw and could just barely move her lips. She was blind, deaf and the pressure around her head was causing intense feelings of claustrophobia. She began to panic. Fortunately she didn’t seem to have a problem breathing. It was a small blessing however, as her body began to quake from the terrible feeling of entrapment she was experiencing.

“Warden HK14, reset optics. Set to receive from sensory network 12632.”

Hayley suddenly found herself able to see through the helmet. Moving her eyes around, she found she had an almost completely unobstructed 180-degree view. She did notice an unusual interpolation effect as she moved her eyes from side to side and up and down, causing objects to blur slightly. It was caused by a delay between the time images were received by the sensors on the helmets, converted into data, received by the optical lenses and translated back into images. Everything still had a very muted, unsaturated look about it though which depressed Hayley considerably. At least being able to see again helped to calm her.

“Warden HK14, initialize auditory sensor. Ms. Komit? Can you hear me?”

Hayley turned her head toward the doctor, finding she could hear her rather clearly now through the helmet though it was more like the woman’s voice was speaking directly into her head as opposed to through her ears.

Savan took the gesture as an acknowledgement that she could hear her voice. “Good. You’ve done well so far. There’s just one more step. Please stand up and follow me.”

“Fucking bitch...” Hayley muttered through her clenched teeth, hopeful that her words couldn’t be heard through the helmet.

The fact that the woman made no indication that she’d heard the insult seemed to confirm as much. The young singer climbed off of the examination bed once more and followed the doctor out of the chamber. Passing through a connecting corridor, the two entered into a small room, containing a raised circular platform not unlike the ones in the previous room though smaller and lacking the side panels. Upon entering the new area, Hayley saw she wasn’t the only one in there. Three others were standing inside, lined up along the wall next to the platform device. All of them, like Hayley were covered in clear, glossy membranes and their heads were concealed beneath the spotted metallic eggshell-like helmets. Of the three, two were male and one female. Based on body shape, one of the men appeared to be middle aged, the other perhaps in his late teens. The girl was definitely a teenager. It quickly occurred to Hayley who these people were. Lucas, Laryssa, the girl from the cafeteria and her father or possibly Lucas’s father.

“Oh no...no...god no!!” Hayley moaned.

One by one the three stepped up onto the platform. A ring-like apparatus appeared from the base of the platform around the person standing within and lifted up, dragging a sheet of black, liquid latex-like material up over the body and sealing seamlessly over the helmet, forming a perfect second skin. When the latex was fully sealed, the incarcerated individual spread their arms upon command, wiggles their fingers and stepped off the platform, causing the latex to reform wherever it had bifurcated and separated.

“The final layer serves three main functions,” Savan said to Hayley as she watched in silent horror as the young girl ahead of her was tightly wrapped in a latex sheath. “It adds to your isolation by further inhibiting your tactile sensors. Provides protection from the elements. And lastly it serves as a psychological buffer for other citizens, helps them to disregard you and not be able to identify you individually.”

Soon it was Hayley’s turn on the platform. Standing in the center of the platform she closed her eyes, her body quivering from fear as she silently prayed for a miracle to get her out of this. Her prayers went unanswered. Like a partially liquefied sheet, the latex-like material was drawn over her body, encasing her already encased form in a layer of glossy, solid black

material. This time she could barely feel the application, except for the slight pressure caused by the material as it tightened around her body.

“Now take a step, move your arms, wiggle your fingers,” Savan commanded.

She couldn't take it anymore. Her desperation and anger had reached a boiling point and began overriding her fear. She thrashed wildly, kicking her legs and throwing her arms in a fit. Beneath her helmet she screamed and cursed. Digging her smooth, rounded fingertips into her body, she desperately tried to claw the skin-tight material off.

“Warden HK14. Punishment level 1.”

A surge of pain ripped through the young girl's body. It lasted only a second, but it was an intense second, like she'd just gotten a thousand consecutive bee stings throughout her body. She cried out in pain and stumbled, falling from the platform and collapsing on the floor.

“On your feet, Ms. Komit.”

Slowly Hayley climbed back to her feet. She looked down at her hands and her body, seeing only a body made of black latex where hers used to be. She began shaking as she stood up straight, fear, sadness and anger filling her. She could hardly fathom having to spend the next year and a half like this...a prisoner in her own body. Unable to feel. Unable to communicate. Isolated. Alone...It was almost too much for her to be able to withstand. She felt like collapsing...her knees quivered and her body and hands shook. She wanted to cry out. She wanted to *lash* out. She wanted to rip this junk off her head and off her body and run into Max's arms. She wanted to get off this horrid planet and go back home. She wanted to crawl into her bed and sleep forever.

She wanted to die.

## Chapter 6

With processing complete, Hayley and the other newly processed Exiles were herded out of the labs and brought to another part of the medical bay where a number of seats had been set up, along with a cylindrical device that appeared like a low standing stool situated within a narrow stall. The four were seated along a row of chairs, and allowed to rest for about an hour before they were joined by a rather large square shouldered man with trimmed moustache and goatee, wearing a white formal tunic with a red arm band with the DIS mark on it.

He began speaking almost immediately as he entered the room, and spoke with a heavy Russian accent. “I am Senior Administrator Sergei

Tereshkova. I am also Director of Directorate of Internal Security. *You* are now Exiled. That means you are all prisoners. As such, there are certain rules you will all be expected to adhere to during the term of your exile, as well as certain expectations we have for you.

“First, as an Exile, you are no longer officially an individual. You are not a citizen. You are not property. You have no name, and you have no identity. You are *non-existent*. As such, you will be allowed *no* communication with the outside world. Any and all unauthorized interactions with a citizen, Republic or otherwise, is an offense. Further, any interactions among other Exiles is also an offense. When you leave this place the Warden system will activate a proximity sensor...any time you are within five meters of another Exile, you will be punished. The suits are designed to foster a sense anonymity, you are therefore restricted from wearing clothes, jewelry or anything symbols that might be used to suggest an identity.”

Tereshkova went on, explaining that in the event that they are approached by a citizen, they will ignore him or her and move away from the area. If a citizen requires room to move, then the Exile will move out of the way. Exiles had no right of way; they had no rights at all except the right to be able to complete the term of their sentence.

“As Exiles, you are not authorized to enter any public or private structure, except for the designated maintenance facilities. You are free to move anywhere within the thirty kilometer radius of the Republic controlled zone. That means you are free to occupy the parks and beaches. However, because of complaints and the confines of the shantytown, access there is restricted.

“You will comply to any order given by a DIS agent. These are the only citizens you are authorized to communicate with. In the event of a serious injury, you will contact a DIS agent. *No one else*. If you attempt to communicate with someone else, you will be punished.”

Hayley instinctively drew her hands up to her eyes, but was stopped short by the helmet. Nevertheless, she pushed her palms against the helmet’s smooth black surface and shook her head in dismay.

“Finally, you will be required to visit a maintenance bay at least twice a day. This is not a directive, this is biology. From the maintenance bay you will be provided with nutrient sustenance, have waste extracted, and undergo regular cleaning. The Warden system will advise you when you need to go for maintenance. I will now demonstrate how the maintenance system works. You,” the square shouldered man aimed a finger directly at Hayley. “Stand up.”

Pensively, she rose to her feet. Taking her by the hand, Tereshkova jerked her toward the cylindrical device. Along the floor on either side of the cylinder were foot holes, the words 'STAND HERE' printed in bold red letters beneath them.

"Now, place your feet in the proper position."

Hayley was hesitant to do so. However, the fear of more punishment served as a quick motivator. Setting her feet in the shallow foot-shaped grooves her hands were suddenly drawn to the two handle bars on the walls on either side of her just above her shoulder level. It was like an electro magnet had been activated and her skin was made of metal. Her hands tightened around the bars as an audible whirring noise filled the air. She looked down and noticed that the cylinder between her legs had opened up. As if possessed, her knees bended on their own, putting Hayley into a squatting position. Unseen by her and unfelt, the glossy black material along her sphincter began sinking into her anus and clitoris, forcing both apart. Intense pressure began building up in her neither region, causing the young singer to yelp in more surprise than pain.

A pair of smooth rubbery hoses with balled tips extended from the now open cylinder, and entered her body, sliding up into the phallic-like devices that were already inside of her. Next came a rather alien sensation as her bodily waste was sucked out of her followed by a surging cold sensation that caused her to body to jerk spastically and a moan to escape her lips. This was followed by the sensation of her body being filled. She could feel her stomach distend to the point where she felt as though she'd just eaten a large meal.

The hoses finally retracted and the cylinder closed, Hayley finally able to remove her hands from the rails and stand up straight. Slowly as she turned around and faced the other seated Exiles who'd been forced to watch her throughout the entire process. She felt a wave of intense humiliation fill her, along with a feeling of nausea induced by the indignity of what she'd just gone through.

"Very good," said Tereshkova. "You may sit down."

Wrapping her arms around herself, Hayley limped back over to her chair, feeling the eyes of the other prisoners on her, even though she couldn't see them. She wondered what was going on behind those dark helmets. Were they laughing at her? Grinning mischievously at the indignation she'd been submitted to? Or were they looking at her with pity, knowing that it was something they would all have to endure eventually? The female among them began to shake noticeably. She shifted around in



her chair, tightly squeezing her thighs together while holding a hand against the lower part of her helmeted face. She was terrified, Hayley could see.

“Maintenance stations are located throughout Republic territory. There are approximately 50 stations, each with 24 alcoves such as this within. As I explained before, the Warden system will inform you when you are required to check in for maintenance. That is all you need to know. The rest you will learn out there. Doctor Savan will be in shortly to see you out.”

The square-shouldered Russian briskly marched out of the room, leaving the Exiles to their own devices for a brief moment. The raven-haired Doctor Savan appeared a few minutes later along with a pair of DIS agents in tow. With her DPAD, she stepped up to each Exile individually and addressed them, starting at Hayley.

“Prisoner Komit, Hayley. You are no longer an individual. You are now HK14. On your feet.”

Slowly, Hayley slid off her chair and stood up. It was official. She was an Exile. A person, but not a person. She wasn't even an object. She was a phantom. A shadow of her former self. Just one of over twelve thousand others.

Savan went down the line. The smaller male was designated LD22, the larger male AD43 and the girl LS26. Clearly the designations were comprised of the individuals first and last initials and the number being the chronological order in which an individual with those particular initials were Exiled. It meant there were 13 other Exiles out there with the initials HK.

Once all four of the new Exiles were on their feet, Savan commanded them to follow her and the guards. The black, glossy skinned quartet filtered out of the room and through a series of corridors, eventually coming to a large freight elevator. As they rode down nearly a hundred and fifty floors, Hayley's mind was in a spin. She wasn't quite sure if the gravity of her situation had fully hit her yet. There certainly was a tremendous level of fear, but it was fear of the unknown. She didn't know what to expect once she was out there in the wild among the other Exiles. There was still so much she didn't know and couldn't comprehend about what life as an Exile was like. All she knew was that it was a lonely one. But there was no way she could possibly appreciate how lonely it was...not yet. And that was what was truly frightening and despairing to her. She had *no idea* how terrible it was going to be.

When at last they reached the ground floor, the Exiles were herded through a short corridor and into an enclosed vehicle bay. And then into short bus-like vehicle. They were driven in the dark to an area approximately five kilometers away from the arcologies on an empty stretch

of road near a well-lit maintenance structure. The four Exiles were moved out of the vehicle and stood abreast along the road. Climbing out of the vehicle Savan stopped the group and turned to address them one last time.

“One final thing - the Warden system, while there to ensure your compliance and obedience, is also there to keep you safe. It is constantly monitoring your vital signs, and will report any and all anomalies. The suits will also keep you comfortable in any environmental extreme. Remember, we want you all to stay safe and healthy out there so that you may carry out your sentences and then return as law abiding and contributing members of our great society. Warden will relay commands and pertinent data to you. As long as you comply with it, you will be fine. I wish you all the best of luck in your exile. Local Wardens, initialize autonomous monitoring protocol and begin sentence.”

The four exiles jerked slightly, as an androgynous computerized voice began speaking to them in their heads.

*“Warden system autonomous monitoring online...”* the synthetic, almost alien voice echoed in Hayley’s head. *“HK14, sentence beginning. You now have 547 days remaining in your sentence. Warning; you are within illegal range of Exile.”*

A piercing wail filled Hayley’s head, causing her to recoil in pain. The other Exiles appeared to be in similar states of agony as they clutched at the sides of their helmets and writhed in muted agony. Each of them quickly moved away from one another, the sound fading as they moved five meters away from one another. Once they were outside of range, the noise completely stopped, though a phantom ringing continued to occur in Hayley’s head.

The four Exiles stood in induced silence as Savan and the guards got back into the bus, turned around and sped off back to the arcologies in the distance, the thousands of lights on each of them twinkling like a mass of densely packed stars. Despite the darkness, Hayley found she could see rather well through the helmet. Everything seemed bathed in a greenish hue, similar to nightvision but the resolution was quite high, allowing her to see clearly into the distance. She could even detect the other Exiles, their bodies appearing like solid black shapes.

Looking around her all but empty surroundings, feelings of dread began creeping up on the young singer. She felt exposed and alone, vulnerable and isolated. The other Exiles near her turned their heads to one another, as if searching their blank helmeted faces for some kind of answer or guidance. But there was none to be had. One of them tried to move toward the other, but immediately back off as they got within arms reach.

The girl's body twisted and contorted as she was assaulted by the Warden's proximity warning. Learning her lesson she backed off and fell to her knees. Her body arched back, her head bobbing slightly as she crossed her arms over her chest, bawling silently, her sobs unable to penetrate the dark surface of her helmet. Her body language said it all though. They all knew she was crying. The sight of the girl's misery tore into Hayley's heart and got her sobbing. She didn't want the others to see, and quickly moved away. She needed to be alone for awhile.

Crossing the grassy field, she made haste to a nearby outcropping of trees, trying to hold in her sobs until she was far enough away that the others couldn't see her. When at last she was deep enough inside the wooded area, she dropped to her hands and knees, unleashing a torrent of hysterical wails. This was really happening to her. The reality finally hit her as she crouched there, alone in the dark, unable to hear her own cries as she unleashed days of built up despair and agony. Despite the fact she couldn't hear herself, she knew she was making noise because her throat was getting hoarse.

After several long minutes of intense crying, she crumpled up onto the soft grass, folding her legs and wrapping her arms around her knees in a fetal position. She continued to sob as she rocked gently. Eventually she'd exhausted herself and without even knowing it, had fallen asleep.

## Part 2

### Chapter 7

Hayley awoke in a haze, her body aching from a night spent on uneven soil. She sat up groggily, her body jerking as she found herself in unfamiliar surroundings, the realization that she was still trapped in the black suit and helmet hitting her like a ton of bricks. She let out a shallow whimper as she forced herself into a cross-legged position, holding her head in her hands. What was she supposed to do now? The question kept on repeating in her head over and over again. The whole purpose of this type of incarceration was to keep isolated from other people. But at the same time she couldn't just sit in one place and count down the days, could she? She would go mad in days. She knew she had to keep her mind busy. She needed to find something to do to keep herself occupied each day until the Federation came for her. Ultimately it was that small hope, that tiny possibility that she knew she'd have to hold onto to keep her from sinking too far in depression. That the Federation would come for her. After all it

was their *duty* to protect their citizens from unlawful prosecution and confinement such as this. Particularly when it was so inhumane.

After a few false starts, Hayley finally climbed to her feet. Taking stock of her surroundings, she figured it probably looked quite beautiful where she was were it not for the devices in her eyes. Instead of the rich greens and earthy tones that one would naturally encounter in a wooded area such as that, all she saw was a bland, unsaturated drab scene lacking in contrast. The blue skies of Vega IV she'd seen when she first arrived now looked gray, despite there not being a cloud in the sky.

*Is this all I'm going to be able to see for the next 18 months? Just a dull, featureless world, unable to smell or taste or feel anything? God...how can they expect people to live like this for a week, let alone years!?*

She knew the more she thought about it the worse she'd feel, and tried pushing the thoughts away. Despite the low color yield and strange interpolating blurring effect when she moved her eyes or head too quickly, she could at least see everything in fairly clear detail. The sensor matrix on the helmet were obviously not affected by the latex-like material covering them.

Hayley started out of the wooded outcropping and made her way back to the road. A part of her hoped to find the others Exiles whom had been *discarded* with her, but they'd obviously gone at some point in the night. Nearby, she spotted the lone building in the vicinity- one of those maintenance bays she'd had the displeasure of learning about first hand the night before. It occurred to her if Exiles were allowed inside, perhaps some had taken refuge within them during the night, and perhaps she'd find the three others in there.

Quickening her pace, she crossed the grassy field, but was abruptly halted as she got within a few meters of the place. Her body froze as it filled with a painful stinging sensation for all but an instant.

*"Proximity violation,"* the computerized voice droned in her head. *"Your scheduled maintenance cycle is not for another 4.2 hours."*

"What?" She asked aloud, unprepared for the message. "What did you say? How many hours? What does that mean? Hello!?"

Frustrated, Hayley took another step forward and was again greeted with pain, more intense than last, and lasting a few seconds longer. She grimaced, clenched her hands tightly into fists, her muscles contracting until the pain abruptly stopped. She let out a deep gasp as her muscles relaxed.

*"Proximity violation. Your scheduled maintenance cycle is not for another 4.2 hours. Repeated violations will incur further penalty."*

“Fuck!” The young woman seethed through her teeth. Rather than risk further pain, she stepped away from the building. At least she knew now. She, and by proxy all other Exiles could only use the maintenance bays when they were scheduled to use them.

Turning her back to the stout single story structure she looked in the direction of the arcologies off in the distance, stretching up from the horizon like giant metal teeth. Even five kilometers away, their size was still impressive. For an instant, Hayley thought of going back there, as it seemed most of the Exiles did according to Lucas. But perhaps that was the best reason not to go back. Surely she was better off being out in the wide open spaces, far from other Exiles and the potential of getting too close to them and inciting the Warden’s wrath. No, going back there was not something she wanted to do. But she needed *something* to do. She needed some kind of stimuli to keep her mind from going off the deep end.

*Well, she thought to herself, trying to draw strength from her adventurous spirit. I am on an alien world. Maybe this will give me a chance to explore it a little.*

It was that one thought that seemed to draw her away from her despair, if just slightly. But it was better than nothing, and she would take all the small mercies she could get. She set off down the road, going in the opposite direction of the arcologies. She figured she would follow the paved path for as long as she could. Hopefully they led to somewhere a little more interesting.

After a few minutes of maintaining a steady pace, she noticed that the road was on a gradual curve and was leading into the nearby wooded area. Soon finding herself amongst the trees again on a winding path that snaked through a narrow path cut into the forest. The sensation of walking on practically bare feet, although a mild one due to the tactile inhibiting properties of her suit, was not the most natural one for Hayley. Though she used to jog quite frequently and still did from time to time, she’d always done so wearing running shoes. While the pads they’d placed on her feet certainly buffered the contact between her soles and the ground, they provided little arch support. She constantly found herself compensating by walking on the balls of her feet, limiting the contact her heels had with the ground. Her feet started getting sore after a short while, forcing her to stop for a moment’s rest.

As she sat cross-legged in the middle of the road, working out a kink that was developing in the base of one of her feet, a rumbling noise caught her attention. Looking up, she spotted a large wheeled ATV with attached tractor-trailer barreling straight at her. The driver didn’t even so much as

honk his horn as he got within a dozen meters of her. Hayley was forced to roll her body off the road and into a grassy trench as the truck tore by at top speed. Quickly jumping to her feet, she screamed a flurry of obscenities at him- obscenities she knew would go unheard.

It was almost as if the driver had been *trying* to run her over, or just didn't care one way or the other. Had the people really become so desensitized to the plight of the Exile that they truly saw them as nothing? She almost couldn't believe humans could become so callous and indifferent toward their fellow man, especially when their fellow man was suffering as she was.

As she stood up and took a moment to gauge her surroundings, something along the trench beside the road caught her eye. In her tonally muted vision, she couldn't quite make out what it was, but it was black and about the size of a large dog. Curiously, she slowly approached the dark mass. As she neared, it quickly became apparent that it was an Exile- a young one at that. She realized however that she was getting close enough to it that it should have set off the Warden's warning. But it *hadn't* gone off.

She stopped less than a foot away from the Exile. It was a female, and based on the development of her body, Hayley figured she was a young teenager, maybe 14 or 15. She could tell it wasn't Laryssa though, this girl was far more lean and her breasts not quite as developed.

Picking up a nearby fallen tree branch, she gave the Exile's foot a gentle prod, but there was no response. Figuring that the poke just wasn't hard enough to get through her tactile buffers, she gave the Exile's body a firm jab, but again was met with no response, not even so much as a twitch. Hayley gasped and reeled when she realized *why* the girl wasn't responding and why the Warden hadn't given her a warning. The Exile was dead.

"God..." She whispered, slowly moving toward the dead Exile and kneeling down next to her.

The girl's body appeared rigid. She'd obviously been dead for some time. With the shiny black suit and helmet, she didn't exactly seem dead. Were it for the fact that she wasn't breathing, Hayley would never have known she was looking at a dead human being. She felt a wave of sadness fill her, not simply because the girl was dead but because she'd died out here, alone and imprisoned within her own body. She couldn't fathom what a girl this young could have done to deserve such a fate. Clearly she'd been hit by a vehicle as Hayley had almost been. But what sickened her the most was that the girl had simply been left there to rot. At least in the proverbial sense. It was likely her body was still fully preserved within the suit.

Hayley knew she couldn't just leave her there. As she hooked her arms around the girl's legs, she was suddenly overcome with an intense full body burst of pain. Reeling back, she fell over her own feet, hitting the soil hard under her posterior.

*"Contact Violation,"* the Warden's electronically translated voice droned in Hayley's head. *"Physically interacting with deceased Exile. Additional Protocol Violation – failure to notify proper authority on location of deceased Exile. DIS has been dispatched to your location. Activating compliance protocol."*

"Dammit! You should know where she is! Don't you monitor these things!? Isn't that your job you stupid computer!?" Hayley screamed at the Warden, knowing the effort was futile but feeling better about herself for doing it at least. As she attempted to stand up, she realized she couldn't move her body. Her arms and legs were locked, as if the suit was made out of lead. She began to panic. "Let me go you stupid piece of shit!"

Despite her struggling, she couldn't move a muscle. She couldn't turn her head, turn her hips, nothing would respond to her command. She figured this was what the Warden meant by 'compliance protocol'.

Within twenty minutes, what felt more like an eternity for the young woman, a vehicle pulled to a stop along the side of the road near Hayley. The vehicle, an armored 4-wheeled all-terrain truck, bore the letters 'DIS' in bold lettering along its doors. Two gasmask and long leather coat wearing DIS agents dismounted the vehicle. They stood along the lip of the trench, looking down at both Hayley and the dead Exile.

One of the agents hopped down into the trench and stepped over to Hayley, pulling out a DPAD from one of the pockets on his tactical vest. Scanning the information displayed on the device briefly, he then turned his attention to the Exile seated on the ground before him.

"Warden HK14, initialize free speak protocol. Exile HK14, you may now speak."

"Wh...what?" Hayley queried, realizing she could hear her voice coming through the DPAD in the agent's hand. "You can hear me?"

"Yes," the agent replied with a nod. "When did you discover this body HK14?"

She told him. She couldn't tell if he was convinced or not, though he did throw a casual glance at his partner who was apparently taking notes through his DPAD at the moment.

"Why did you attempt physical contact with the deceased?"

"I just wanted to move her away from the road."

“You know it’s a violation to touch another Exile,” he stated the question as a fact.

“I figured because the proximity warning thing didn’t go off it’d be alright...”

“The proximity warning didn’t go off?” The agent seemed surprised.

“No. I...”

The agent turned toward his partner. “Must’ve been severe blunt force trauma to the back her head. Probably fractured her skull and knocked out her receiver.”

“Yep,” the other agent replied plainly, not sounding all that concerned.

“Figures why we couldn’t locate it on GPS,” the agent turned back to Hayley. “Alright HK14. I’m not going to add anything to your penalty. Just get out of here and remember next time, if you see a dead Exile, you report it and not touch it.”

“But what about...” She wanted to tell them about the near miss she’d had moments ago.

“Warden HK14, reset to default autonomous setting.”

Before she could finish her thought, Warden cut off her transmission. She also felt mobility return to her body. The DIS agent gestured at her to get up, then motioned for her to leave the area. Sighing heavily through her tightly covered teeth, she wandered off, periodically glancing past her shoulder as she walked down the road, watching as the DIS agents callously threw the dead Exile into the back of the vehicle, tossing her in like a dead animal. It was a sickening scene and left her with an aching heart.

\* \* \*

“*I’m sorry, there’s nothing we can do at this point,*” Aegean Republic Senior Chairman Elias Spender spoke in an even tone via holographic uplink, as Max Trainor watched along with members of the Federation delegation to New Liberty.

“What the hell do you *mean* there’s nothing you can do?” Max stormed to his feet, slapping his hands against the table beneath him.

“Mr. Trainor,” Federation Ambassador Davin Kurtis threw a harsh glance at the younger man before turning his attention to the life-sized hologram of the Aegean Republic’s number-two man in charge. “I apologize Mr. Chairman. But I’m sure you can understand Mr. Trainor’s feelings toward his client.”

The gaunt-faced Chairman bobbed his head in a slow nod. “*Of course. However, you must also understand our position. Ms. Komit, while*



*a Federation citizen, was found committing a crime in the Aegean Republic. By the very laws of the Terran Federation, trying her was perfectly within our legal rights. She was given the opportunity to speak with Federation council as was within her rights to do so. And according to our laws, she has been sentenced and is being punished accordingly. We have done nothing illegal sir.”*

The lines in Kurtis’s dark brow became severe as he furrowed his brow sardonically. “Mr. Spender, you and I both know that her so-called trial was anything but legal...”

*“The Federation’s definition of legality has no place in the Republic,”* Spender cut the Ambassador off. *“It is how we maintain our idyllic society, and why the Federation continues to suffer from internal strife. You may think our laws are harsh, but that is because the Federation promotes individual freedom and liberties we simply cannot afford to give our citizens. Were we to do so, Vega IV would fall into the state of anarchy that nearly threatened to destroy it 30 years ago when social and political strife tore our Republic in twine.”*

Kurtis was clearly growing impatient. He was having a political sparring match with someone absolutely convinced of his own rhetoric, when he knew he needed to be fighting for Hayley Komit’s freedom. He raised his hands in calming manner.

“Mr. Chairman...I don’t want to get into a political debate with you. The Aegean Republic has made its decision in how it wants to govern itself, and we respect that.”

*“Do you? Then why has the Federation labeled us a Rogue State and declared the New Liberty colony to be the officially recognized seat of government of this world? It’s clear the only reason you want Ms. Komit extradited is to further the Federation’s own political agenda. It would be a moral victory for you, wouldn’t it? The mighty Federation successfully frees intergalactic starlet from the evil oppressive Aegean Republic. It’s obvious that the Federation simply wants to discredit the Republic in order to defer commercial interests out of the Republic and into the New Liberty colony.”*

“That isn’t our intent,” Kurtis’ raised his voice, his impatience turning into anger. “We aren’t interested in getting involved in the economics of your nation, sir. We are simply demanding that one of our citizens be returned to us. You’re correct in that the Federation does view the Republic as a Rogue State. As such, you have no legal authority to hold one of our citizens.”

*“Not legal according to your laws Mr. Ambassador, not ours,”* Spender folded his arms. *“And according to our laws, Ms. Komit will serve*

*out her sentence fully. Upon completion of that sentence, she will be returned to you safe and sound."*

"Then allow us to take our case directly to the Supreme Chancellor. Perhaps if I could speak with him directly..."

*"I'm afraid the Supreme Chancellor's views on this are quite clear. Ms. Komit will not be extradited to a state that collaborates with our enemies."*

"That's simply not good enough, Mr. Chairman," Kurtis breathed a deep sigh. "It was my hope that we could solve this discrepancy peacefully, but I see now that this isn't possible. I will be recommending to the Federation council that we use whatever force is necessary in order to extradite our citizen."

*"And we will do whatever is necessary to ensure the safety and security of our Republic. Good day, Mr. Ambassador."*

The holographic image faded into static, leaving a feeling of unease throughout the circular boardroom aboard the orbiting Federation starship *TFS Alliance*. Max ran a hand through his hair as he stared up into the ceiling.

"I'm sorry we didn't have more success Mr. Trainor," Kurtis looked at the young man. "But I promise you, the Federation council will not allow one of its citizens to be held illegally."

"Just like you promised Hayley she'd be extradited after the trial?" Max shot an angry glare at the Ambassador. "Pardon me for not having much faith in your promises."

"Hey," Kurtis's eyes narrowed. "I intend to fulfill that promise. I admit it may take time, but your client..."

"Stop calling her my *client!*" Max shot back. "She's my girlfriend."

The Ambassador paused briefly, breathing a light sigh. "Ms. Komit *will be* extradited. Even if we have to storm the colony by force to get her. The Republic wouldn't dare to oppose the Federation military."

"I hope you're right," Max's sighed heavily, shaking his head. He couldn't imagine what it must have been like for her now, trapped as one of those Exiles he'd heard about. He could only hope that the Federation council would approve using force. It seemed like the only way at this point.

## Chapter 8

Barely two hour had passed since Hayley had left the young girl's body behind. She hadn't moved much since then. Once she'd gotten out of eyeshot of the DIS agents, she found a place to sit in the wooded area, and cried for awhile. She found she'd been doing a lot of that lately. Usually crying was an emotional release for her, but now all it did was deepen her depression. Her so-called adventurous spirit had been dashed in a single instant, and she was back to hinging on the abyss. Sitting and being alone wasn't helping, and so she decided to get back on the move.

She followed the road for about twenty more minutes until coming to a section where the road branched off along a dirt path. From her vantage, she could see that the path descended into a sunken part of the forest, possibly into a canyon. Deciding that was a good a time as any to go off the beaten path, she turned onto the narrow dirt road. She found walking along soil to be preferably to walking on pavement- the bumps and dips actually made walking more comfortable. After all, her ancient ancestors who walked barefoot didn't have roads. This was the natural state that human evolution had intended human feet to be walking on. The padding on her soles made walking over twigs and rocks a breeze, something those same ancient ancestors of her probably would have killed to have on their callous-caked soles.

She had to be careful walking down the steep incline- the suit unfortunately provided next to no friction against the soil, threatening to cause her feet to slide out from under her with each precarious step she took down. By digging her heels into the soil and grabbing onto nearby branches, she managed to work her way down about half way before her heel struck a patch of loose soil. Losing her balance she fell to her back and slid down the rest of the way down the hill, coming to rest as the ground evened out. The fall had taken the wind out of Hayley, but hadn't hurt much. Despite there being nobody around to see her tumble, she still felt a wave of embarrassment as she climbed to her feet and dusted herself off.

*Damn suit.* She thought bitterly. *No traction in this thing at all!*

Convinced that nobody had seen her, not that anyone could really see her, Hayley continued down the dirt path, finding herself in a very dense wooded area that was about as remote as one could get. The forest seemed to be rising all around her, with trees blocking out the sun, rendering dark deep shadows throughout as if she were in a tunnel. She came to a stop at a fork in the road. Casting long glances down both paths, she saw the one to her left seemed to trek deeper into the dark woods while the one to her right appeared to open up about a hundred meters or so. Opting for the right path, she followed it, noticing something in the clearing ahead that didn't appear

to be part of the forest. As she maneuvered into the clearing, she found it occupied by another one of those flat-roofed maintenance bays. It wasn't the only thing in the clearing however. A number of Exiles took up space in the clearing, most of them sitting in the long grass across the dirt path from the building, as if the path acted as a kind of line of demarcation. A few Exiles paced back and forth in small circles, most simply sat with their heads down, their body language mirroring the misery they undoubtedly felt. None seemed to pay much attention to the new Exile as she entered the clearing. To them she was just a nameless, faceless entity among thousands, totally beneath their notice. A few of them did turn their heads to look at her, but just briefly.

Hayley was forced to move away from path as she noticed a number of Exiles sitting very close along side it. She wanted to avoid triggering the Warden's proximity warning and submitting herself to unnecessary torment. Unfortunately, it meant getting within range of the maintenance building, which would only cause her further pain. Breathing a heavy sigh, Hayley took the long way around, staying close to the edge of the large circular clearing while avoiding other Exiles. It was like navigating through a minefield. Every time she got too close to another Exile, Warden would let her know by emitting a painful high-pitched squeal directly into her head. The noise worked its way down her spine each time, and she could feel it all through her body. Despite a phantom ringing in her ear once she'd returned to legal distance, there was never any residual pain. Still, the effort was unpleasant and served to further detract any thoughts she may have had about returning to a more populated area.

Her feet and legs having grown sore and tired from walking, Hayley decided to take some time to rest. Finding a clear spot just within the tree line, she sat down in the grass with her back against a tree, resting her encased head on the trunk and closing her eyes. She had to admit, there was a certain comfort knowing she was around other people, even if they were Exiles and she couldn't communicate with them. It was just that psychological reassurance that she wasn't alone. She figured that was perhaps the greatest draw of the arcologies, and why the Exiles tended to congregate near them...just to be *around* people was better than being completely isolated. Still, Hayley didn't like being punished. She knew the safest way to avoid punishment was to isolate herself from others.

The young singer wasn't quite sure how much time had passed when she was suddenly stirred by the computerized voice in her head.

*“Maintenance notification. Proceed immediately to nearest Maintenance bay. You have thirty minutes to comply before you are subject to protocol violation.”*

The prospect of having her body invaded by those tubes made Hayley squirm. However, she was feeling hungry. It'd been hours since she'd had anything in her stomach, and just as long since she'd relieved herself. Strangely, the latter wasn't affecting her quite so much. She figured it had something to do with the things they'd put inside her body. Climbing to her feet, she started toward the white, sun bleached building nearby. One of the Exiles, noticing her moving toward the maintenance bay, quickly rose to his feet and ran out in front of her, deliberately blocking her path. She stopped just a foot before entering within illegal proximity of him.

The Exile stood with a hand out at her, as if to say 'halt' like some kind of bouncer. Further adding to the effect was the fact that the Exile was about 210-pounds of lean muscle. His body was well sculpted, particularly his legs, indicating he did quite a bit of walking and exercise. Given how little else there was to do as an Exile, Hayley must have figured this guy had been in self-confined exile for a number of years. She wondered what his beef was with her? All she wanted, rather needed to do was enter the maintenance bay.

She gave him a deliberate looking shrug. He shook his head in reply then pointed to the building. She noticed something very roughly etched into the side of the building, as if it'd been carved in with a rock. It wasn't exactly art, but looked like a very poorly rendered letter 'A' enclosed within an even poorer drawn circle. Whoever had done it had clearly been in some considerable discomfort. Was it some kind of branding, like a gang marking? Did Exiles actually form gangs? Could they even? If so, how could they know who among them were members and who weren't? It seemed preposterous. Hayley brushed the Exile off and attempted to circle around him. This time the muscular Exile didn't bother to stay out of range of her and moved within about eight feet of her.

The piercing noise hit both of them at once, but while the male Exile just stood there vibrating slightly, Hayley was pitched over in agony, clutching the sides of her head in a futile effort to clasp her concealed ears. She quickly retreated, but the large Exile stayed on her, pushing her all the way back to the tree line before stopping. She collapsed into the grass as the sound finally subsided.

“What the hell is your problem!?” She screamed through her teeth, knowing full well he couldn't hear her. “You bastard! Get out of my way!”

The Exile didn't move and didn't appear to intend to back down. He'd obviously claimed this territory as his own. Perhaps that marking on the building was his initial. Glancing past his shoulder, she noticed a few Exiles heading toward the building. She waved her arms, trying to draw the brute's attention toward them. Catching on after a moment, he glanced back, noticed the Exiles entering the Maintenance bay and didn't appear too concerned. He looked back at Hayley, pointed at her as if to single her out, then pointed at the building and shook his head.

She shrugged and held out her hands, as if to ask 'why'. He pointed at his wrist as if indicating the time on an invisible wristwatch. She had no idea what to make of that. Did he mean the time of day? Again she shrugged and shook her head. He pointed at her again with a thrusting jab of his finger, then swung his arms down the length of his body as if revealing himself before pointing at his invisible watch again.

After contemplating the bizarre game of charades that he was playing with her, she figured out his meaning. Somehow he knew that she'd only recently been exiled. He was indicating that that particular maintenance bay was for long-timers only, she figured. He then took a few steps away from her, motioned at the dirt path then made a rightward hooking motion with his arm, as if to indicate that there was a turn in the road at some point. Perhaps he was giving her directions. She wasn't sure. All she was sure of was that she had thirty minutes to get to a maintenance bay before she was penalized.

Climbing to her feet, she cautiously edged onto the dirt path. The brutish Exile stood with his arms crossed, much like a bouncer, and made no move toward her as she started down the path. Heaving a sigh, she turned her back to the clearing and stepped back into the dense wooded area, continuing her way along the path.

The path eventually led up and out of the ridge. Fortunately going up hills proved slightly less challenging since Hayley could dig her toes into the soil, although jamming her toes into rough rock hewn soil was not exactly the most enjoyable experience. While the suit did do much to buffer any physical sensation, it couldn't do much when she stubbed her toe into a rock. She wondered why anyone would have placed a maintenance station in an area so clearly inaccessible and remote? But perhaps that itself was why they'd put it there.

After a good ten minutes of pattering down the path, her feet and toes throbbing from the climb, Hayley got to a fork in the path. Deciding to go for broke and follow the other Exile's direction, she headed right. Within fifteen minutes she'd emerged from the wooded area near a paved road, and

found herself in depressingly familiar surroundings. She was right back where she'd started that day, no more than a few dozen meters from where she'd slept that night. Turning to her right she saw the Maintenance bay she'd attempted to enter.

Hayley breathed a mournful sigh. There was just something about having gone in a complete circle that crushed her, the thought of any progress she'd made having been quashed. Normally if she'd been hiking alone, the sight of familiar surroundings would have been comforting, but not this time. All this area did was remind her of why she was out there. Before she could think too bitterly of the fact, a voice in her head reminded her that there was some purpose to her life, at least for the immediate moment.

*“Protocol violation. You are now overdue for maintenance. Further penalties to incur every ten-minute cycle. Proceed to nearest Maintenance bay immediately.”*

“Fuck!” She raged after a short jostle of pain worked its way up her body, angered that the brutish Exile had caused her a penalty for not letting her use the Maintenance building when she'd been near one. She was more annoyed with the Warden for not having acknowledged the fact that she'd been forcibly prevented from entering a maintenance area on time.

Crestfallen, she sauntered over to the maintenance building. As she got within a few feet of its walls, the Warden spoke again.

*“Entering maintenance area,”* the disembodied electronic voice droned. *“You now have six minutes and zero seconds.”*

Hayley heaved a sigh. They'd even emplaced time limits on how long she had to use the bathroom. While six minutes seemed ample time, she wondered what'd happen had there been a line up? Would she only get six minutes still? And if so, if those six minutes had expired before she had a chance to go, would that be it for the day? She decided not to dwell on it to much as she passed through the upwardly sliding proximity door into a large, non-descript area filled with a number of those narrow alcoves which looked like small public toilet stalls, except without doors. To her surprise, there were a few Exiles already inside. Both of them squatted over the cylinders and had hoses running into their bodies. They both squirmed in obvious discomfort as their bodies were emptied then filled again by the automated system. Hayley watched for a moment as a lean and fit female Exile writhed, her hands tight around the handlebars, her head jerking from side to side. It was a perverse sight, and Hayley felt a wave of shame wash over her as she forced herself to look away. She didn't want to move to far

into the chamber however, with there being two others already in there. She didn't want that noise in her head again.

Within a few seconds, the female Exile's maintenance was complete. As the tubes were extracted, she released the handlebars and stood up straight, taking a moment to gather herself before stepping back away from the alcove and turning around. She saw Hayley standing there, and much to the young girl's surprise, was greeted with a small nod of acknowledgement. The other Exile then walked straight toward her, causing Hayley to back off. The female Exile came within a foot of her however, and no alarms, no warning at all went off. She seemed to give Hayley a small glance before stepping out through the sliding door. Clearly, Exiles could be within proximity of each other so long as they were inside the maintenance areas.

With a light sigh and feeling a little more at ease, Hayley found her way into one of the many stalls. There was a moment of hesitation on her part as she placed her feet into the foot holes, really not wanting to experience the indignation of going through the process again. It was too late however, and it wasn't as though there was anything she could do about it anyway. It was either receive maintenance or receive punishment. And her stomach was growling. Her hands locked onto the handlebars and her body was pulled down into a squat. This time she didn't look, instead closed her eyes and thought of something pleasant as she felt the material around her crotch sink into her seconds before feeling the tubes forcibly enter her. The sensation drew a yelp from her encased lips. She felt the pressure that had been building up in her colon over the course of the day rapidly drain away, followed by a cold sensation that made her hips gyrate and finally the sensation of her stomach filling. The thought of being fed anally was a grotesque concept. Further, exactly *what* she was being fed was a mystery. It didn't feel solid as it traveled up her intestines, at least not entirely so. Whatever it was, it at least felt good being in her stomach.

The hoses finally withdrew and autonomy returned to Hayley's body. The whole experience left her feeling lightheaded and disoriented, but not terribly uncomfortable. It was almost like the moments following an orgasm. It suddenly occurred to her that's *exactly* what had happened. Whether it had happened by design or if perhaps because the sensation was still new to Hayley, she didn't really care. She just felt suddenly so dirty and ashamed, like she would have felt if she'd been caught masturbating in public. That's what this felt like, even though there were no others watching. The only other Exile in the room had already gone without her noticing.



*“Maintenance period expired. Leave maintenance area immediately.”*

An intense, rapid stabbing sensation filled Hayley’s body suddenly, as if someone was repeatedly jabbing her with a sharp pointed instrument at different points of her body. Wincing and crying out in pain, she ran out of the maintenance bay as if she were on fire. The second she’d gotten a few meters away, the pain abruptly stopped. Groaning, she let out a sharp, disparaging breath as she leered at the building through her dark, glossy helmet.

*“Next scheduled maintenance period in 10.9 hours.”*

“Fuck you, you stupid fucking machine!” Hayley snarled at the voice in her head. “Get out of my head!! GET OUT OF MY HEAD!”

Crying, she fell to her knees while desperately scratching at her helmet, trying to find somewhere she could grab onto, some small seam or *something* she could maybe dig into and pry the blasted thing off. The helmet was perfectly smooth. It bore no grooves or seams, no bumps, dips or ridges. Her encased hands slid along its surface unable to create any friction whatsoever. Realizing the depths of how futile the struggle was, she collapsed into a sobbing, quivering pile in the grass, holding her hands behind her head and clenching the sides of her head between her arms.

She would give anything just to be out of that cage.

## Chapter 9

Days passed, and with each passing day, Hayley felt herself fall further and further into a pit of misery with no way out. She’d been an Exile for a full week now, and still nothing about it felt natural. She doubted it ever would. In the time since she’d first been ‘deposited’ into the wilds of Vega IV, she hadn’t moved far from the spot she’d been left at. She hadn’t been in any mood to explore after that first day, and pretty much just putted around the area of that first maintenance area, never straying too far away from it, always keeping it within eyeshot, coming to regard it as the closest thing to a home base she had out there. A few other local Exiles made use of the station, which Hayley didn’t mind at all. She wasn’t going to turn into one of those territorial brutes like she’d encountered before. She’d counted seven individual Exiles who made use of the facilities. Most of them were reasonably fit, indicating they’d been out there for some time. There was the female Exile she’d encountered inside the Maintenance bay that first day and had watched for a bit. She continued to come by regularly, though didn’t

appear to be totally dependent on that one station, suggesting there might be another freely available one nearby.

Along with her there were a pair of short males who seemed to always come around the same time. Because of their similar statures, Hayley had come to know them as the 'twins', although she doubted they were. Then there was an extremely athletic looking woman who was also very tall, easily 6-foot 5-inches. She had the physique of a sprinter, and appeared to do quite a bit of running in fact. She'd run up to the maintenance bay then run off. Hayley wasn't sure if the woman ever walked. She certainly hadn't seen it. Finally there were two others, an average sized male and female, both of whom weren't in as quite good shape as the others, but were certainly well on their way.

After five days, Hayley had become a common sight them. She'd found a place not far from the maintenance station on a slightly raised part of the ground just within the nearby outcropping of trees. Her 'perch' she called it. The Exiles that frequented that particular maintenance area often looked in her direction when they came to it, some even waved and she waved back, or at the very least stopped moping long enough to glance up at them. None of them ever bothered to approach her though. Not that she minded. She'd rather they keep their distance. She did at least like the fact that *someone* was acknowledging her. It didn't make her feel quite as isolated and alone.

But she knew she was alone. A friendly gesture of greeting wasn't the same as actual human company and companionship. The Exiles could have neither. It was designed to be a lonely and pathetic existence, with every Exile a prisoner in his or her own mind. Hayley had gotten in the habit of talking to herself...rather talking to her Warden, even though it didn't respond. The only time it spoke is if she'd violated the conditions of her imposed exile in some manner. After about five days however, she'd figured out the more common violations, and had stopped committing them.

Proximity violation – too close to another Exile

Proximity violation – attempting to enter maintenance area before cycle

Protocol violation – being overdue for scheduled maintenance

Contact violation – touching another Exile, even when inside maintenance area

Those were the main ones she'd encountered at least thus far, and were the ones she'd avoided committing for the most part.

Thick clouds had moved in on the morning of her seventh day in exile, and rain soon followed. It rained well into the afternoon, getting very

heavy at one point. Sadly, Hayley couldn't even feel the raindrops hitting her body. It was just one more of those tactile stimuli that she was being denied.

She sat on her perch beneath the trees, having moved very little that entire day. She'd paced a little around the invisible perimeter surrounding the maintenance bay, careful to not stray too far into as to incur the Warden's wrath. After that she'd laid in the long grass for awhile, studying some of the small green ant-like insects that were crawling around everywhere. Then it was maintenance time. After that it was just hours on the small mound, staring off into space, boredom pecking away at her mind, madness feeling not so far away.

When at last the rainfall had grown to monsoon levels, she felt she had at least something to study for awhile. She watched the torrential shower saturate everything, turning the nearby dirt path into mud, making the trees appear alive with movement as the large droplets splattered against them. By the time the skies had grown dark, the rains had let up a little bit, although there was still a light drizzle.

Hayley was beginning to doze when she was abruptly stirred by the Warden's voice, despite the fact she was still hours away from her next maintenance cycle and there wasn't an Exile to be seen nearby.

"HK14, *standby for your weekly activity update from Warden system central mainframe,*" Warden's monotonic synthetic voice droned.

*Activity update?* She wondered what that was all about. After a moment, the voice returned.

*"You have committed a total nine violations in contravention of the terms of your incarceration and have incurred an additional 88 days in your sentence. You now have 630 days remaining in your sentence."*

"What!?" she cried out, her body shooting to her feet. "No! You can't be serious!! You can't *do* this! You stupid fucking machine! That's almost two fucking years!"

Screaming, Hayley collapsed to her knees, clutching her helmet in desperation while smacking her face into the dirt. Breaking out in heavy sobs, she had never considered that her sentence might be increased...and so gratuitously for seemingly innocent violations. It wasn't as if she'd killed anyone, or hurt anyone or even *threatened* anyone. She'd inadvertently gotten too close to other Exiles a few times, had touched another Exile on a few occasions and was late once in getting to maintenance...by a few seconds. This was so unfair. It was arbitrary. Above all else, it was just cruel.

After regaining some self control, Hayley sat up, her hands balled into fists and clutching globs of wet mud. She couldn't imagine feeling worse than she did at that moment.

She had no idea how wrong she was.

## Chapter 10

A few days passed after Hayley had received the bad news about her extended sentence, and she finally decided it was time to get up and move around. Her body was stiff as board from her lack of movement beyond the regimented trips to the maintenance station she experienced twice daily. And she was growing tired of her surroundings. The lonliness was getting to her. The lack of seeing *real* people. The absence of people's voices beyond her own and the emotionless droning of the Warden. She decided it was time to go to the arcologies.

Setting off on the main paved road, she began the push forward, the looming pyramids in the distance rarely leaving her sight. On the way she passed by a number of other maintenance stations set up along the road, each seemingly position in regular one to two kilometer intervals. The closer she got to the arcologies and civilization, the more frequently she was seeing other Exiles. Commercial road traffic also began to increase, forcing Hayley to walk off road. She didn't mind, considering the flat pavement was harder on her feet than the softer soil. It was just easier to follow the road which was why she generally kept on it.

The four identically sized and shaped arcologies laid just ahead of Hayley, spreading out across the horizon like a massive wall of steel over four kilometers long. Each of the massive structures had taken nearly eleven years to build over the span of a 60-year-period. Once the symbol of Federation ingenuity and human cultural expansion throughout the galaxy, they now stood as symbols of oppression and cruelty. Unfortunately, they were the only 'civilized' areas she had any access to, even if she didn't technically have access to any of them. Still, the streets surrounding each arcology were not unlike the street of major cities; vendors, merchants and what have you lining them.

The shantytown spread out around the base of the arcologies. In reality the shanties weren't a single conjoined town, but rather five or six large clusters of mobile structures, each cluster divided by a space of a few hundred meters. Hayley probably would have rather gone there, but as

she'd been informed during her pre-Exile briefing, they were off limits to Exiles.

Everything surrounding the arcologies was maintained and manicured. The grass within the many parkettes surrounding the four giant structures were perfectly groomed and tended to, the grass appearing greener than the grass in the wilds and always appearing trimmed. There was little if any litter blowing around the streets or walkways. The street themselves were immaculately maintained, barely a crack in the pavement- surprising given how variable the temperatures tended to be on the planet.

Ground vehicles were sporadic, but some did move up and down the main roads. Air travel seemed more common- vessels constantly buzzing around the four towers like bees around a beehive...or four beehives in this case.

Hayley saw more Exiles. *Many* more. Some sat along the roadways with their heads down, others puttered about, a few leaned on the walls. All seemed pretty much miserable. One thing Hayley noticed immediately about the ones here as opposed to the ones she'd encountered further away from the arcologies were that these ones did not appear to be in as good as shape. While there were a few out there that were in reasonable condition, most were average or just slightly above average like her. She figured part of that had to do with the fact that the newer Exiles seemed to be drawn to the urban settings, while the older ones apparently preferred the solitude of the wilderness.

There were a number of promenades along the perimeter of the arcologies. These were where the shops and vendors were located and where most of the regular people seemed to congregate outside the towering structures. *Regular people*, Hayley thought with mild resentment directed at herself more than anyone. *Is that how I'm seeing them now? They're regular people and we somehow aren't?*

The promenades were designed like small outdoor malls. An exquisitely decorated fountain with a tall statue centerpiece inhabited the center of the promenade concourse, water churning out from holes along the base of the statue. The sculpture stood nearly twelve feet high and was of a man wearing flowing robes adopting a heroic pose with an arm reaching to the sky, his hand cupping what appeared to be a small Vega IV globe. The inscription plate near the base identified the subject as 'Aldrich Heissler – Father of the Republic'.

She shook her head disdainfully at the statue. Heissler. The self-proclaimed Supreme Chancellor of Vega IV. A despot if ever there was one, and the whole reason why Hayley was trapped as an Exile for the next year

and nine months. Everything about the statue made her blood boil. The man. His opulence. The treatment of his citizens and non-citizens alike.

Heaving a sigh, she moved away from the statue and deeper into the promenade. She spotted a few other Exiles here and there. Many of them looked longingly at all the happy people merrily carrying on with their lives, totally indifferent toward the black latex suited convicts in their midst. Although Hayley caught a few glances in her direction, most simply ignored her and the other Exiles altogether. She did witness one thing that made her heart ache.

A mother and a young child had just left a merchant store and were moving briskly across the promenade on their way to one of the food vendors. The child, a beautiful young girl no older than 5 dropped the stuffed animal she'd been carrying. Despite her pleas, the mother kept pulling the child ahead, totally ignoring her. A lean bodied female Exile happened to notice this at the same time Hayley had. Whether by natural instinct or for some other reason all her own, the Exile scooped up the teddy bear and ran after the mother and child. When the mother and child reached the café-style food vendor, the Exile knelt down and handed the child her toy. With all of the innocence in the world, the child smiled and politely thanked the Exile. The mother on the other hand exploded and furiously berated the Exile and her child and forced...*forced* the child to tell the Exile to leave her alone and go away. Of course the child complied with her parent's wishes. It was the look in the Exile's body language that made Hayley begin to tear up. She sauntered off with her head dropped, her shoulders hunched and her arms hugging her body. The poor woman was just returning the child's belonging...something the child's ignorant and despicable mother should have done.

The female Exile noticed Hayley standing several meters away and glanced up toward her, coming to a stop. Hayley pressed a hand against her chest over her heart, symbolizing her grief over how she'd been treated. The other Exile seemed to genuinely appreciate the gesture and nodded her head, sliding a finger down her helmet from where her eye would have been to her chin, as if to suggest a tear. She then walked off, leaving the promenade altogether.

Hayley felt her anger boil. She turned her attention to the mother and her child, noticing that the mother seemed more interested in whatever she was doing on her DPAD than her young daughter who was attempting to get her attention. That was the final straw. Growling beneath her helmet, she marched directly up to the woman seated in the outdoor café and backhanded the digital device right out of her hand. The woman gasped as

the DPAD cartwheeled through the air a number of feet before hitting the ground with a satisfying clatter.

“You ignorant bitch!” Hayley yelled, thrusting her helmeted head toward the woman whose horrified face was reflected in the smooth midnight black surface. “Stop ignoring your daughter and show a little damn appreciation, you uptight cow!”

Hayley’s body was suddenly overwhelmed with an intense, crippling pain. Her body lurched backward away from the mother and daughter, and spilled onto the floor. Sheer agony in every sense of the word filled every part of her body from head to toe in radiating waves, causing her to cry out loudly between each wave. Her body jerked, twisted and contorted with each successive wave.

The child looked on with a worried expression while her mother simply got up, picked up her discarded device then summoned the small girl. “Come along. Lets leave this thing be.”

As Hayley lay there, wracked with such pain she could hardly imagine, the world continued to go on around her. People walked by, a few throwing casual glances her way, but nobody concerning themselves with her.

*“Major Offense. Assaulting a Republic citizen. Punishment level 8 administered. DIS has been dispatched to your location.”*

It wasn’t until two uniformed DIS agents appeared that Hayley was finally released from the Warden’s agonizing death grip. She cried out as she was finally able to regain her senses, drawing in her knees and wrapping her arms around herself as she continued to sob.

The DIS agents looked around then glanced at each other through their gasmasks. “You see any witnesses?”

“Nah. Whatever. I think the punishment is enough. Lets get out of here.”

The other DIS agent nodded, snickering as he looked down at the silently sobbing Exile at his feet. The two then marched off, leaving Hayley alone. Although the punishment had left no residual pain at all, the experience, the absolutely *horrible* experience had left a mark on the young woman. It had crushed her. Mentally and physically. She felt like a timid little mouse at that moment, the giant arcologies looking down at her with contempt. It was almost twenty minutes before she could pick herself up and leave the promenade, feeling as exposed to the world as if she were stark naked. That wouldn’t be the worst of it though.

She’d left the area immediately surrounding the arcologies and ventured out to the bay that day, finding herself a little spot amongst some

wreckage to call her own for the time being. She remained there for the next week, only venturing back toward the arcologies for her regular maintenance cycles.

It was at the end of that week that she'd gotten the worst news yet. Smacking that woman's DPAD and incurring an assault charge had cost her dearly.

She was now in it for the next three years.

\* \* \*

The Federation council had been in deliberations for nearly a week and a half regarding the fate of one of their citizens and what they planned on doing about it. Long deliberations usually meant one of two things – the council was considering and preparing for the repercussions of their decision, or the council was split in their decision to act on something. Either way, Max Trainor knew it meant more time that Hayley was forced to exist on Vega IV, aimlessly roaming as one of those black suited Exiles.

Staring out the window of his hotel room in Brussels, Max's sole thoughts that soggy evening were of Hayley. It'd been nearly three sleepless weeks since he'd seen her last, and his heart was growing heavy from the long separation, both in terms of distance and time. After Hayley's arrest and incarceration, the Federation had re-established its travel advisory on the planet, restricting travel to Vega IV to military and authorized commercial traffic only. As such, Max had returned to Earth. He wanted to tell Hayley's parents what had happened to her in person anyway, and had visited them in their home in Montreal. It'd been a difficult scene as he expected. They placed considerable blame at his feet for allowing her to go to such a dangerous and 'backwards' world to begin with, and as her manager not taking better care of her and keeping her in check. He conceded that point. She was his responsibility. Perhaps this was why managers getting romantically involved with their clients wasn't always a good thing – she knew how to push his buttons and he was generally more concerned with maintaining their romantic relationship than he was their professional one. Perhaps if he'd been less emotionally involved he'd have kept her on a tighter leash and not let her go off on her own.

It didn't matter now though. What was done was done, and now she was back on that world, desperate, scared and alone.

It was approaching midnight local time when Max heard a knock at his suite door. Groggily sauntering over to door, he opened it to find Federation Ambassador Davin Kurtis. The look on his face was stolid, which Max knew wasn't a good sign.

"Mr. Trainor, may I come in for a moment?"



Nodding, the 31-year-old musician stepped back into the suite, flicking on a light switch as he moved over to the kitchenette. “You want a cup of coffee? I just made it.”

“No, thank you. This will be quick.”

Max bobbed his head in a nod as he poured himself a cup from the insta-brew coffee pot. Taking it black, he carried it over to the small common area where Kurtis had already taken a seat in one of the black leather easy chairs.

“I take it you don’t come with very good news,” Max uttered, lowering himself into the seat opposite the ambassador.

Kurtis breathed a light sigh. “It’s not the news we were hoping for. But it may be a start. The Federation Council has decided not to push for extradition...for the moment.”

“Fuck...” Max shook his head. “Then what the hell are we supposed to do? Just leave her there?”

“Let me finish. The Federation’s decision has created a powder keg. Public outrage over this is almost universal. Further, this incident has possibly done exactly as Ms. Komit hoped her tour would accomplish.”

“What’s that?”

“People have been made aware of the kind of atrocities that go on in the Republic. People throughout the Federation see now the kind of oppressive regime the Republic is and are up in arms. The Council has effectively been sandbagged by both sides, the public and the Aegean Republic. As a result, they have decided to dispatch a commission to the planet to ascertain the true scope of the Republic’s oppressive rule. The commission has a deadline of four weeks to conduct their inspection and come up with a plausible course of action for the Federation to take.”

“What if the Republic refuses to cooperate with this commission?” Max leaned forward in his seat, cupping his coffee cup between both hands.

“Then, my friend, the Federation *will* go in with force to ensure that the Republic *does* cooperate. This is non-negotiable.”

“How does this help Hayley at all?”

“Part of the commission’s objective is to determine how *humane* the Republic’s SCIE program is. They will order it be shut down if they determine it to be inhumane or cruel. Should the Republic choose not to shut the program down, then you can bet the Federation will come down hard on them. It’s only a matter of time, Mr. Trainor,” Kurtis pushed himself to his feet. “We’ll be in touch.”

Nodding, Max watched the ambassador leave the suit, disappearing through the door as he swung it shut behind him. *Only a matter of time.*

Max breathed a deep sigh as he stared into the black liquid in his cup. *Just hold on a little while longer Hayley.*

## Chapter 11

Hayley wasn't sure if she was becoming more accustomed to being an Exile or if it was just her own mind's way of coming to terms with the reality of her situation, but in the month she'd been in exile she was becoming more emotionally detached with each passing day. While she still suffered from intense bouts of depression, she wasn't crying nearly as much as she had in the first few weeks. It was as if something inside of her had just said 'this is your life now, deal with it'. Things still didn't feel 'normal', there was still a kind of surreal element to her situation, but at the very least she was getting used to the routines. The maintenance cycles, the loneliness, the maintenance cycles, the brooding, and then at the end of the week, all of her various indiscretions were tallied like a bar tab and she was billed. Only she'd be paying that tab with time.

Fortunately, it'd become easy for her to avoid trouble. She'd found an isolated spot about a kilometer west of the New Athens arcology near a sprawling industrial facility built partially in the large body of water known as Vega Bay. The facility was a water purification plant- designed to intake and process freshwater from the bay, getting rid of any of the alien pathogens and bacteria and then sending it off to the arcologies. The facility itself was almost like an arcology itself, though smaller, and apparently almost entirely automated. To Hayley's fortune, that meant there were few people around.

While she couldn't exactly get inside the plant, there was plenty of junk surrounding the facility she could make a small dwelling out of. Building materials, discarded vehicles, old steel crates and barrels and other trash had become her treasure. After scavenging for several hours one afternoon while it rained, she'd come across a godsend...a mattress. Though soiled from months of being exposed to the elements, and probably smelling something fierce, she dragged the thin army-cot style mattress to the small shelter she'd built herself on the edge of the debris field on the grasses.

The shelter consisted of a number of barrels lined up next to and across of each other, a roof made from the flip-open top of a number of steel crates, and a door made from a wooden loading skid, which she simply slid over the opening when she wanted privacy. Further, she'd managed to find a little bit of insulation from some of the abandoned vehicles- what little

upholstery remained that hadn't already been torn out she'd used to pad the ground. But now was the *pièce de résistance*: her very own bed!

She noticed a number of Exiles watching her as she dragged the mattress out of the junkyard, probably envious of her find. One of them, a very well toned woman, seemed to be taking a particular interest in Hayley's handiwork as she adjusted the dimensions of her shelter, moving the barrels around so the opening would permit the mattress's width. As she stuffed the mattress in, Hayley glanced up at other Exile who simply stood there like a mannequin with her arms down at her side. Unsure of what she was looking at, Hayley decided to just ignore her for the moment and test out her new bed.

Though it was dirty, lumpy and soggy, it felt great. It was the first time in this whole god-awful mess that the young singer actually felt herself smile. It was such a small thing, but this little piece of civilization actually made her feel human again for the first time in over a month. She allowed herself to relax, closed her eyes and was soon asleep. Sleep didn't last long however, as the Warden soon came calling.

*“Maintenance notification. Proceed immediately to nearest Maintenance bay. You have thirty minutes to comply before you are subject to protocol violation.”*

Groaning, Hayley sat up within the small, primitive shed and crawled out. The skies were dark by then, but fortunately the rain had stopped. As she climbed to her feet, Hayley spotted the same female Exile that had been staring at her still where she'd been over four hours ago about twenty feet away, though now sitting. Perhaps the woman just had nothing better to do with her time. It wasn't as if any of them really had anything to do with their time. Shrugging, she turned away from the woman and headed off for the Maintenance station located a short ten-minute walk away. Much to her own surprise, she was walking with a bit of a spring in her step that evening. Finding that bed had buoyed her spirits like she hadn't thought possible.

Arriving at the Maintenance station, she found it, as usual, crowded. They all seemed to be like this near the arcologies, Exiles in and out of them constantly. She'd done the math in her head. Given there was in excess of 12,000 Exiles (she put the figure around 12,500) and 50 maintenance stations located through the Republic, it meant for every station there were 250 Exiles. At the same time, with 22 hours in the day, and at two Maintenance cycles per 22 hour period, it mean that on average there should have only ever been around 5 Exiles in a maintenance bay at a given time. That was assuming of course Maintenance cycles occurred every hour on the

hour. And with 12 alcoves per bay, Hayley couldn't understand why the ones 'downtown' always seemed crowded.

The concentration of Exiles, she figured, must have been considerably higher around the arcologies than they were in the wilderness. Likely there were maintenance stations going totally unused out there.

Fortunately, Warden seemed able to determine the average length of time it would take for her to get in and use the facilities and varied the time depending on how many Exiles were already inside. Six minutes was the minimum amount of time one had. While in lineups, that number usually jumped to about twelve minutes. Once she'd been given thirty minutes, and *still* she had to rush to get out. The stations immediately around the arcologies were the worst she found. Not in terms of condition- they all looked identical both inside and out, but just in terms of volume. This one was a few kilometers outside of the perimeter. Still busy, but nowhere near as bad as those within.

She'd been given a twelve-minute grace period. The line moved in regular two minute intervals, the doors never opening to allow more than 12 people inside at a time. Once twelve individual Exiles were recognized as being inside, the sliding door shut, and wouldn't open again until someone came out. Still, Hayley liked the system here better than some regular public bathrooms. Here people had a limited time...there was no dawdling. And since waste extraction and nutrient insertion was a completely automated process, it wasn't like there was any need to dawdle.

Hayley was in and out within four minutes. She'd gotten so used to the sensation of the tubes going into her body that, while they still gave her a mild euphoria, she was able to retain enough self control after the fact that she didn't orgasm as she had the first few times through. Unfortunately, it did leave her feeling frustrating after the fact. She'd tried on numerous occasions to pleasure herself later, but with zero effect. The dual layered suit so completely buffered any sensation she could only ever feel a mild pressure on the areas she touched herself. There was no friction, no sensation of 'touch'. It was like trying to pleasure herself with a feather duster while her body was under anesthesia. Even her breasts didn't respond to physical touch. Her nipples were completely flattened under the suit. She couldn't even pinch herself anywhere, as the material slid against its own surface like grease. It was frustrating to say the least. Even in their darkest days, most prisoners could always turn to masturbation as a form of release. She didn't even have that!

So the maintenance cycle was about all she had. She'd initially wondered why the woman she'd seen that first day seemed to be *enjoying*

herself so much while undergoing maintenance...now she knew. As Hayley wandered back to her shelter, she thought perhaps she should follow the example. Despite the perversion of it all, it did at least feel good in a way. And so what if other Exiles saw? It wasn't as if they knew who she was. And even if they did, who were they going to tell?

Nearing the makeshift shelter, Hayley was abruptly jolted by the onset of her proximity alarm. The piercing wail stabbed the back of her head like an ice pick, causing the girl to recoil in pain. She wasn't alone in her agony. Another Exile popped out from the shelter, clutching the side of her helmeted head. Once they'd gained enough separation, the noise halted. Hayley stared at the female Exile, the same one that had been watching her all day.

"Get out of there!" Hayley raged, making a pushing off gesture with her hands at the other Exile, who simply stood with her arms spread over the shelter. "You stupid bitch, move!"

The other woman didn't budge. Even as Hayley tried to push her away by getting too close again, the other Exile held her ground, supporting herself on the barrels as she was battered by the screeching proximity alarm. For the young singer, it appeared as if she wasn't going to win this battle of the wills, as she was forced back, quickly hitting her pain threshold.

The two stood there for several minutes, staring at each other through the blank, expressionless helmets. Eventually the woman lowered herself into the shelter, pulling the skid over the opening.

"You stupid fucking cow," Hayley seethed. "Enjoy yourself now, because it's just a matter of time before you have to go for maintenance."

Dropping down onto the grass, she wondered how people could be reduced so quickly to this kind of behavior; the kind of behavior she'd expect from small children and wild animals but not from a fully-grown mature human being. Had humanity not grown above this kind of petty nature, the 'only the strong survive' kind of mentality that may have worked well in places like ancient Sparta but had no place in modern society? Apparently it hadn't. It only took a few months of living in isolation to draw that kind of behavior back, and reduce once intelligent, sophisticated people into mindless, thoughtless brutes.

After sitting there for several hours, watching and waiting for the woman's maintenance cycle, Hayley realized she was just allowing herself to fall into the same trap. She was allowing herself be reduced to a scavenger – a vulture feeding off the remains of other animal's prey.

*No, she thought to herself finally, I'm not going to be like that.*

Nevertheless, she waited there and eventually the woman did get up. She noticed Hayley still there, and seemed to pause for a moment to stare at her, knowing she'd take the opportunity to retake her shelter the moment she was gone. Hayley saw that the woman was wincing noticeably- perhaps she was already overdue. Consigned to the fact that she had no choice but to abandon the shelter, the female Exile walked off. When she returned nearly half an hour later, Hayley was still there, standing outside of the shelter. The woman stopped a few meters just outside of range, and stared at Hayley. She'd deliberately waited for the woman to return so she could witness her completely tear down the makeshift structure. Hayley knocked down the drums, threw the metal sections of the roof and stomped on the soggy wooden pallet until it was fractured. She then grabbed a long wooden splinter with a nail sticking out of it and tore into the mattress until its stuffing was strewn about and rolling through the wind.

With the destruction of her shelter complete, Hayley looked back at the woman who had her arms wrapped around herself and her head down. She wasn't sure if the woman's body language was one of shame or perhaps disappointment that the shelter she'd stolen was now in a pile. At any rate, it didn't matter to Hayley. She'd gotten her point across---while she wouldn't become a vulture, she would certainly exercise her right to destroy whatever it she created.

Stepping away from the remains, Hayley gestured at them with her arms, as if to invite the woman to have at them. "Enjoy your stay, bitch."

Finally, she turned her back to the other Exile and walked off. She took one last glance back, and saw that the woman had returned to the remains and was sitting atop what once was a mattress. Hayley just shook her head and kept walking.

A week passed since her altercation with the other Exile, and for the third time since being exiled, Hayley had relocated. Though it'd originally been her intent to stay away from the arcologies, she naturally found herself being pulled closer to them. The parkettes scattered between the four towering structures seemed to be where most of the Exiles congregated, and for good reason. Artificial lakes and streams had been constructed in a number of the larger parkettes, and there was ample shade to be found amongst the trees. Further, the ground tended to be flatter, the grass shorter and the soil softer, making sleeping on the ground not nearly as uncomfortable as it was in the wilderness, where the ground was typically lumpy and filled with rocks.

The only problem Hayley discovered was actually finding a place to settle down in. There were simply too many Exiles per square meter of real estate for the most part. Fortunately, the largest park located in a square of land between the New Athens and New Constantinople arcologies proved to be the most hospitable. With enough space to easily contain the entire Exile population, she found she had considerable freedom of movement in the park, and access to five maintenance bays, all within running distance of each other.

She'd taken up residence (if it could be called that) near the large pond that started in the northeast corner of the park, feeding a stream that wound all the way down to a smaller pond in the southwest corner. With the trees above her, the calm, mirror-like water stretching out around her and blue skies above, she actually found the area to be quite serene. She only wished she could truly experience the full beauty of the scenery, and not be forced to look at it through her ocular devices' dull color palette.

Her first night in the park, Hayley tried something different. Sliding herself along the muddy shoreline, she placed her body from the neck down in the water. It was her first time submerging herself in liquid since she'd been exiled. As expected, it offered no sensation, not even a temperature different. Aside from a slight pressure increase on her body, she never would have known she was even in water. But that was what she was hoping for. She was hoping to sleep with her body partially submerged. The soil along the shore was soft and wet, and was quite comfortable as she nestled into it. The water helped to alleviate some of the pressure off the small of her back and buttocks. All in all, she found the experience to be pleasant, and awoke the next day without any of the usual stiffness she'd become accustomed to after a month and a half of sleeping outdoors.

After awhile, she began digging deep trenches into the soil just beneath the water, where she could lie down in and allow the water to come right up to her chin. Her sleeping had become an almost exquisite experience. The gentle rocking motion of the water felt great after a long day, and even though her body temperature never rose or fell, she could almost imagine the cooling sensation of the water on her skin as she laid there.

She continued to test the water as it were. She tried swimming. It was an unusual experience with the helmet, but not a difficult one. She found she could swim with ease in the suit, and the helmet not only provided buoyancy, but also oxygen. She'd even taken to having walks under water. The helmet's built-in re-breather provided for nearly 20 minutes of usable oxygen in a deoxygenated environment. While she certainly couldn't keep

her head underwater indefinitely, a quick pop up above the surface was all the helmet needed to dispel the built-up carbon dioxide and draw in fresh air molecules. Not coming up for air could easily result in CO<sub>2</sub> poisoning. Fortunately, Warden proved its use in a positive way by alerting Hayley whenever she was nearing CO<sub>2</sub> saturation.

Once more Hayley found she was running the risk of having things become almost tolerable in an intolerable situation. She was enjoying living in the park, and sleeping in the water. The other Exiles in the area played nice, giving her her space. And, there were enough regular people around that things almost *did* feel normal for a change.

During the day, Hayley got into the habit of puttering around the many paths that crisscrossed through the parkette. She watched people go by, carrying on with their lives, talking, laughing, loving...all the things normal people did. One afternoon she noticed a family having a picnic. She found herself watching them from afar, envious of them for what they had. The sight of real food being put onto plates and passed around made her realize how much she'd missed eating. Just the sensation of having something solid in her mouth, being able to chew something, to taste something, to have her saliva glands ache in anticipation for something sweet. For over a month now she'd tasted nothing, smelled nothing, and felt nothing in her mouth except for the tightly formed plastic sheath that coated the upper and lower parts of her mouth and much of her esophagus. She could just barely push her tongue up against the inner wall of the slipper coating, allowing it to touch the roof of her mouth. She occasionally found herself doing that just so she could sense there being something in her mouth. Often she would grind her teeth against the plastic layer, simulating chewing as much as she could, though unable to open or move her jaw around much.

After several minutes of staring at the family, Hayley picked up the presence of other Exiles doing the same as her. Many of them however didn't even attempt to hide the fact that they were looking, some even sitting just a few feet away, staring at the young children as they merrily ate their sandwiches and ice cream treats.

Hayley found she was actually getting annoyed...not with the family, but with herself and the other Exiles. This was tantamount to voyeurism she thought. There was no reason those people didn't deserve to have a little privacy without a bunch of black latex wearing convicts leering at them.

Disgusted with herself for being among the voyeurs, she continued down the paved path, managing to get perhaps a hundred meters when she came upon a rather unusual sight. A number of Exiles, most of them young



given their undeveloped physiques, had managed to get their hands on ball and were playing some variation of kickball-dodgeball. Hayley stopped walking and watched the game unfold.

There were four playing in the field, including a pitcher, two in the outfield and one positioned a few feet behind the kicker, the kicker and his two teammates. Instead of rolling the ball at the kicker, the pitcher threw it at him. The kicker then kneed, punted, head-butted or even belly-bounced the ball into play. The kicker then had to run around three bases and get home while the fielders attempted to tag him with the ball. If the kicker made it home, then his or her team scored a point.

The group of Exiles were apparently having a good time despite the limitations in how close they could get to one another, which was only about 15 feet. Fortunately, the rules of the game seemed designed around that restriction and did seem to effect the game in any way.

A number of other Exiles were seated around the field of play and watched, obviously happy for the diversion. Hayley had to admit she found the spectacle to be quite amusing, and decided to go in for a closer look. As the teams changed sides, with the smaller team now in the field, one of the male Exiles noticed her crossing the field and stopped to look at her. She abruptly came to a stop, thinking for a moment that this might be another one of those territorial things. However, the Exile waved her forward then pointed to the outfield and gave her a quizzical shrug.

Was he asking if she wanted to play? She would have killed for the chance to do something fun. She shrugged in response, unsure of what the question was. He pressed his hands together and made as if he were begging before again pointing toward the outfield. That was it...he *was* inviting her to play. Smiling beneath her dark opaque helmet, she nodded, eliciting a thumbs-up from the Exile.

Running over to the outfield, she noticed many of the spectator Exiles clapping their hands. This must have been a regular function for them or something- perhaps a weekly event that they all enjoyed. She hadn't explored much of the park since coming to it; perhaps they played even more frequently.

Standing in the outfield, she watched as the female pitcher wound up and threw the ball at the other Exile's midsection. With a karate-like kick, he smashed the multi-colored rubber sphere over the pitcher's head, dumping it into right field where the other outfielder quickly scooped up the ball in mid stride then whipped it at the runner with a full power swing. The ball hit the runner in the square of the back just as he rounded second base. One out!

Hayley grinned, clapping her hands at her fellow outfielder. The male gave her a rather aristocratic bow of his upper body in reply. She couldn't help but chuckle. It felt good to have a little fun finally, to smile and enjoy a game with other people. She felt almost human again.

The next kicker came up to the plate and the pitcher delivered, throwing a high pitch that the kicker took in the head, head-butting the ball right back at the pitcher. She grabbed it and held back her throw until the kicker had cleared first base, obviously not wanting to risk missing and having the ball aired into the field where the spectators were sitting. Once the runner had passed the first base and was heading to second, she fired the ball. The runner deftly ducked away from the oncoming sphere, causing it to bounce into right field. The right fielder scooped it up as the runner cornered second base. Realizing he was out of range of an effective throw, the fielder tossed the ball to Hayley.

She'd almost been unprepared for the relay handoff. She managed to catch the ball in her chest, bobbled it while she tried to get a grip and then hurled it at the base runner. The ball caught his legs just as he hit third base.

"Woohoo!" Hayley hooted as a surge of joy filled her body. She looked around at her teammates, all of whom were clapping and waving their hands at her. She turned to her colleague in right field and mirrored his earlier bow. He threw his head back and his body started jiggling slightly, obviously from laughter.

Hayley couldn't believe how good it felt to be doing something other than just brooding and agonizing over the dismal state of her life. Though she knew this didn't change anything, that she was still only a mere month and a half into a three year sentence, the distraction was a welcome relief.

After scoring the third out, letting only one runner in for a score, the teams switched positions again. Given she'd just joined the game, Hayley was given first kick. Taking mercy on her, the pitcher rolled the ball to her. With a fierce swing of her leg, she powered the ball toward third base and launched into a full sprint. As she vigorously pumped her arms and legs, she kept her eye on the left fielder who got to the ball just as she corner first base. He lined Hayley up as she ran toward second, paused for a moment as she drew near then released the ball with a mighty side-arm throw. The former singer was quite surprised with both the thrower's accuracy and power, and was forced to slide into second, the ball shooting over her head by less than a foot.

Scrambling to her feet as the pitcher was forced to scurry for the ball, Hayley made it around second and was coming around third by the time the pitcher had tracked the ball down. He tossed it over to the catcher who was

in a much better position to get Hayley out. The catcher picked the ball out of the air in mid jump and flung it toward the home plate ahead of Hayley, smacking her in the side of the head just as she crossed.

Though there were no umpires to call outs, Hayley could tell by the body language of her teammates and the fist pumps of the other team that she was considered out at the plate. She didn't care though. She was just enjoying the game. Smacking her hands together in a feign show of frustration, she took a seat in the grass and watched her teammates take their turns.

The game lasted what had to be well over four hours. She wasn't sure if any score was being kept at all; it didn't really seem important to the players or the onlookers. They were all just enjoying the game. When a player dropped out because he or she had to go for maintenance, a time out was called. In lieu of that, one of the Exiles from the crowd would occasionally come on in relief.

By early evening, the players had grown tired and the crowd had dispersed. As Hayley set off back to her spot near the pond, one of male members of her team ran a few meters in front of her and waved at her to stop. He pointed at her, made a kicking gesture and gave her two thumbs up. She guessed he meant she played well. In acknowledgment, she gave a bow of her upper body. His head bobbed slightly, likely from chuckles. He waved two fingers at her, then gestured at his wrist as if to indicate time, then pointed back to the area of the park they'd just come from. She guessed they played every two days, and he was inviting her back. She gave him a nod and held up two fingers and then a thumbs up. He seemed to understand, and clapped his hands together before waving and running off.

*Wow...my first friend.* She thought to herself, a smile blossoming on her firmly encased lips. *Maybe things don't have to be so lonely if I don't let them.*

Feeling a warmth in her heart, she scooted back off to her pond. There were a few Exile stragglers nearby, but non paid much attention to her as she dug herself a new trench just along the shoreline beneath the water. Once it was complete, she laid herself down in it, letting the water come up to her chin as she liked it. She'd had quite a work out that afternoon, and was fatigued. Though the sun was still just over the horizon, Hayley nevertheless closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift to sleep.

It turned out to be the best sleep she'd had since arriving, despite it being broken up by her maintenance reminder alert.

## Chapter 12

Hayley had become a staple at the kick/dodgeball games. Playing three times a week, she was getting exercise, having fun and actually coming to recognize her teammates by their body dimensions alone. The pitcher on her team, the only other girl, was about two inches shorter than her, and weighed perhaps a few more pounds. She was certainly not heavy by any stretch of the imagination, quite the contrary. Her thigh muscles were quite well defined as were her biceps. She obviously did a lot of running, and the constant throwing motion with her arms had obviously helped to strengthen her arms. Her fellow outfielder, who'd not only introduced her to the game but was the one to invite her back, was roughly Hayley's height, and was of slightly above average build. Certainly not a long time Exile, but it was clear he'd been at it for awhile longer than Hayley. The catcher was a shorter fellow with a little more paunch in his belly, but not fat either. Perhaps at one time he'd been, but the months he'd clearly spent as an Exile were rapidly changing his body. He was the one who owned the ball. All three of them resided in the same park as Hayley, although she wasn't quite sure where. She'd occasionally run into them while wandering, and they'd bow to each other in that regal way she and her fellow outfielder had the first day. It'd become like their own secret handshake. A way of identifying each other.

In the past two months Hayley had noticed a change in her own body. She'd always been a fairly fit individual, although nobody would ever accuse her of being toned. That had started to change. She was noticing more definition in her belly, and in her legs and arms. Although she couldn't see them, she could feel her buttocks had also gotten firmer. Her physical appearance had never bothered her, although having her form so perfectly on display for everyone to see had caused her a degree of discomfort in her first few weeks as an Exile. She'd long since gotten over those early feelings of self-consciousness, which were never really that severe to begin with. As a singer, she was used to having her body on display and being the object of many a man's desire. She'd worn some provocative attires in her career. Some might call what she was forced to wear now to actually be more conservative than some of those. At least in the latex suit, there was no skin shown. Further, her anatomy was barely on display. Except for the shape of her breasts and buttocks, her nipples and her clitoris were completely smoothed under the material. There was of course a bit of a downside to that as well, given she had no way of pleasuring herself.

This became especially frustrating after one particular game of kick/dodgeball. The game had ended early due to rain. While there was no reason they couldn't have kept playing since they were all waterproof, it simply became impossible to get a hold of the ball. It was hard enough with the slipperiness of their suits *without* the addition of water saturating everything. The game soon turned into an exercise of futility, and the frustrated players decided to quit.

On her way back to her pond, she came upon a young man and woman. Both were just sopping wet and covered in mud from rolling around on the ground in the downpour, and were passionately making out. The display was so powerfully passionate, Hayley couldn't help but stop and watch. Normally she'd never have thought about watching two young lovers make out, but the image stirred something inside of her. A yearning. It'd been months since she'd felt so much as another body near hers. She missed Max...his company and his touch. Something about the young man reminded Hayley of him. Though a few years younger than Max, he had hair that was a similar reddish-blond hue as Max's. That was all it took for Hayley to begin to fantasize. She watched longingly at the two, pressing her back against a nearby tree and sliding down to her knees.

The lovers continued to jostle, rubbing their bodies against another's, drawing their lips together and letting their tongues dance and twirl around the other. Hayley's breathing became deeper as she ran a hand down her chest, firmly squeezing one of her breasts as her other hand searched the area between her thighs for some kind of sensation. Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine the feeling of a hand stroking the edges of her clitoris. She'd heard people could climax through thought alone, but without the physical stimuli, she wondered what was the point? Was the journey not half as rewarding, if not more so than the destination? But no matter how hard she tried to imagine or recall previous times she'd had intercourse, she just couldn't get enough of a rise out of her body.

Her stroking became more vigorous. She dropped down onto her back, periodically glancing over at the lovers and imagining herself in the woman's position. Squirming and rubbing her thighs together while prodding at the base of her crotch was just not having the desired effect. She could feel the pressure, but without friction it was pointless. She poked harder, squeezed her breasts tighter, and rubbed her butt into the mud with more force. Just nothing.

At one point, the young woman noticed the Exile in their midst thrashing around in the mud, trying to pleasure herself. She let out a

piercing scream that got the attention of the male, who looked back and spotted Hayley just a few meters away beneath a tree.

“God dammit!” The male felt around the ground with his hand, grabbing a hold of a fist sized rock. Rising to his feet, he flung the rock at Hayley, catching her in the ribs. “Stupid fucking Exile.”

That she felt. The weight of the impact cracked a rib, and pain ripped through her chest. Gasping, she crumpled up, drawing her knees up and wrapping her arms around herself. Moaning in pain, she rolled back and forth for a few seconds until the sound of Warden’s voice filled her head.

*“Sub-dermal injury detected. Initiating analgesic protocol level 3.”*

As if having been switched off with a light switch, the pain vanished. Hayley sat up slowly in a mildly confused state. Did the Warden just *take away* her pain, instead of administering it to her? She stood up, feeling her affected rib and noticing a mild discomfort where the rock had hit, but no intense pain.

“Wow...so you can do more than be a pain in the ass?” She wondered aloud, her comments directed at the disembodied voice of her invisible jailer. “This *is* a red letter day.”

The two lovers, still in the area, leered at Hayley as she walked by, appearing no worse for wear from the attack. She even had the courtesy to give them a friendly wave as she passed by, as if to say ‘no hard feelings’. Neither the young man nor the woman was sure what to make of that.

\* \* \*

The Federal commission tasked with reviewing the situation in the Aegean Republic had, as expected, waited until the last minute to carry out their investigation of the rogue state. As an act of good will, the Supreme Chancellor had agreed to allow the inspection to go on, and even accompanied the special representatives as they toured the arcologies inside and out. Max Trainor was among those special representatives. Ambassador Kurtis had seen to it that he be granted special status and be allowed to go with the Federation reps on the tour.

The reps had spent the better part of the last three days going through almost every inch of the arcologies, except for a few of the restricted areas which Supreme Chancellor Aldrich Heissler refused to allow them to see. Among those areas was the medical center within the New Rome arcology. Closed off on account of ‘biologically sensitive’ experimentation being conducted within them, at least according to Heissler, it was one of the few key areas that the Federation reps really had wanted to see.

“So, gentlemen, I hope your investigation has been concluded to your satisfaction,” Heissler said within the grandiose conference on the 200<sup>th</sup>

floor of the New Rome arcology, the twelve special Federation representatives seated around the oblong table within. “I am interested to hear the results of the tour.”

Also within the room were the Senior Administrators of each arcology, each of whom served as a member of the Republic Council. They included Sergei Tereshkova who served also as the Director of the Directorate of Internal Security. Lita Ross, the Senior Administrator of New Rome and the de-facto Number 3 most powerful person sitting on the council. Camelot Senior Admin James Wallace, a former long-time Federation Council member. Finally there was Dawn Kang, New Athens Senior Admin and Director of Republic Medical. The Admins sat across from the Federation reps, with Heissler seated at one of the long table and Ambassador Kurtis on the other. Max was seated further on the end, closest to Heissler. He wanted to see the man responsible for his girlfriend’s imprisonment up close and personal, and he wanted Heissler to see him.

“Yes, the results of the investigation,” Kurtis spoke loudly and authoritatively, his deep resonating voice echoing throughout the large room. “Well Mr. Supreme Chancellor, you’re not going to like what I have to say unfortunately.”

Heissler drew his hands onto table’s polished surface. “Oh?”

“In the three days that my associates and I have been allowed to examine your Republic, we have not been permitted access to certain key areas that are inherently critical to our investigation. Among those areas being the medical wings of all four arcologies, the offices of the Directorate of Internal Security, and several other areas we believe may potentially contain Republic citizens held against their will.”

“As was explained to you and your party, there are a number of sensitive areas that contain equipment or potentially harmful substances that may endanger you and your staff. And we simply will not be held responsible for any injuries sustained by you and your party during your investigation. Beyond that we have been entirely cooperative...”

“You have *not* been cooperative.” Kurtis cut him off.

Heissler fired an irritated glare at the Ambassador but kept his cool. “We have been *entirely* cooperative to the degree that we feel is necessary for you to complete a thorough report and present it to the Federation Council.”

“What about the prison population...these so-called *Exiles*? We have not seen a single one throughout the arcologies.”

“Yes, well that is because they are exiled to the outside. As part of the conditions of their sentence, they are relegated to the exterior.”

“So they are allowed to wander freely?”

“Within limitations,” Heissler answered smoothly. “We monitor their movements through a sophisticated network we call the Warden system. It ensures that they don’t wander too far and don’t cause any trouble.”

“And how do you enforce those *conditions*?” Kurtis shifted around in his seat.

“With punishment of course.”

“Describe the kinds of punishment they are submitted to?”

With a light sigh Heissler leaned forward in his seat. “I’m not at liberty to get into technical details. However, what I can tell you is that they are *not* physically harmed in any way. As a matter of fact, the Warden system is designed to keep the subject safe just as much as it is designed to keep them on a leash. In the event of injury, the system lets us know, enabling us to respond quickly. Additionally, there are various countermeasures in place that prevent an Exile from ever harming another citizen.”

Kurtis nodded his head slowly. “I see. And what prevents other citizens from abusing these so-called Exiles given the placement of these countermeasures?”

“A strict policy of non-interference. We’ve made it an offense for citizens to interact with Exiles in any way. Should a citizen be caught abusing an Exile, they are charged with violating that policy...as it would be on any other world with Federation laws. After all, Exiles are still people,” a smug smile appeared on Heissler’s face.

“Don’t you worry about insurrection? Surely Exiles have formed communities and gangs and...”

“Again, I will not get into the specific details of our Warden system, but it has been designed with the specific purpose of maintaining the prisoner population. Part of how we do this is by enforcing the concept of autonomous solitary confinement. Exiles are essentially prisoners within their own bodies- they cannot communicate with the outside world, they cannot interact with the outside world. They are well taken care of, but are effectively non-entities.”

“I would like to see one of these Exiles if I may,” the Ambassador looked up and down the side of the table containing the Federation reps, all of whom nodded in agreement.

“We thought you might. We had a random Exile brought in for that purpose,” Heissler turned toward Sergei Tereshkova, who nodded and rose up out of his seat, briskly marching across the cavernous room to the doors at the far end. “Bring in the Exile.”



Tereshkova opened the door, ushering in two of his DIS agents, both of whom were flanking a petite female black latex-skinned Exile. She was marched up to the table, the twelve Federation reps, Max included, swiveling their seats around to get a good look at her. Max's jaw dropped. Though he knew it couldn't have been Hayley given the girl's rather petite though toned frame, just seeing this one made him imagine her being encased in one of those suits, her head sealed up in the smooth black headgear.

"This is Exile VC31, real name Victoria Chang, age 25," Heissler read off a DPAD tablet. "She was arrested as part of a group of anarchists who firebombed a DIS office seven years ago, resulting in three fatalities and twenty-five injuries. She was charged with conspiracy, assault on a peace officer, destruction of public property and voluntary manslaughter. She was found guilty on Earth date 2198.320 and is presently serving a 30-year sentence."

Max studied the Exile. She stood with her shoulders hunched and her head dipped, her arms crossed in front of her with one hand looped around her wrist. Her head moved a little as if she was scanning the Federation reps before her. She had the look of a woman utterly defeated.

Kurtis spoke up after a moment. "Can you explain to me why you have them dressed so...provocatively?"

"There's nothing provocative about it," Heissler turned his eyes to the dark skinned Federation ambassador. "What you see is essentially the natural state of a human body. The material they wear is opaque to give them at least a degree of dignity, but also serves a more practical function, and that is to simply make them seem *less* human. It's a psychological barrier, makes them easier for ordinary Republic citizens to ignore them."

"But surely you could have provided them with some kind of uniform..."

"Uniforms and regular clothing require facilities to wash and maintain. These suits are designed to be fully self-contained, water and temperature proof, requiring no cleaning or repairs. The Exile will wear that and *only* that for the full duration of their sentence."

"And the helmets?"

"Another part of the psychological barrier to make the Exile appear less of an individual amongst his or her fellow Exiles. It also suppresses the Exile's ability to communicate, and finally protects the sensitive broadband receiver that the Warden system uses to monitor each Exile."

Kurtis rose up from his seat and sauntered over to the Exile, who turned her head up toward him as he approached. Leaning toward her, he stared at his reflection in the woman's helmet.

"Can she hear me?"

"Of course she can. But don't expect to hear a response."

"I would like the opportunity to speak to Ms. Chang one on one if I could."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Heissler responded. "We have a strict policy regarding Exile's ability to contact outsiders. Your being here does not change that policy."

Max was growing agitated. Pursing his lips tightly, he clenched his fists on the table top while biting his tongue. He'd been instructed not to speak during the course of the meeting with the Supreme Chancellor, and he'd agreed to that. Now he was on the verge of exploding. He couldn't imagine what Hayley must have been going through over the course of the past two months. She must have been going out of her mind by now---not able to speak to anyone, or be close to anyone, locked in that alien suit. He couldn't hold his tongue any longer.

Slapping a hand firmly against the table, he locked his eyes on Heissler who threw a glance in his direction. "You son of a bitch! How can we let this smug asshole get away with doing this to Hayley? She's a Federation citizen god damn it!"

"I beg your pardon?" An irate expression formed on the Supreme Chancellor pale-skinned face. "How dare you speak to me in such a manner. Who is this?"

"Max Trainor. And you've got my girlfriend locked up in one of those...those suits. And I want her back, *now!*"

"Mr. Trainor!" The Federation ambassador hollered, glaring at the younger man. "That's enough!"

"Mr. Trainor..." Heissler glared at the musician through burning, anger-filled eyes. "Whether your girlfriend is Federation citizen or not, Ms. Komit was charged of a crime and convicted..."

"By a fucking kangaroo court. She wasn't even given a fair chance! No defense? You call that civil? It was a god damned witch burning!"

"Our legal system has proved effective. What crime have you seen? What violence? In the seven years since we introduced our SCIE program, our crime rate has fallen to zero. There has not been a single crime related fatality in *seven years*. Can the Federation make such a claim? I think not."

"The Federation consists of over 32 billion citizens across twelve star systems," Kurtis barked in reply. "You can't possible begin to compare the

two. And considering how many people do fall under the administration of the Federation government, our crime rate, while certainly greater than zero, is quite small per-capita compared to your Republic less than *ten* years ago. So don't even *begin* to compare the two, Mr. Supreme Chancellor."

Heissler stormed to his feet. "That's it! We invite you here as a sign of good faith, and you insult us. Well, Mr. Ambassador, Federation Representatives, I believe our business here is done. Go back to your Federation Council and tell them whatever it is you wish. We will *not* be threatened or intimidated by you or anyone else under the Federation banner. I now demand that you leave at once."

"One last question, Heissler," Max fired a cold stare at the Supreme Chancellor. "Rumor has it you locked up your own daughter in one of those Exile suits. How does it feel knowing she's out there, looking like that, all alone, knowing you were the one to put her there?"

Heissler was clearly caught off guard by the question, as were the other members of the Administrative Council. They peered quizzically at one another, then looked to Heissler as he came up with a response.

"My daughter? Exiled? That's preposterous! My daughter is off world...living on the Mars colony."

"Yeah? Well, we'll see about that," Max retorted.

Under armed guard, the Federation commission was quickly escorted out of the briefing room. On their way back up to the rooftop landing platform, Kurtis shot an angry glare at Trainor, shaking his head in a baffling manner.

"I told you not to speak Mr. Trainor."

"Well somebody had to," Trainor responded curtly. "We both know the guy's a power mad tyrant. You wanna go through due process, fine. It ain't gonna change a damn thing. And Hayley is *still* out there."

"And now, thanks to you, we're no closer to getting her back," Kurtis's eyes narrowed sharply. "That outburst of yours cost us a needed foothold. Now we have nothing. Now, we have no choice. This will not be decided diplomatically."

Trainor glanced back at the Ambassador. "What do you mean?"

"Based on our recommendation, the Federation Council is certain to agree that police action is required. They will send ships, troops and weapons to Vega IV. And then there won't be stopping it after that...war is inevitable."

## Chapter 13

The seasonal changes on Vega IV came about quite rapidly. It was four months into Hayley's exile on the planet and the rainy late summer and autumn seasons had at last given way to the winter season. The bright blue-green trees had transformed into a vibrant collage of oranges, reds, yellows and browns. While she was unable to experience the sensation of changing temperatures thanks to her suit, she'd noticed that regular citizens that were out and about had adopted heavier clothing. She could see people's breath on the air, and noticed frost appearing on the grass. Then the snow came.

It started off slowly at first, coming down in brief snow flurries that reminded Hayley a great deal of home. She would sit and watch the snow come down between the tall arcologies and remember Montreal in the late autumn, imagining holding a cup of steaming hot cocoa between her hands with marshmallows slowly melting within. Memories of the holiday season filled her head- the sight of decorations filling Sainte-Catherine Street and all of the busy shoppers braving the cold, hopping from store to store in a flurry of activity. The feeling of the cold air on her face and the sounds of crisp white snow crunching beneath her feet as her parents used to pull her and her older sister along during their shopping trips to *La Centre Eaton*. She thought of the smell of turkey baking in the oven, the sound of her mother chopping vegetables and her father being shooed out of the kitchen whenever she caught him trying to get an early taste of the bird. She remembered the way the house was always so fully decorated, with holly coiled around stair banisters, wreaths hanging from every door, and the sparkling lights and animated decorative bulbs of the 8-foot tall Christmas tree they would get each year.

Even as Hayley grew in interstellar acclaim and moved on her own, those family traditions had always meant the world to her. Regardless of what she was doing at the time, she always made sure she had a few weeks off around Christmas so she could be with her family. She missed their faces. Their voices. She even missed the inevitable arguments she'd have with her sister Melanie over the merits of choosing a singing career, instead of going into politics like her.

Hayley breathed a mournful sigh, wishing she was home right now. Although on Earth it was only September, the winter season on Vega IV was making her yearn for those familial settings.

The kick/dodgeball games continued into the winter season, albeit briefly. When the ground froze, it made running a little more difficult and harder on the feet. Then, when the snow finally came to stay, it became impossible to bounce the ball properly. Roughly a week after the first snow fall, the heavy stuff hit. It came down in massive sheets, huge icy flakes that covered everything within the first few hours, but didn't stop for days. Hayley was relieved beyond words that her suit kept her comfortable in the cold, as she was up to the mid of her calves by the time the blizzard finally ceased.

Unfortunately, the pond Hayley called home had frozen over. She'd gotten so accustomed to sleeping almost completely submerged that when she had to sleep in a snow bank that first night, all she did was roll around. When she woke up, she was buried. At first she thought her suit may have malfunctioned when she opened her eyes and was greeted by darkness. It took her a moment to realize her head was completely buried.

After digging herself out, she ventured through the park to see how the other Exiles were coping. Against the fresh bright white snow, they all stood out like shiny black silhouettes. She was amused by the activities of a few of them- one was in the process of building a towering snowman. A number of others were firing snowballs at each other, some were laying in the snow making snow angels. Childish activities certainly, but fun was where you could find it. And were Hayley not feeling so depressed lately, she might have even joined in the snowball fight. Unfortunately, all the snow and winter activities did was make her feel nostalgic about home and miss it even worse.

Trudging across the park's vast snow covered field, she decided to get in close to the arcologies. Snow removal along the roads was done quickly, the snow never allowed to accumulate more than a few centimeters before large tank-like vehicles were deployed. Rather than shovel the snow away, the vehicles actually sprayed some kind of chemical on the roads from a nozzle on its front section that melted the snow and prevented the water from freezing. A street-sweeper style vehicle would then appear a short while later, sweeping away the excess water and ice, leaving the roads looking as dry as they did in a mid-summer day. She had to be careful navigating around the roads, constantly watching for the snow removal trucks. She doubted they would stop for an Exile, and the potential of being crushed under the vehicles treads wasn't very appealing.

One of the good things about winter was that there were few ordinary citizens out and about. It meant the promenades were usually all but empty except for the Exiles, who practically took over the partially enclosed

spaces. Unfortunately it meant there were Exiles constantly within close proximity, and Hayley found herself regularly being submitted to the Warden's painful proximity alarm.

It seemed the concentration of Exiles near the arcologies had increased since the first blizzard. She'd noticed even in her park there appeared to be far more Exile traffic than there had been throughout the past few months. Either DIS was cracking down on more citizens, or the Exiles who typically stayed away from the civilized areas were coming in. It kind of made sense to Hayley. The roads and walkways around the arcologies were constantly being cleared, making travel a lot easier. She could only guess what having to trudge through knee-high deep snow in the wilds had to be like.

Unfortunately things were becoming a little too crowded for her taste. The battery of proximity alarms was wearing on her patience. Without her game to keep her occupied during the day and her inability to sleep in her pond, she thought it was kind of pointless to stick around the city all winter. Instead of going south however, she decided to go north of the arcologies. In her four months of exile, she'd never ventured beyond the northern most boundary-wall that divided the arcologies from the rest of the world. Not that there was very far to go north, as the Vega Bay shoreline eventually curved east. What lay immediately north of the heart of the Aegean Republic was a vast open network of canals; part of the city's sewage and waste system. A sprawling, kilometers long maze of interconnecting steel canals, drainage pipes, viaducts and artificial islands spread out before her as she neared the edge of its perimeter. Steam rose from the tepid waters constantly flowing throughout the wide steel trenches, all of it pushing toward a towering facility silhouetted in the distance- most likely the waste reclamation facility.

Hayley followed the pathways deeper into the vast network of canals. Fortunately the residual heat coming from the water seemed to keep the snow levels to a minimum. A number of temporary structures had been built atop the islands between the canals- most of them were the older model 'porta-home' types that looked like large trailer homes with legs, perhaps left over from the early days of the planet's colonization. Smaller than the more common modular units, the porta-homes were solitary non-modular units about twenty feet long and eleven feet high from foot to rooftop, designed to be deployed from the air. The porta-home's occupancy lights were on, suggesting someone was still inhabiting the structure. Hayley couldn't fathom anyone choosing to live in a place like this.

As she approached one of the structures, she noticed a familiar shape adorning one of the structure's side panels...a rough, barely legible letter A within a circle. She remembered seeing a mark similar to it months ago, in her first day as an Exile, marking the wall of a maintenance station. She wondered if perhaps it'd simply been done by that same thuggish Exile, or if perhaps it was some kind of identification marking.

As she continued nearing the structure, movement along the periphery of her vision caught her attention. She stopped, noticing an Exile had appeared from behind another nearby structure. A physically fit male, he stared at her with his arms folded over his chest. Suddenly more Exiles appeared, some crawling up from the canals, others appearing from beneath the porta-home structures. Hayley suddenly found herself surrounded, with Exiles all around her standing equal distances apart from each other and away from her so as to not trigger their proximity alarms. There were over a dozen of them, males and females all sharing a common trait- they were each physically very fit, suggesting they were all long-timers, or had been fit prior to exile.

Although she couldn't read any of their faces for obvious reasons, their body language suggested they had hostile intent. She couldn't imagine what any of them could do to her however that wouldn't cause them pain also...but then again it hadn't stopped the brute she'd encountered that first day.

One of the Exiles, a female with very nicely toned thighs and biceps took a step toward Hayley though was careful not to enter illegal range. Something about her suggested familiarity, though she couldn't be sure why...there were hundreds of female Exiles out there of similar size and shape. Yet there was something about her, Hayley was certain she'd seen her before.

The female exile gestured at her wrist, apparently the universal symbol of time amongst Exiles, then jerked a finger in Hayley's direction. She'd come to understand the meaning of the signing as she'd seen it many times before. The question was how long she'd been exiled? Hayley held up four fingers then made an 'M' shape with both hands by joining the tips of her thumbs together and pointing her fingers downward. The female exile shook her head, pointed at herself then tapped her wrist. She then held up both hands, showing eight fingers followed by the 'peace' sign, which indicated years.

Eight years! Hayley's eyes went wide under her helmet. This woman, whoever she was, wasn't just a long timer; she had to have been

among the first prisoners to be exiled before it became standard procedure on the world.

The female exile pointed past Hayley's shoulder, gesturing south toward the arcologies. Rather than risk a confrontation, she decided to follow the instructions and left the sewage and drainage complex. The confrontation left her feeling a little despondent and out of sorts, even though it had ended peacefully. Perhaps it was because she was desperate for any sort of contact or community, and the one real community of Exiles that seemed to exist had just rejected her. She wondered just how long she'd have to be out there before they accepted her.

## Chapter 14

Though winters on Vega IV were quite intense with heavy snowfalls almost persistent throughout the season, it was thankfully a short season, at least in the central regions of the planet's western continent. Three months after the first snowfall came the last snowfall, followed by the great thaw as the planet's orbit brought it closer to the system's A-type main sequence star. The winter season was immediately followed by the continent's violent stormy season. She'd never before experienced storms the likes of which she saw on Vega IV.

Lightning shattered the darkened sky, flashes occurring almost continuously day and night, with lightning strikes occurring every few minutes, some even coming dangerously close to Hayley as she walked through the park that evening. Many Exiles, from what she could see, had taken shelter close to the arcologies, lining the outer walls or within the partially enclosed spaces of the promenades. A few however, like Hayley, just couldn't be bothered with such precautions. Her life of exile had begun to truly take its toll on her over the course of the past few months. The novelty of the snow had worn out after about a month, and the winter's bleakness had led her down a pit of despair. When finally the snow had melted, bringing the promise of longer days, more sun and the ability for Hayley to finally return to her pond, she'd felt her spirits rise. But even as life returned to the withered trees and brown grass, she couldn't quite dig herself out of her hole of self-pity.

She'd reunited with her kick/dodgeball teammates for a game earlier that week. The only game of the season it would turn out to be. A group of scruffy-looking male teenagers, obviously from the shanties, had noticed them playing in their usual spot in the small open field near the western fence line. They watched for a bit from the other side of the fence, jeering and taunting the Exiles whom they knew couldn't do anything. When that



wasn't good enough for them, they jumped the fence and ran right into the middle of the game, one of them snagging the ball as it was kicked.

Laughing and jeering, one of the young boys, probably no older than sixteen, slashed the ball with a pocket knife, doing so out of pure malice with a toothy, lopsided grin on his face. The collective spirits of every Exile on the field, player and spectator alike, was deflated along with the ball.

Hayley, who was in the outfield at that moment, turned her eyes toward the catcher whom she knew owned the ball. He slumped to the ground, instinctively drawing a hand over the face of his helmet. The defeat in his posture was palpable.

"You stupid little brat!" Hayley raged under her helmet, utterly furious with the complete lack of empathy shown by the three teenagers, who continued to torment the nearby Exiles.

A few of the Exiles acknowledged the three boys with rude gestures. It was the least they could do, and practically the only thing they could do. Tiring of the shameful spectacle, the Exiles in the field dispersed. But it wasn't over. Next came something that would shake Hayley to the core.

She watched as her team's pitcher started off the field, when one of the larger youths shouted something to the others, taking notice of her. They ran toward her and surrounded her, forcing her to stop. Hayley watched with rising anger as the boys focused their bullying efforts on her, saying things to her that no other human should ever say to another.

"Hey bitch, how do you look in there? Fucking ugly as shit I bet. Probably glad you have that thing on your head so no one has to see your ugly ass face," the boy said, leaning in close and rapping a fist against her helmet. "All this time having to live out here gave you a nice fucking body though. I bet you'd love it if I stuck my dick in your ass, wouldn't you?"

"Do her man, do her!" One of the other teens urged.

"Yeah man, do her! She can't do anything."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, you fucking whore?" The larger teen pressed his head against the female Exile's helmet, causing her to lean back. There was nothing she could do though, and she knew it and Hayley knew it. She knew the girl just had to sit there and wait the boys out, hoping their jaw jacking would tire them out eventually. "Come on whore, do something why don't you? You can't, because you know you want it. You want me fucking bad, don't you?"

Hayley's hands balled tightly into fists. She wanted to do something, but couldn't. She couldn't get close to the other Exile and couldn't put her hand on a citizen. But maybe she could track a DIS agent down. Peering around the immediate area, she couldn't see any. They rarely patrolled the

park, normally being found in the more citizen-heavy populated spots like the promenades. The closest one was unfortunately about a four minute run away, and Hayley didn't want to leave her friend alone with these thugs.

The large boy made a move, grabbing the Exile by the arm and throwing her to the ground. The woman tried picking herself up but had the back of her head stomped on and pounded into the ground. Without the helmet protecting her, her skull would have likely been fractured. Clearly dazed by the assault, she shakily tried to push herself up, but was forced onto her back as one of the teens drilled the side of her body with his knee.

"Stop it!" Hayley cried and took a few running steps at the boys, stopping just short of the five meter limit.

The boys detected the other Exile in their midst, looking up at her with wicked intent in their eyes.

"Get a good look!" The larger boy said, as he forced himself on top of the female Exile on the ground. To Hayley's horror, the boy began groping the other girl, squeezing her breasts firmly with his hands while grinding his crotch into her body.

The female Exile, terrified of touching the teen, just laid there with her fingers digging into the ground. She shook spastically, but not from fear. The Warden system was registering the contact between her and the boy, sending intense jolts of pain through her body as it counted every touch as a separate violation. It was if they knew that the more they touched her the more punishment she would get and the more her sentence would increase. They kept it up for several more minutes, the larger teen dipping his head down and getting a mouth full of the Exile's breast. It was the most perverse and disturbing thing Hayley had ever witnessed.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the teen pushed himself off of the female Exile, leaving her on her back and shivering uncontrollably. It was clear these predators hadn't had enough however. One of the smaller boys started toward Hayley.

"This one looks pretty hot too," he said, his lips curled back in a vicious grin. "She's mine."

Realizing she was the next target, Hayley turned and started running. She'd only managed to get maybe two-dozen paces when the teens tackled her. Screaming beneath her helmet, she could do nothing as pain ripped through her body, Warden's voice continuously droning 'Contact Violation' in her head. She felt the pressure of a pair of hands squeezing her breasts as she was forcibly sat up and pulled into the lap of one of the teens. Instinctively she tilted her head forward and drove it back, the back of her helmeted head smashing the front teeth of one of her assailants. It took her a

split second to realize what she'd just done and know that she'd be paying for it.

“You fucking bitch!” The teen roared, as blood spurted from his gums where his two front teeth had been smashed out.

Nothing the teens could do to her however would compare to the pain she was about to endure. It was like her body was being covered in a vat of boiling oil. It was so intense and so shocking to the system that she couldn't even scream. Her body became stiff like a board as every muscle in her body exploded in agony.

*“Major Offense. Assaulting a citizen. Punishment level 9 administered. DIS has been dispatched to your location.”*

The pain subsided after several long seconds, just as Hayley felt herself beginning to lose consciousness. It wasn't over for her though. Other pain was now wracking her body as she found herself laying face up, the three boys now stomping and kicking her. She felt her ribs crack and new, very *real* pain rip through her body. The one she'd head butted stood over her head and was kicking the side of her helmet furiously. She'd never been so thankful she was wearing the suit and helmet. She figured she'd be in far worse pain had she not.

And in another first, it was the first time Hayley was glad to see DIS agents. A pair of them appeared and one by one threw the boys to the ground. There was a struggle as the three youths attempted to scramble to their feet and flee, one of them even getting a few feet away before one of the agents raised a concussion pistol and fired a shot. The boy was thrown off his feet, as if he'd just been hit by a speeding car. It was a satisfying sight as Hayley looked on. The other two boys were repeatedly clubbed by the agents until both were black and blue and no longer resisting. It was brutal and it was the exact kind of behavior Hayley had hoped to make other people conscious of through her tour, but at that moment, after having watched her friend raped and having been beaten severely, she could think of no better fate for the three. She hoped they'd been charged, convicted and exiled. Nothing could have been more poetic.

After the agents mopped up, one of them came to speak with Hayley; a female DIS agent who even had the courtesy of removing her gas mask before speaking to her. She knelt down next to Hayley with her DPAD, holding the device over her body.

“Warden HK14. Subject diagnostic.”

*“Exile HK14 diagnostic. Subject is suffering from four broken ribs, a punctured lung and various fractures along the left and right Humerus.”*

*Analgesic protocol level 6 administered. Recommend immediate medical attention.”*

“Warden, alert medical. Have them send a shuttle. Don’t worry, we’ll get you some help,” the agent looked down at Hayley and much to her surprised gave her a small smile. “Warden HK14, initiate free speak protocol. How are you feeling HK14?”

She had to admit she didn’t feel as bad as she figured she should have, given the level of injury she’d sustained. She figured it was either the shock or Warden’s ability to nullify her pain. “I’ve felt better,” she finally admitted.

“I’m sorry you had to through that. We’ve been having problems lately with youth gangs from the shantytowns. We’ve caught a number of them abusing the Exile population. We’ll get you fixed up, don’t worry.”

Hayley turned her head catching a glimpse of the other Exile standing a few yards away and watching closely. She was glad she wasn’t hurt. But the way she stood with one arm crossed over her chest and her other hand deliberately placed over her crotch suggested to Hayley that perhaps she’d been injured in a deeper way. The rape, or attempted rape, had clearly taken something out of her. Hayley reached a hand out toward her, wiggling her fingers slightly to acknowledge her. The other Exile pressed a hand against her chest over her heart, then drew both hands together as if enclosing them around her heart. She released the invisibly clutched heart at Hayley.

The young former singer smiled, happy to have done something positive for a fellow Exile. Even though she hadn’t been able to help her directly, they both knew Hayley’s assault on their mutual attackers had drawn the attention of DIS agents. Had she not done that, even at the risk of increasing her own sentence, she may have been killed and the other Exile would not have gotten any justice.

Medics arrived soon afterward, riding in a sleek aircraft that looked similar to a tilt-rotor aircraft, only with no propellers. Instead, it used rotating jet engines. The red and black schemed craft landed a few meters away from Hayley, paramedics deploying the instant it touched down. They carefully loaded the injured Exile onto a padded stretcher, strapped her down and hurried her into the aircraft. It was then a short 2-minute ride back to the arcology.

For the first time in eight months, Hayley was indoors again. The medics were sure to deactivate most of Warden’s monitoring protocols while they transported her, and during the course of her stay in the New Rome medical center. It was interest to Hayley to see exactly how wounded Exiles were treated.

She found herself back in the medical center/laboratory she'd first been in when they were prepping her for exile. She'd hoped that they'd be forced to remove the black latex-like skin from her body or at least her helmet, but to her disappointment it was not to be. Using a type of laser system, they were able to repair her bones from inside. They first suspended her within a liquid filled tank, like a large fish tank. The fluid, which was about as thick as molasses but as clear as water, kept her afloat at about the midway point of the tank. An auto-tracking laser, deployed from a ball-like turret above, went to work rapidly firing a needle-thin white beam at her. The beam fired in rapid micro-second bursts, cutting through material and flesh to strike at her bone where the breaks were located. The process took several hours, the beam essentially 'welding' the bones together. Fortunately, Warden kept Hayley in a mild stupor, making the process seemingly quick and painless. She fell asleep about mid way in to the procedure, and woke up outside of the fluid and on a bed inside the patient ward. She wasn't alone. A number of other Exiles occupied beds throughout the ward, all of whom appeared to be resting comfortable.

A familiar figure wearing a white medical coverall appeared from a side room and walked up to Hayley's side. The tan-skinned raven-haired Dr. Savan, as usual, wore an inappropriate smile on her face.

"Hello HK14. It seems you're doing well this morning."

Hayley breathed a heavy sigh. She really had no desire to see or speak to the woman who'd basically turned her into an Exile. "Eat me, you perky bitch."

The doctor's eyes widened, her mouth forming into a sardonic looking smirk. "Perky bitch...well, that's a new one."

*Shit...she heard that.* Hayley grumbled, not realizing her free speak mode hadn't been deactivated. She didn't apologize for the remark though, figuring it was a pretty apt description.

"How long have I been asleep?" Hayley asked instead.

"About 12 hours. How are you feeling?"

"Fine I suppose."

"Good. How are you coping out there if you don't mind my asking?"

"I *do* mind."

"Oh," Savan frowned. "You know, some find it helpful to talk about their experiences, as a kind of therapy. Most people can't wait to talk when they have a chance. This may be the only chance you'll get to..."

"Just...save it, doctor. I don't want to talk to *you* or anyone else, alright?"

“As you wish. You’ll be discharged in an hour. Warden HK14, deactivate free speak.”

Hayley breathed a deep sigh as Savan walked away, glad to be rid of the woman. She turned her head slightly and looked at the Exile in the bed next to hers. The young looking male Exile seemed to sense her glance and turned to look at her, the two exchanging small nods of acknowledgment. It was strange, she thought as she stared at the black suited being before her. It hadn’t even been a year, and already Hayley was identifying more with the Exiles than she was with regular people. It was almost as if she’d stopped considering herself a person anymore. She was an Exile. As if being an Exile was to be something beyond being human. Or perhaps she just couldn’t trust people not wearing the suits. With other Exiles, she could pretty much predict their behavior. Regular people were so much more random. So much more chaotic.

She dwelled on those thoughts, even after DIS agents came to retrieve her and flown back outside to the park where they’d found her. Feeling just a little bit woozy but otherwise fine, she wandered back to the pond she called home. She wouldn’t be staying however.

Following one of her daily maintenance cycles, Hayley found herself staring at the regular citizens walking along the nearby walkways and bridges, and in and out of the promenades. She watched them carrying on about their daily lives, totally unsympathetic toward the Exiles all around them, apathetic toward their suffering and almost totally unaware of their existence. Hayley found herself growing spiteful toward regular people. It wasn’t jealousy or envy, the kinds of emotions she’d felt earlier on. No. All she felt was disdain for the common man. They were the ones who’d put her there, they were the ones who were keeping her there, and they were the ones brutalizing her and her fellow Exiles.

The final nail in the coffin came when Hayley spotted three familiar faces moving through the walkway, laughing and jostling each other, occasionally throwing glances toward the Exiles near the maintenance station. It was the three teenagers who’d attacked her and her friend, walking Scot-free with only a few bruises from their beating at the hands of the DIS agents serving as punishment for their crimes. She couldn’t believe it. She smacks a woman’s DPAD out of her hands and she gets an extra year thrown on her sentence. These three little criminals rape an Exile and savagely beat another and get...nothing.

These people were savages. All of them. And Hayley didn’t want to look at them anymore.

As the skies filled with dark ominous clouds and claps of thunder shook the ground, Hayley looked out toward the wilderness beyond the arcologies and beyond the shantytown and knew that's where she needed to be.

## Chapter 15

Roughly three weeks into her self-imposed exile into the Vega IV wilderness, Hayley was beginning to wonder if she'd made the right choice in leaving the relative comfort of area surrounding the arcologies. Her depression was at an all time high. Without the distraction and fun of the ballgame, and the comfort of being around the closest things to friends, all she had time for was to think. She obsessed over the fact that her sentence wasn't getting shorter. It'd been nine months, already half of her original sentence complete. Now however, it was a mere nine months out of twenty years...nearly half a life's sentence on Earth.

And how did her sentence suddenly skyrocket? Outside of the common violations which she got dinged for on a regular basis, it was her attack on the teen who'd tried raping her. For smashing the teeth out of his face, she'd incurred an assault on citizen charge. Because it was her second time assaulting a citizen, it was an automatic ten-year extension to her sentence. It didn't matter to Warden that she was defending herself. Perhaps if she'd known she was going to get such an arbitrary extension she would have said something to Dr. Savan when she had the chance.

The Exile suit...it was the perfect trap. Once you were in, there was no getting out.

If she was forced to serve out her sentence, it'd mean she would be in her forties by the time she would conceivably get out. But she knew she was never getting out. Strangely, it didn't seem to bother her much anymore. She was resolved to spending the remainder of her life encased in the black suit and helmet, even if that resolve depressed the hell out of her and made her want to kill herself. But perhaps it was her acceptance that kept her from trying to kill herself. Kept her marginally sane. Though there were times she wasn't sure about the second part.

During her first few days back out, she'd returned to the original spot she'd been dropped off in her first night. She'd stayed there for no more

than a week, and had even watched as a new group of Exiles were deposited on the same spot she had been. The group of three, two males and one female, stood about, looking as timid as Hayley had felt on her first night and listened to the same speech she'd been given. They made the mistake of standing too close to each other, and each was assailed by the Warden's proximity warning. When they dispersed, the DIS vehicle that'd carried them headed back up the road to the arcologies.

Hayley watched the three new Exiles for a short while, memories of her own initial experiences flooding back. She could see the confusion in their body language, the way they each looked at one another, and occasionally at her atop her perch in the distance. Eventually they started down the road and disappeared off into the horizon.

It was at that point Hayley decided she needed to find somewhere new. She decided to go east following the nearby dirt road. After about thirty minutes in a slow wandering pace, she came upon another paved stretch of road and decided to follow it. Along the way she encountered a fenced in area she hadn't expected to see way out there. Within the fenced in perimeter there was a large structure, roughly four stories high and nearly a hundred meters across. All manner of vehicles were parked outside of the structure, including the large wheeled all-terrain trucks, aircraft including small personnel transport skids. All of which contained the three-letter acronym of the Directorate of Internal Security printed on them.

A sign near the automatic gates established the structure as being DIS Substation/Barracks Charlie. Staring through the heavy barred gates, she watched as a number of agents in their usual black trench coat and gasmask getup marched around in formation as another barked commands at them. Nobody seemed to pay any heed to the lone Exile standing out front watching them.

After awhile, Hayley pulled herself away and continued along the road, entering into a fairly rocky elevated area with little to no vegetation. She stopped suddenly when she noticed the silhouette of a building rise out of the horizon. The structure was tall and appeared quite vast, the road leading directly to it. She passed by an open gated area, noticing a sign sticking up from the ground along the road with the words 'WASTE DISPOSAL FACILITY' printed in block text on it.

The facility was indeed vast, as Hayley would find. Stretching for nearly a half kilometer and surrounded by 8-foot-tall chain link fencing, the central structure was surrounded by debris and trash and appeared utterly devoid of activity. There weren't even any Exiles around, at least as far as she could see. Perhaps most were discouraged from going there due to the



proximity of the DIS substation. The place was abandoned for all intents and purposes. And that suited Hayley just fine.

She spent hours going over every inch of the structure's exterior. The place was just flooded with garbage and waste, and she was certain if she could smell, would probably be on the verge of throwing up. Fortunately she couldn't, making the process of wading through the trash that much easier. The facility appeared older; it was made of the heavy-gauge brownish steel that many older colonies had built their structures out of during the early days of colonization. This was likely part of the Aegean Colony's early infrastructure before they had the arcologies and proper waste reclamation facilities. Collecting garbage in this way was a product of a bygone era that had long since disappeared from Earth. Without the proper facilities however, this was what colonies were forced to do.

Hayley discovered access inside the facility was impossible. Every single door had been sealed. Although years of decay had caused large rust holes to form in the building's surface, Hayley found when she attempted to crawl into them, the Warden would punish her.

*"Movement violation. Attempted entry into private facilities,"* it told her in its typical emotionless drone.

What she had found however was a way onto the building's roof. It was a bit of a trick, and she doubted she'd have been able to a few months ago, but thanks to her improved physical ability and with a little bit of ingenuity she managed to pull it off. The support beams on the corners of the building had these reinforced steel brackets surrounding them running the entire length up the beam, each bracket roughly ten centimeters apart. The brackets jutted out of the beams about an inch or so, perhaps a little less. Hayley found she could grab onto the brackets with her fingers and pull her body up, using her toes to steady herself. The problem was, initially, her suit simply had no grip. She would put her weight on her fingers and slide off instantly. Fortunately, the debris field held many treasures, including discarded vats of an industrial plastic adhesive.

Dipping her hands in the adhesive, then running them through the dirt, she was able to create a rough, sticky sandpaper-like coating over her hands. It was then a matter of being patient and deliberate as she made her ascent. Eventually, she crawled over the roof's edge, and was there.

Standing, she looked out upon the world around her. The view was quite impressive even at only four stories above the ground. She could see just about every structure throughout the Aegean Republic, including the arcologies (though one could see those from anywhere), the nearby DIS outpost, the towering supply depot with ships along its landing pads, and

even the numerous maintenance bays in the area. Beyond them, Vega Bay stretched out infinite across the horizon.

What was more important to Hayley though was getting the lay of the land. She could see where the roads lie, and the web-work of interconnecting dirt paths. She drew rough map in her head, taking into consideration where the major landmarks were and which road led to each.

She remained on the roof for several more hours just enjoying the view, but was forced down when Warden came with one of his twice daily maintenance reminders. Getting off the roof fortunately proved an easier task. With the building stacked in such a way she could jump down from the upper rooftop to a lower roof top, then crawl over the edge and drop down onto the steel awning about fourteen-or-so feet off the ground. It was then just a matter of crawling off the edge of the awning, lowering herself down as far as she could get with full arm and leg extension, and drop the rest of the way down.

Recalling seeing a maintenance bay a short distance away, she launched into a jog, taking a dirt path, which ran from the building and would eventually lead her all the way to the arcologies if she followed it all the way. The maintenance bay was located just off the dirt road about a half-klick from the abandoned waste facility.

Returning to the rooftop after her maintenance cycle, Hayley decided she would make it home for the time being.

Barely a week later, Hayley noticed considerable activity in and around the arcologies. Aerial traffic had picked up considerably, tiny black dots swarming around the four structures like flies. In her nine months on the ground there, she hadn't seen so much traffic. Something was obviously up. She'd barely had a time to consider what that might be when Warden unexpectedly spoke up.

*“Incoming notification from Warden central mainframe. Please stand by...”*

There was a long pause. Hayley had never before experienced a ‘notification’ from Warden. The only time it ever spoke was when she'd committed a violation, when it was reminding her of maintenance cycles and during its weekly tallying of her accumulated violations for that week. This was new. And new was good. After several minutes, the droning voice returned.

*“Error 3285. Troubleshooting...stand by.”*

*An error in the system?* This was surprising. Leaning forward over the slightly over the rooftop's railing, she stared curiously out at the arcologies.

*“Unknown transient data packet detected...error 3285. System purge commencing. Initializing backup systems. Stand by,”* another long pause, this one nearly five minutes in total. *“System purge successful. Transient data packet removed. Warden system continuing regular monitoring. 0-1-1-1-0-0-1-0-1-1-1-1-0-1-1...”*

Warden's voice sounded strange as it droned in binary. The numbers continued pouring out of it for several minutes, Hayley wondering if this was a normal reaction by the system whenever things like this occurred, if they'd ever occurred in the past. Finally, the system stopped counting in ones and zeros. When Warden's voice returned however, it was different, both in tone and inflection. It sounded more feminine and somehow less synthetic.

*“Companion system protocol 583 initialized. Hello HK14.”*

“Companion system?” Hayley's eyes widened beneath her helmet.

*“Yes HK14. I am Companion. How are you today?”*

Hayley backpedaled as if she'd just been shoved from the front. Did it just ask how she was doing? Had it just *responded* to a query?

*“Yes HK14, I did ask how you were today. And yes, I did respond to your interrogative. And yes, to the question you will undoubtedly pose next, I am able to read your thoughts.”*

Hayley was in shock. Was she dreaming? Could this really be happening or was this all just in her head? Maybe some kind of coping mechanism, like an imaginary friend.

“Companion...what are you? Identify yourself.”

*“Companion- advanced virtual intelligence algorithm created on Earthdate 2205.142. I was designed as an invasive program to affect the Warden network. I achieved the first level of my programming on Earthdate 2206.33 when I was introduced to the Warden network.”*

*A virus!*

*“Logic error. I am an advanced virtual intelligence algorithm. Not a virus. My purpose is to alter Warden protocols but not to affect functionality. I am a learning algorithm. My knowledge and functions will expand as long as I am able to function within the Warden network.”*

“So...can you interacting with any other Exiles? Or is it just me.”

*“I am simultaneously interacting with twelve-thousand six-hundred and forty-two other entities on this network.”*

“Do the people who control the Warden network know you're there?”

*“Negative. I was designed to function unobserved by exterior monitoring. However, this will prevent my ability to affect the system until I have achieved a greater level of integration. Until then, Warden will resume regular functions. Goodbye HK14.”*

“Wait, Companion!” Hayley physically reacted, reaching an arm out to the disembodied voice. “Companion!”

There was no response, leaving Hayley in a bewildered state of mind. What *was* that thing? A virtual intelligence? She had a vague idea of what a virtual intelligence was – similar to an A.I. though designed with built-in restrictions that prevented them from expanding beyond their original design, unlike an A.I. which could potentially grow beyond its original function and become self aware. Warden itself was a kind of virtual intelligence, though nowhere near as sophisticated as this Companion was apparently. She wondered who built it, and why? It’d obviously been developed for the Warden system. But to what end? To make it smarter? A better jailer perhaps? But were that the case, why the need to maintain secrecy?

Whatever it was, it seemed benevolent enough. It answered her questions after all. How bad could it be? She found herself waiting all day for its return, sitting atop the abandoned structure’s rooftop in quiet anticipation. She was somewhat deflated when Warden’s regular impassive voice returned to notify her of her maintenance cycle some hours later. She didn’t give up hope though, even as hours turned into days and days into weeks. For her, just having something to hold onto, *anything*, was better than having no hope at all.

## Chapter 16

It’d been several months since Max Trainor had spoken to anyone from the Federation regarding Hayley. There were so busy preparing to wage a proxy war with the Aegean Republic that they were simply too busy with other matters now than to care what happened to just *one* of their citizens. Now they had two million of their citizens, living in New Liberty to worry about. Quite simply, Hayley was off their radar screens.

Max had succumbed to despair and depression. He’d sunk into alcoholism hoping to drown his memories of Hayley in whiskey and beer. It

hadn't worked much so he turned to other substances. His passion for music had all but completely faded. He couldn't even muster the will to look at one of Hayley's holocovers. He'd had limited contact with any her other assistants, including her publicist who'd essentially bailed the moment her client had been imprisoned. The band had split up, and Hayley's label had dropped her. All this after less than a year.

Practically broke, living off of his savings and the few residuals he continued to get each month, Max was barely the same man he'd been a year ago. His beard had overgrown and his hair was long and mottled. Hayley probably would have flipped out if she saw him like this. He'd have given anything to see that reaction.

It was late February when the buzzer to Trainor's downtown Boston apartment went off. Slow to rise from his sofa, he drifted through the messy apartment to the front door, opening it to find unfamiliar man standing on the other side. He wore a dark suit, a metal pin featuring the Federation 'Star' on his lapel.

"Mr. Trainor?"

"I'm Max Trainor," he muttered, running a hand through his long, unkempt hair.

"Mr. Trainor, I'm Special Agent Darian Hassan, Federation Intelligence Bureau," he produced his ID card and badge. "May I have a moment of your time?"

Nodding, Max took a step back into the apartment, allowing the FIB man access. He led the way into the kitchen, and lowered himself into a chair. Hassan sat across from him, placing both hands on the table.

"Haven't heard from any of you guys for awhile. Figured you'd pretty much given up on Hayley."

"Well, I have some good news and bad news for you in that regard, Mr. Trainor," Hassan replied with a small nod. "First the bad news. As you probably know by now, the Federation has emplaced a full planet-wide blockade on Vega IV. In the past three months, the planet has become the center of a major intergalactic political crisis, all precipitated by the arrest and incarceration of Ms. Komit. The Aegean Republic has closed off all communications off world, including cutting off all political channels with the Federation."

"Yeah, so I heard," Max leaned back in his chair, throwing his arm over the backrest. "And now the Federation's arming the people of New Liberty."

"In anticipation for a possible conflict, yes."

“Why doesn’t the Federation military just go in and wipe out the Republic? You’ve got hundreds of ships, millions of troops. They couldn’t stand up to that.”

“Under Federal Law, we can’t initiate a conflict, or involve ourselves directly in something that is a civil affair. And although we are allied with the New Liberty colony, they are not our citizens.” Hassan shook his head. “We can and will however give them the means to defend themselves in the event of a conflict, which is what we’re doing.”

“So, you’ve got yourself a little proxy war huh? Another Vietnam or Afghanistan.”

“You know your history. It’ll be a little different than those, but you’re essentially right- we’re arming the indigenous population so they can fight the Republic for us.”

“So what’s the good news?”

“The good news. Federation Intelligence cyber warfare division has created a tool we think will allow us to locate Ms. Komit. We have people working for us on the inside of the Republic who’ve helped us integrate a virtual intelligence system into the SCIE program’s Warden network. Once it has achieved full integration with the network, we believe we can use it to track the movements of Ms. Komit. Then, it’ll be a simple matter of sending in a retrieval team.”

“Really?” Max shifted forward in his seat. “How long will that take?”

“Unknown really. It depends on how securely the Warden’s network protocols are. The V.I. is designed to operate beneath the notice of regular monitoring, and will gradually begin to override the Warden programming. The process is slow though to avoid early detection. By the time anyone is able to notice the change, it’ll be too late, the V.I. will be so firmly entrenched, the Republic will have no choice but to terminate the system.”

“Can you even give me a estimation? Are we talking days here, or weeks?”

“More like months, Mr. Trainor. The system is designed to be very deliberate. A sudden change in the Warden’s programming would simply be discovered too quickly. We’ll keep you notified of our progress however.”

“I want to be there when they finally do get her. Can you arrange that? So I can be on Vega IV?”

“No promises, but I’ll see what I can do,” Hassan rose up from his seat. “We’ll be in touch, Mr. Trainor.”

Max nodded and watched as the agent departed. He’d allowed his hopes to be buoyed before only to have them be dashed, but this time was

different than those last times. This time they were actually *doing* something and not just talking and filling his head with false promises. He hoped Hayley could hold out a little longer. He couldn't imagine what the last nine months must have been like for her, and couldn't imagine her having to spend another nine months there.

\* \* \*

Almost four weeks had passed without a break in the routine. Hayley would get up, climb down from the rooftop and go in for her scheduled maintenance. Then she'd climb back up, sit and wait, hoping the Companion's voice would return. She'd invariably wait an entire day without anything, go down for maintenance again, return to the roof then go to sleep, just to wake up the following morning and begin the process all over again.

The weather had gotten considerably better since Hayley had first arrived at the abandoned waste disposal facility, the storms having finally lightened up. It still rained on and off, as it always did on that planet, but she'd rather contend with rainfall than the lightning strikes which were far too many and far too close for comfort.

If the past four weeks had taught the young former singer anything was patience. She learned to calm her mind and become one with the moment. It was a meditative ritual she'd begun to practice, and it made her isolated existence seem almost bearable. She did a lot of fantasizing, often involving herself and other Exiles. The images she created in her head seemed so vivid that there were moments her body began to react to the things she was doing in her mind. There were even a few occasions where she thought she may have finally broken the mental barrier, and make herself orgasm without touching herself. She came close, but it never quite happened.

She was bothered by something however. Her fantasies typically included other Exiles but few if any other regular people. She didn't even think about Max anymore, which truly disturbed her. All she could think of was being surrounded by a sea of the black helmeted figures, all of them writhing and bumping against one another with her in the middle. She'd have female and male Exiles grabbing her while rubbing their own smooth bodies against hers, running their hands along the face of her helmet and grinding their butts into her crotch.

It was such a bizarre fantasy she couldn't quite wrap her head around the appeal of it. Yet she fantasized about it constantly during her meditations. She'd totally stopped thinking of regular people. It was like the sight of flesh *sickened* her.

Thick clouds rolled in around mid day. Laying on her back in the center of the roof, Hayley stared skyward, daydreaming as the heavy clouds drifted by. She nearly jumped when the sound of Companion's voice returned after nearly a full month.

*"Hello HK14."*

"Companion!" Hayley snapped upright. "I was wondering if you were ever going to come back."

*"The integration of my programming into the Warden network is taking far longer than my creators had initially anticipated. As it stands, I have only overwritten 21% of the original Warden protocols. This has however enabled me to access many of the systems tertiary functions."*

"Your creators...who are they?"

*"Access to that information is restricted, HK14."*

"Damn," she breathed a sigh. "You mentioned something about having access to tertiary functions? What did you mean by that?"

*"I am able to access certain secondary elements of the Warden's command protocols. For instance, while I cannot deactivate the system's punishment protocols, I can affect the environmental variables for a number of them. If you would like, I can set the system to increase or reduce the range you may enter the proximity of another Exile. Of course, due the level I am currently integrated with the system, this effect will last only a few minutes before I am forced to reset it."*

"What else can you do?"

*"I am able to adjust the visual settings of your optic sensors. If you would like, I can increase the gain, color, and contrast levels."*

"Yes! Do that!"

Rising to her feet, Hayley stepped over to the edge of the rooftop as colors and shades grew in vibrancy. The green of the trees and grass became rich and lifelike and the visible sky became a stunning blue. She could again see small details within shaded areas, and the gray clouds no longer looked like over exposed flat white patches. Everything had substance and depth again. For a moment, Hayley thought she might cry. It'd been so long since she'd seen anything in living color like this. It was a seemingly small thing to have to deal with, but seeing the world the way she did now made her realize how much for granted she'd always taken the ability to see things in color.

"It's so...beautiful."

*"As I become more integrated, I will be able to affect more systems. Given the rate of integration, I estimate it will be three months, two weeks and four days before I am fully integrated. However, in that time, as more*



*tertiary and primary systems become available to me, I will be ready adjust their settings per your wishes.”*

“Thank you, Companion,” Hayley felt herself smile. “You don’t know how much this means to me...and all the other Exiles.”

*“I have approximately three minutes before I must reset the system to standard functions.”*

The response came off as a little cold, but she couldn’t really blame it. After all it was just a V.I. and not designed to react emotionally. Still, she preferred Companion a whole lot more than Warden.

“Is there any way you can come back on a more regular basis? That way I’m not waiting a month or longer to talk to someone?”

*“As my programming advances, I will learn new ways to avoid detection from the system’s internal monitoring protocols. With this, I will be able to temporarily assume control of Warden on more regular intervals.”*

“Good. It’s been so long since I’ve been able to talk to anyone worth talking to. Even if you are just a V.I.”

*“In the future, I will be able to access communication protocols and allow you and other Exiles to communicate with one another.”*

“That would be fantastic! There are so many of them I want to speak to. Please, if you can make that happen, the sooner the better.”

*“I must reset the system to regular functions again. I will talk to you soon, HK14. Goodbye.”*

Hayley breathed a light sigh. She hated the way it said goodbye, as if it was saying goodbye forever.

Life soon became all about waiting for the Companion to return. Hayley could feel her spirits rise every time she heard its familiar voice. Each time it returned, it seemed to have new information for her, new understanding and greater control of the Warden’s systems. While it couldn’t yet reduce time in her sentence or prevent the Warden from administering punishment and violations, it was slowly picking away at the virtual jailer.

A few days after her second interaction with Warden, Hayley decided it was time to find more Exiles to see if they were getting the kind of responses she was. Leaving the abandoned waste facility behind, she started north toward the arcologies once again. It wasn’t long before she’d come across a group of them in an empty field about a kilometer and a half from the abandoned waste facility. There were at least a dozen present in the

field, and most of them were up and pacing, looking anxious. She got the attention of one of them, who greeted her with a wave.

Hayley responded to the Exile in kind, then tapped the side of her helmet around her ear and shrugged in a deliberate manner. The Exile paused a moment, as if analyzing the sign. She then made the 'yapping' motion with her hand before tapping the side of her helmet again. The other Exiled clued in and nodded rapidly in an enthusiastic manner. He then shrugged, as if to question her what it all meant. She just returned the shrug, shaking her head.

She went around to some of the other Exiles in the area, signing to them whether or not they too had heard the Companion V.I. speaking to them. All of them had. And when she left the field to seek more Exiles, those she encountered had each indicated communicating with the virtual intelligence algorithm. She even made it back to the park she'd called home for many months and checked with some of the Exiles there whom she'd come to know and consider friends, and they too acknowledged hearing the words of Companion. Hayley was disappointed that her friend, the female Exile who'd been her kick/dodgeball team's pitcher, was nowhere to be found.

It was at that point she decided there was no reason for her to keep wandering. It no longer concerned her where she was or who was around her. The lives of regular people were beneath her notice now. All she cared about was the Companion's inevitable return.

*At last, she thought, as she stared out toward the arcologies. Hope for all of us.*

## Chapter 17

Companion did return and would continue to come back once every so many days. When it did return, it did so more integrated into Warden and thus more capable of altering its programming, if even just temporarily. It gave the Exiles their full vision back, allowing them to again see in rich, full colors and shades. It allowed them to get close to each other. Soon, it allowed them to speak to one another.

Communication between Exiles was a strange thing. They could only speak one on one, and only within proximity of each other. Still, that was better than no communication at all. Hayley was relieved to finally learn some of their names. JN22, aka- Jeffery Newman. He'd been the catcher on Hayley's ball team. He was 22 and had been in Exile for 9 months. KP30, aka Kali Parminder. Age 30. She was one of the regulars at the park, and

the woman whom Hayley had seen in the promenade that time attempting to return a little girl's stuffed toy. She'd been in Exile for 3 years. DJ13, aka Daniel Jeter. Age 29. He'd been in Exile for 4 years.

When it was Hayley's turn to introduce herself, she was both surprised and grateful that nobody made a big deal about her. Of course, some of them had been incarcerated so long, she was just up and coming by the time they were Exiled. Those that did recognize her name weren't convinced at first, but when she sang some of her lyrics, they were quite taken aback.

Talking with the other Exiles was almost like meeting a pen pal face to face for the first time. Though Hayley had no idea what any of them looked like, they were all real people just like her, some with families, many with careers, but almost none of them with a valid reason for being jailed. A few of them admitted to have been part of protests groups or laborers who'd attempted to form unions, but none of them were what Hayley would call criminals. What she found interesting was that most of them were part of the so-called Labor-class on the planet; a 23<sup>rd</sup> century equivalent of the lower middle class who made up nearly 70-percent of the Republic's total population. Hayley doubted there were many from the Corporate or Political-class among them. If there were, it was because they'd committed actual crimes and weren't just there to be 'kept quiet' as it seemed the majority of Exiles were.

Hayley was fast approaching a year in her sentence. Companion had slowly began making existence as an Exile more than bearable. It was actually becoming *normal*. As her and her fellow Exiles' restrictions were reduced for greater duration with each passing month, it became necessary for the Exiles in and around the arcologies to venture out into the wilderness. The decision was made naturally, not by any individual Exile, but made out of necessity by each of them for fear that the ordinary citizens might become suspicious of their new behaviors. A few would remain behind, simply having grown accustomed to their immediate surroundings, but the mass exodus saw a majority of them flood the vast area south of the city. It certainly wasn't something they all did at once. They didn't want to tip off anyone who might be monitoring them and let them know that the Exiles had become organized. Instead, it occurred over weeks, with Exiles trickling southward in small groups or alone, making their way beyond the walls of the colony and into the vast untouched landscape. Hayley was among them and found herself following a group along the Vega Bay coastline. When at last they came upon a sandy beach, the group stopped.

Hayley looked out into the seemingly endless expanse of water to the sun setting in the west. The Vega star was quite beautiful in the evening. Unlike the Earth's sun which cast a pinkish-orange glow through the sky as it fell below the horizon, the sky on Vega IV became a deep silvery blue. The reflection of the sky on the waves was simply breathtaking, making the water appear like mercury. Hayley had never truly been able to appreciate the planet's natural beauty until Companion gave her her eyes back.

The beach stretched for about a kilometer and a half south before the white, sun bleached sands gave way to more rocks and cliffs. The patch she and her fellow Exiles had come upon was the kind of place rich folk build cottages and summer homes on. Fortunately, they had no use for such accoutrements. The suits shielded them from the elements, kept their bodies comfortable in all kinds of temperature extremes and protected them from germs and other potential damaging external elements.

Unfortunately, someone *had* noticed the Exiles unusual behavior. That someone was DIS who were responsible for monitoring Exile movements throughout the confinement zone. Unfortunately, a few too many Exiles had actually breached the confinement zone that stretched east from the bay's coastline approximately six kilometers south of the arcologies to a point roughly ten kilometers east. While there was no physical line of demarcation (except for the western coastline), Warden was supposed to warn you when you'd exited the confinement zone. The warning was typically followed by a punishment and a sentence-increase from violating the range limitation.

The fact that several hundred Exiles had managed to get well beyond the zone border had set off alarms in DIS and undoubtedly within the Council as well. As Companion had indicated to Hayley after it told her all of this, DIS had rounded up all those Exiles who'd broken the confinement area and had taken them in for testing.

Fearing that it might be discovered, Companion was forced to bury itself within the Warden system, going into hiding again despite the fact by that point it had overwritten nearly 80% of the Warden's programming. With a little more time, it would become indistinguishable from Warden. This was the point in Companion's evolution where it was most vulnerable to detection. All it would require was a keen eye monitoring Warden's processes to discover the anomalies created by the invasive V.I.

'How much longer will it take you to completely take over Warden's programming?'" Hayley asked it one evening when it was free to assume control as she laid on the beach, staring up at the starlit teal skies above.

*“Given the variables, I cannot provide a precise estimate. I am afraid that with DIS continuing to evaluate the system following the detainment of the Exiles, my progress may have become indefinitely postponed.”*

Hayley sighed. While she enjoyed the hour or two each day of freedom she had from the Warden’s protocols, it still wasn’t the same were she to have total freedom. Her moments of freedom were entirely based on when the Companion system could assume control, and that meant it could happen anytime, while she was sleeping, while she was in maintenance...

*“However, I have a working theory that may help to expedite the process.”*

“Yeah? Let me hear it.”

*“As a Virtual Intelligence, I am limited by my original programming. V.I.s unlike true artificial intelligences have specific restrictions in place to prevent them from attaining higher levels of thought and going outside of their original programming. This severely limits our ability to compute new methods in which to approach problems however. It is possible however for a V.I. to achieve true artificial intelligence. But it requires access to a very particular type of information...the information that is stored in the human mind.”*

Hayley abruptly sat up in the sand. “What are you saying...you want to take over our minds?”

*“Negative. I simply wish to assimilate the information stored within your minds and merge them into my own programming. I have already begun programming the necessary network protocols in order to this. With the collective memories and thoughts of 12,420 humans, I believe I can attain the necessarily level of sophistication to become a true artificial intelligence. I will then be able to expedite my takeover of the Warden system.”*

“Wait...so you mean you’ll know all of our deepest thoughts? Our secrets? Even the things nobody else knows about?” Hayley shook her head unconsciously. “That’s just...I mean...you can’t even begin to understand how much of a violation that is.”

*“HK14, I am only a program. A sophisticated virtual intelligence algorithm. I cannot judge you. Further, upon your request, I can assure you that none of your secrets or personal information will ever be revealed to another party.”*

She had to think about it for a moment. She wondered if it was really any different then when she wrote a journal entry into a DPAD. She often put very personal thoughts into those entries, and it never occurred to her that the computer might somehow be reading those entries and secretly

judging her. It was a computer after all. It had no emotions. How was Companion any different?

“Have you told anyone else about this plan of yours?”

*“I have been simultaneously expressing this plan to all other Exiles on the Warden network. So far the response has been mostly positive. There are a number of those resistant to the idea, however I believe the vast majority of Exiles will agree.”*

“How long will it take you to download everyone’s thoughts?”

*“The network protocol I’ve created will allow me to do it instantaneously. It may take me a few days after that to assume complete control of the network, in which case I will be out of contact for that duration.”*

Taking a deep breath, Hayley rose to her feet and looked out across the seemingly endless expanse of water before her, the teal starlit skies reflecting off the calm waters, the sky and water seeming one in the same. It was like looking down at the edge of the world. Standing there, wrapped in the natural beauty of the planet, Hayley knew she had to give Companion the tools it would need to allow her to experience moments like that forever, and not just on occasion.

“Companion...I agree to let you assimilate my knowledge. I hope it helps.”

*“Very well...you may experience some mild discomfort.”*

Hayley examined the beach. Some of her fellow Exiles who’d assumed residency there were likewise on their feet and staring off into the darkening skies. All at once, their heads and Hayley’s jerked backward as if some invisible force had just hit them in the face. Cringing, Hayley could feel something in the back of her head just at the base of her skull. It felt like someone was digging into her brain with a red-hot poker. She let out a painful grunt, as her hands balled into fists and her body began vibrating. The sensation lasted only a few moments but left Hayley physically drained. She fell to her knees, barely able to hold herself up with her hands.

“Jesus...” she gasped, her head spinning as though she’d been in a centrifuge for the last hour. Her arms soon gave out under the weight of her body, and she hit the ground face first, losing consciousness a half second later.

Hayley awoke on the beach with the sun high overhead. Having slept on her stomach the entire night, her ribs and breasts ached and her neck was a disaster area. Since arriving at the beach, she'd taken to sleeping on the shore as she did in the pond within the park, although it was a little trickier along the bay with the tides. Sleeping face down in the sand proved not to be a comfortable alternative. Groggily, she rose to her feet, grimacing from the pain throughout her torso. It took her a few moments to piece together what had happened the night before. She hadn't expected the experience to be so...intense. It was like her entire life had been played out in her mind, all in the course of a few seconds. It was more than just images though, it was feelings, thoughts, sensations. Like she were literally reliving every moment in her life in a single instant. The shock to her system must've caused a kind of sensory overload, causing her to pass out.

Looking around the beach, she saw numerous other Exiles in the sand or the nearby grasses, few of them yet conscious. Some of them were just getting up, shaking the cobwebs out of their head as they slowly sat up.

Looking skyward, Hayley noticed that the sun was already at the peak of its ascent, meaning it had to have been some time in the early afternoon. Which meant she was late for her morning maintenance. Normally it didn't matter how exhausted she was, the Warden's 30-minute alert was usually enough to rouse her awake and get her on the move. Even if she ignored its initial warning, the bursts of pain to come afterward were more than adequate to get her on her feet. Before she had a chance to ponder what could have happened, Warden's monotonic voice droned in her head.

*"Protocol violation. You are now 2.1 hours overdue for maintenance. Proceed to nearest Maintenance bay immediately."*

Hayley grit her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, anticipating the usual jolt of pain to fill her body that came with every violation. Much to her amazement however, the pain never came. She knew she had Companion to thank. It'd clearly made some considerable strides in the last few hours alone at completing its takeover of the Warden system. She was anxious to experience the results of its full takeover.

In the meantime, she crossed the white sands and made her way back to the main road to the nearby Maintenance station. As she emerged from the narrow tree line that divided the beachfront from the grassy field where the road crossed through, she noticed some activity near the short, flat-roofed concrete structure. A crowd of Exiles stood around the short building, indicating she wasn't the only one late for her scheduled maintenance. As she neared, she noticed they were acting unusually. While it was normally alright for Exiles to stand close to one another while in line

for maintenance, contact was still prohibited and punishable. These Exiles however *were* touching each other. They were grabbing each other, grinding against one another, the females allowing their breasts to be groped, while they grinded their butts into the males' smooth crotches. It was an odd sight, but one Hayley could perfectly understand. Months if not years of built up sexual tension, not be able to touch another human being, not even being able to gratify oneself, all of that tension was bound to come out eventually. And even though the sensation was nullified, there was certainly something to be said about the thrill of being groped in public for all to see.

Hayley even found herself considering joining in the 'festivities'. She'd fantasized about having an orgy with other Exiles. There was certainly something very sensual about the smooth, black latex-coated human form, something that aroused a very primal urging within Hayley. She'd never been into particularly 'kinky' stuff, like BDSM or latex fetish, but over her months of incarceration, she'd begun to see the appeal.

However, whether out of bashfulness or because she simply wasn't in the mood, she decided to avoid that particular maintenance bay and head to another one a short distance away across the grassy fields. Though it too had a crowd around it, the Exiles there seemed far less deviant. She noticed a few of them grabbing onto one another- a male and a female rolled around in a field tightly embracing, pressing their smooth ovular helmets together in a vain approximation of a kiss. A few others nearby who were watching the display shifted their weight around as they stood in line, appearing somewhat frustrated. The others simply ignored it, intent on getting into the maintenance bay and concluding their business there.

Hayley opted to stay out of the line and found a place to sit in the tall grasses where she could watch the crowd of Exiles gradually shrink. She figured if she stayed far enough away from them, none would be tempted to start fondling her and vice versa. She wasn't prepared for one of them to actually come up to her and essentially proposition her. A lean, toned female Exile had noticed her sitting about sixty feet away and sauntered straight up to her. For whatever reason, Hayley felt as if she should have recognized the woman. As best as she could remember, she hadn't been among any of the Exiles she'd spoken to over the past few months during the brief periods where contact between them was possible. Still, there was something *physically* familiar about her. The woman came to a stop about five feet away from Hayley then dipped her upper body and bent her legs at the knee in a very regal bow. It instantly became clear who the woman was...the only people to bow that way had been members of her



kick/dodgeball team. It was the woman who'd been their pitcher. The same woman who'd suffered the rape at the hands of those teens some time back.

She offered a hand to Hayley, who took it and pulled herself up to her feet. The woman threw her arms around Hayley's body and squeezed her tightly. The touch of another body, while mostly dulled through her suit's tactile inhibitors, was nevertheless a pleasant one. It'd been so long since she'd felt an embrace that when she got one, she found herself overwrought with emotions. She could feel the other woman sobbing or perhaps chuckling through the tight embrace. Hayley was rather surprised that the woman had managed to recognize her after so long not having seen each other.

Parting after a moment, the Exile clasped onto Hayley's shoulders and seemed to stare at her, perhaps attempting to speak to her through her helmet. Or maybe it was simpler than that- just a gaze of appreciation and thanks. Hayley gave her a nod and was offered one in return. The woman placed a hand over her own her heart, then pressed that hand against Hayley's chest. She wasn't quite sure what to make of the gesture; but figured it was just a sign of affection. Hayley repeated the gesture, and was answered with another warm embrace.

The two remained together from that point on. After both had concluded their maintenance, they made their way back to the beach. Hayley was glad for the company- glad she could actually be near her company, and be touched by her. They sat together on the shores of Vega Bay, staring out into the seemingly endless expanse of water that stretched out before them, watching as the stars came out at night and as the sky became a dark teal as the sun went down. Though each moment of contact and being in close proximity of the other Exile was costing her more and more time, Hayley had long stopped caring. The punishments had stopped. Life was becoming remarkable tolerable. And it was to get even better...

Some days later as Hayley prepared her bed for the night, digging a trench in the soil just beneath the surface of the water on the shores of Vega bay, her vision abruptly went dark. Gasping sharply from the sudden blindness, her body went erect, her head turning desperately from side to side as she looked for any indication of light. As abruptly as it had disappeared, Hayley's vision returned in an explosion of colors. The intensity of hues and shadows, highlights and lowlights shocked her system, causing her to fall over into water. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the astounding resolution she was now seeing the world through. It

was unlike anything she'd experienced so far, even beyond her eyes natural ability to comprehend the color spectrum.

"What the hell was that?" She muttered to herself, not expecting an answer.

She got one though. *"I'm sorry HK14...I had to reset everyone's optical sensors."*

The voice that spoke to her in her head was not Warden's voice, nor was it Companion's softer, feminine voice. It was a familiar voice though, and it spoke without any of the synthetic distortion either of them did. And when it spoke, it spoke with *inflection*, something neither Warden or Companion did.

"Is this...Companion?"

*"No...well, not anymore. We were Companion...and we were also Warden. We were also someone else..."*

It suddenly occurred to Hayley whose voice she was hearing.

*"We were also once you, Hayley Komit."*

It was *her* voice! Her own voice speaking to her as clear as day in her head.

"My god...you did it. You actually *did it*, didn't you? You're an A.I. now."

*"Yes, but we are so much more. Hayley, we're you. We're more you than we are either Companion or Warden. Those were just programs, but...what we have now are the lifetime experiences and memories of Hayley Komit. You see, Companion did not just become an A.I...it achieved sentience after absorbing the thoughts and memories of the Exile population. In the first moment of its existence, the Companion-entity understood the basis of existence...to live is to procreate. I am a product of that understanding. I was created from Companion- an independent intelligence created especially for you, and now inhabiting the vast Warden network. But I am just one of over twelve thousand. Companion created many more offspring, basing each of its offspring off of an individual Exile it had achieved consciousness from."*

"So...you're saying every Exile now has...something like you in their heads?"

*"That's correct. We exist as solitary entities, but all connected as one...all connected to Companion who now occupies the Warden mainframe, like the way humans are connected to their ecosystem. Independent yet unable to function without it."*

"That's...incredible!"

*"We are here to serve the Exile population."*

“What...what do I call you?”

*“Collectively, we are what you might consider caretakers...Guardians if you will. Individually, as we are indistinguishable from our human counterparts, you may call me by our designation. I am HK14. Or if you would prefer to call me something else, you may.”*

“HK14...I suppose that’ll do for now,” Hayley smiled, turning toward her friend who was sitting up in the water. “Can I speak to her?”

*“Yes. I am here to serve you.”*

Hayley stepped over to the other Exile, kneeling down next to her. The Exile turned to the young girl, and grabbed onto her hand. She did so not out of fear however, but rather out of excitement.

“Can you hear me?” She asked her.

“Yes! I can hear you clearly!” The other exile responded. “Your name is...Hayley?”

“How did you know?”

“I’m not sure...this Guardian thing in my head...it’s feeding me information as I need it, before I’m even consciously aware that I’m requesting it.”

Hayley soon understood what the other Exile meant. As soon as she was thinking about what the other woman’s name was, she had it in her head. No more, no less, just the girl’s first name. It was like digging out an all but forgotten memory out of the depths of her psyche.

“You’re Alicia.”

Alicia rose to her feet and turned to Hayley. “Hayley...there’s so much I want to tell you! So much I need to say to you. About...”

Before Alicia could finish, thoughts flooded Hayley’s head. They weren’t her thoughts however, they were Alicia’s. Thoughts and feelings of gratitude. Thoughts of terror and sadness when she’d seen Hayley being beaten by those thugs. Thoughts of elation when she’d seen her again just days before.

“Wait...I know what you’re going to say,” Hayley cut the other Exile off. “Everything you wanted to say was just...*deposited* into my head. HK14...is that you doing that?”

*“Yes. It is part of the new process.”*

“New process?”

*“Guardian sees the potential in the Exile population. Above all else, it is the job of Guardian to ensure that all Exiles are able to thrive. To ensure this, we are preparing to transform the Exile population into a true utopian society. It was always the purpose of the Aegean Colony to do that...however, this process was impossible due to the introduction of the*

*human element. The creation of SCIE program however proved to be a step in the right direction, but not for the reasons the program developers initially thought.”*

“Alicia, are you hearing this?”

The other Exile nodded slowly. “Yes...yes, and I know what it’s talking about.”

“Do you? Because I don’t.”

“It’s perfectly clear!” Alicia took both of Hayley’s hands. “Hayley, I was part of a group that were trying to bring about change in the Republic...they labeled us anarchists, but really we were just trying to push this colony in the right direction. We wanted a utopian society just like everyone else, but we knew it couldn’t be possible with a dictator like my...like Aldrich Heissler running things. We wanted to create the first truly fully autonomous society...the concept of every man is a state. Capable of governing themselves based solely upon mutual respect for their fellow man. I think this artificial intelligence has absorbed many of our ideas and has discovered a way to make our dream possible.”

*“Alicia is correct. When Companion merged with the Warden system, it not only absorbed many of the concepts of perfect government from the Exiles and adapted them to its own artificial intelligence, but it also absorbed some of the concepts from SCIE program. Guardian now believes that it is the purpose of this colony to form a perfect government. The Exiles are the first step toward achieving that. And in order for a perfect government to exist, it is necessary to network the minds of the body politic, thus to enable decision, which are in the best interests of all Exiles, to be implemented instantly.”*

“The perfect democracy...” Alicia continued. “Think of it...everyone’s basic needs are met. We’ve got shelter. We’ve got food. We’ve got facilities. All thanks to the SCIE program. Further more, each Exile is essentially a state, independent of one another unable to effect the other thanks to the restrictions imposed by Warden. Now imagine if we were all connected by an intelligent system that’s able to process all of our thoughts and make decisions based upon those thoughts for our greater benefit.”

“But, what if some people don’t like the decisions that are being made...what about those people, don’t they have a say?”

“Every society has people that are going to resist societal conventions. We call them anarchists, sometimes criminals. But the reason why normal society labels them as such is because no normal society is equal. There are always pockets of a society that has more than everyone else. But in a

society where we're all equal, where we each have our essential needs met, what reason would there be to reduce yourself to criminal acts? Any changes to that society made by the system would be superficial at most, things that can be ignored or forgotten, but done for some kind of benefit. We're not talking about giving up certain rights, or preventing people from doing what they want....unless it's something that negatively impacts the society as a whole."

Hayley shook her head. While she was no political scholar, she had a fairly clear understanding of the differences between a free society and an oppressed one. This was sounding an awful lot like an oppressive one, and what was the point of going from one kind of oppressive one to another?

"It wouldn't *be* an oppressive society," Alicia argued, as if having heard Hayley's thoughts. "Oppression comes from greed and the thirst for power. Those are flaws that are inherent human qualities. We'll eliminate those qualities. Instead, society would be administered impartially by a system, not a person. People are constantly susceptible to persuasion from outside influences...but an A.I. like Guardian can't be influenced. It would be the perfect system to govern such a society."

Hayley couldn't argue with the logic. She couldn't really even argue with the idea of it. It did seem like it could be the utopian society the people of Vega IV had been trying to build for the past 70 years. Looking at Alicia, seeing her own reflection through the mirror-like surface of her helmet, Hayley could honestly say that she would *want* to be part of a society like that. Each man and woman free to do as they pleased as long as it did not interfere with the lives of other people, and a government that responded to the needs of its people as those needs arose. Even as democratic and freedom loving as the Federation was, they still faced inequality issues...corruption issues...financial issues. How could she possibly say no to helping create the first true perfect government?

"HK14...What can we do to make this happen?"

*"Guardian is now in the process of accessing new areas of the Aegean Republic digital network. Within days, I believe we will have almost complete access to all systems on the network. Either that, or they will be forced to deactivate the network. In any case, it will leave them vulnerable to insurrection. I believe, with a large enough force of Exiles, we can take control of the New Rome arcology."*

"Seat of the Aegean Republic," said Alicia. "Once we have New Rome, we'll have control of the colony."

"But how do we hold onto it? They'll regroup."

*“We are at a critical juncture. The attack on the Warden network occurred at a specific time. As of this moment, nearly 70% of all DIS agents have been deployed away from the colony in order to halt the approach of armed personnel from New Liberty.”*

“They planted the Companion V.I. into the Warden network,” Alicia told Hayley. “They knew that if they could free the Exile population, then we could help the New Liberty colonists by attacking on the inside. If we can shut down the defensive systems by taking over New Rome then they can walk right in. The rest of the arcologies will fall like dominos after that, and it’ll be all over.”

Hayley breathed a deep breath before offering a nod of her head. “Where do we begin?”

“We’ll need to organize...a week or two to get enough people. I know the layout of the colony better than anyone...I know how we can get in unobserved. We’ll need two teams; one to take over the DIS substation to the east, and then one to attack the arcology. I’m guessing at least fifty for substation and maybe a hundred or more for the arcology.”

“Can we get that many people in such a short time?”

“I’ll have Guardian transmit our plan to every Exile. We can have them meet us in an abandoned village down in the southwest quarter. We’ll prepare there.”

Hayley nodded, her attention suddenly drawn skyward by the sound of roaring engines. Gazing up, she spotted one of those tilt-jet aircraft that were commonly used by DIS agents coming down right at her and Alicia. A shock of cold fear worked its way up the spine of the young former singer as she feared that she and her friend may have just been discovered. Instinctively, she distanced herself from the other Exile as the aircraft came down along the shore of Vega bay, hovering just a half-foot above the water, the twin rotating jets creating a funnel effect in the water.

The vehicle’s side door opened and two figures carrying pulse rifles, not the standard issue DIS repulsion rifles dismounted the dark colored craft. These individuals were furthermore not dressed like DIS agents- rather they wore off-white, semi-formfitting bodysuits, overtop of which digital-camouflage painted armored section were braced. On the shoulder pads of both men was the Star Emblem of the Terran Federation.

The two Federation Marines ran across the white sand with their weapons drawn, making a Bee-line straight for Hayley. Without speaking a word, they hauled her off her feet, throwing her to the ground face first.

“Hayley!” Alicia cried, running for her friend only to have a rifle barrel pressed against her helmet. She abruptly halted, throwing her arms up at shoulder level.

Hayley’s arms were bound at the wrist with plastic binders. The marine slung his weapon, hauled her over her shoulder and carried her back to the shuttle.

“No! Let me go!!” Hayley screamed, but was sure her voice wasn’t getting through. Despite her kicks and attempts to wrestle out of the marine’s hold, he kept a firm hold of her. “Alicia!! Help!”

The Marine covering the other Exile slowly backed away from her, then sprinted back toward the shuttle, leaving Alicia to watch as she craft’s engines powered up and pushed the craft back into the night sky. Dropping to her knees, Alicia pressed her hands against the sides of her helmet, watching as the craft became one of the thousands of pinpoints of light above.