

## Chapter One

Ava stood on her office balcony, gazing out over Seattle's waterfront and the curved expanse of Puget Sound almost too bright to look upon as it reflected the slowly setting sun. When she'd moved to Seattle earlier in the year, Ava definitely hadn't expected so much sunshine. Was this an off year, or was it simply climate change? She felt the familiar shudder of horror wash through her body—*the planet's sixth mass extinction event was well under way!*—and blinked, trying to push away her existential panic. With her mother and brother on the loose, there were more immediate fish to fry.

Wait. Was that Kenzie and her multicolored body suit shooting past the Ferris wheel? Ava squinted, wishing she had her girlfriend's enhanced senses. But even if the mercurial flash had been Kenzie zooming along the waterfront, she was gone now.

Ava continued to scan the sky, a frown tugging at her brow. She was not a fan of Kenzie's insistence on a regular patrol schedule, especially now. If Ava's brother and his murderous minions wanted to find Seattle's increasingly famous alien superhero, they would only have to set a trap between five and seven on any given weekday evening, as Ava had pointed out too many times now to count. Kenzie, however, refused to vary her schedule. The residents of Seattle appreciated knowing when the Galaxy Duo would be airborne, and Kenzie wasn't about to risk an increase in crime just because Sentinel was out there somewhere probably planning something nefarious.

"As soon as you give terrorists power over you, they've won," Kenzie had argued a few nights earlier, quoting every action movie ever. It had been all Ava could do not to roll her eyes, but she'd somehow managed to keep her response to a disapproving sigh. Staying respectful

even when you disagreed with someone might not be part of the Westbrook ethos, but then again Ava didn't feel much like a Westbrook these days.

It wasn't that she believed caving to shadow threats was ideal. But despite Kenzie's insistence to the contrary, a sizable gray area existed between giving terrorists power and changing up a routine to protect yourself. And anyway, Sentinel wasn't the only group gunning for the Galaxy Duo. In addition to dozens of smaller anti-alien extremist groups, the federal government wasn't exactly keen on alien vigilante squads. Kenzie and Panopticon may have formed a mutually beneficial partnership, but in Ava's opinion, not being predictable was simply smart.

Behind her, the intercom on her desk beeped, and she turned away from the railing. Despite the late hour, she had one last meeting to get through this evening. A longtime member of Hyperion's board was in town from New York and had requested a "chat," and since she served at the pleasure of the board, she couldn't very well say no.

"Ned Anderson is here, Ms. Westbrook," her assistant's disembodied voice announced.

Ava punched a button on her phone. "Thanks, Rose. Please send him in."

He swept into the room, his stride commanding even now as he neared his seventieth birthday. "Ava," he boomed, holding out his hand. "How the heck are you?"

She couldn't avoid the handshake, either. Wishing she had her girlfriend's powers for the second time in as many minutes, she braced herself for the usual businessman squeeze, in which a man in suit and tie tries to assert his dominance by reducing the hand of a lesser being to dust. As soon as the requisite mauling was over, she turned toward the wall that housed the Visiting Executive Entertainment Bar, the liquor cabinet her mother had installed behind a secret panel. It was after five; why wait to drink? Not like Ned would turn her down.

“What can I get for you?” she asked, pressing the button that revealed the bar.

“Whiskey neat.” Ned lowered his girth onto the couch. “I like what you’ve done with the place.”

Ava smiled politely and focused on pouring their drinks. In addition to finding herself a new assistant, she had recently replaced her mother’s cold, uncomfortable furnishings with warmer, comfier fixtures. Kenzie had helped pick out the new paint colors and had insisted on testing the replacement chairs and couch. All came with Galaxy Girl’s express approval—not that Ava would be broadcasting that fact, of course.

“My mother’s taste has always been more spartan,” she said neutrally as she handed Ned his drink.

He grimaced. “That’s one word for Amelia.”

Ava lifted her glass to her lips to hide her matching grimace. She was furious with her mother right now, it was true, but that didn’t mean she wanted to listen to other people speak ill of Amelia. As the scent of the whiskey wafted upward, she hesitated. What was that smell? She couldn’t quite—

“Wait!” she said, snaking out her free hand to stop Ned from taking a sip.

He reared back, pinning her with an offended glare. “Excuse me!”

Ava’s mind raced. “I forgot—we received notice from our suppliers that there had been a recall on this batch.”

Ned frowned and lifted his glass, taking an audible whiff. Then, nose wrinkling, he handed the drink back to her. “If that isn’t a metaphor for your mother’s management of this company,” he said, broad, florid face still arranged in an expression of mild disgust, “then I don’t know what is.”

Ava barely heard his caustic comment. She was too busy replacing both glasses on the bar and pushing the button to hide it once again behind its panel. Who had access to her office? And who knew about the secret bar? Her mother's face swam before her, but she blinked hard. It couldn't be her, could it? This was more Nick's style. It had to be him. At least, she hoped it was him. Otherwise, she would have to reconsider everything she knew about her family.

She glanced at the windows, suddenly aware how vulnerable she was before the thin wall of glass. Anyone with a long-range scope could keep tabs on her easily from a number of nearby buildings, if they really wanted to. And what about a drone? Hyperion offered a number of models capable of delivering a payload. *Jesus*. How had she ever believed herself safe here?

"Ava," Ned said, actual concern tingeing his voice. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine." She forced a smile as she settled at the other end of the couch. At least seated here, she wasn't as vulnerable. The opaque guardrail around the balcony offered a modicum of protection from all but the tallest of buildings. "Now, what did you want to talk about, Ned?"

Somehow, she made it through the conversation that followed: a discussion of stock prices, investor complaints, industry rumors, and competitor moves, all with her mother's recent actions front and center. Her hands were still shaking when she saw Ned out, though, and the door had barely closed when she selected a familiar name on her cell phone.

*Pick up, pick up, pick up*, she thought, pacing away from the floor-to-ceiling windows with one arm folded across her midsection.

More than anything, Sloane sounded confused when she answered. "Ava?"

"Can you come see me?" she asked quickly. "I'm at work."

"Are you okay? Did something happen?"

“Yes, but—can you just get here as soon as possible? And can you bring Mika, if she’s available?”

Sloane paused. “I can do that. What about Kenzie?”

“No. And please don’t tell her I called you.”

“Is that really a good idea?” Sloane asked, her tone indicating her opinion on the subject.

“Just for now,” Ava amended.

She didn’t want to keep secrets from Kenzie, but at the moment, she needed Sloane and Mika to help her figure out her next steps without her super-powered girlfriend having a panic attack in the background. Given the likelihood that Ava’s office was bugged, the last thing any of them needed was Galaxy Girl showing up from her patrol all in a tizzy over another assassination attempt.

*Another assassination attempt*, a voice inside her head whispered as Ava hung up the phone. God. What had her life become? And what had her mother done?

Cognizant of the windows, she dropped back onto the couch. Her first impulse was to text Bea, or Madi, or even Angelica. But texting wasn’t entirely secure, and she didn’t want to bring more danger to their doors. Instead, she hugged herself and pulled up Instagram. Perhaps scrolling through travel videos and nature photography would keep her distracted from the terrible, inescapable fact that someone close to her wanted her dead. Nick had often accused her of being an “alien sympathizer”—blasphemy to him, particularly since their father’s murder—and the last time she’d seen him had been from the stand at his trial when her testimony had helped put him away. But always before now she’d managed to convince herself that there were some lines even a Westbrook wouldn’t cross; that it was his supporters—or enemies?—trying to harm her, not her brother himself.

But now—well, she wasn't sure she believed in that imaginary line anymore.

Instagram failed to distract her from the hardening pit in her midsection, but fortunately, she didn't have long to wait. A quarter hour after Ned had left, Rose buzzed through on the intercom. "Ms. Westbrook, reception says there's an Agent Shepherd from Panopticon here to see you?"

Ava moved to the desk and pressed the send button. "Yes, that's Kenzie's sister." It hadn't taken Rose long to deduce that Kenzie had free access to Ava's office and person; she might as well know that Sloane came as a package deal. "Please have security escort her up. And then, really, Rose, you should go home."

"I don't mind waiting until you—"

"That wasn't a suggestion," Ava interrupted, her voice as gentle as she could manage. Given the circumstances, probably not very gentle.

After a moment, Rose said, "Thank you, Ms. Westbrook. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," Ava echoed, hoping it was true. "And thank you, Rose. I appreciate all of your hard work getting up to speed."

"Of course. Good night, Ms. Westbrook."

"Good night."

Ava depressed the button and began to pace the office. Was this the right decision? Should she have embroiled Sloane, a long-time Panopticon agent, in Westbrook family drama? Sloane had made no secret of her mistrust of all things related to Nick Westbrook and Sentinel. How would she react to this situation?

Ava wasn't going to lie. Seeing Sloane and Mika all but burst into her office a few minutes later, their movements confident and their expressions concerned, was a huge relief. Not as big a relief as seeing Kenzie would have been, but for now, #AgentDetective (as Matt had nicknamed

them) were exactly what Ava needed. When Mika tugged her into a warm hug, she let go, finally, tears of reaction blurring her vision as she clung to the shorter woman.

“I would ask how you are,” Mika said, “but you look even paler than usual, so...”

Ava managed a slight laugh, mostly for the sake of any hidden surveillance devices. “I’ve had better days.”

“Apparently. Come on. Let’s sit down.”

Nodding shakily, Ava allowed herself to be guided to the couch. “I’m sorry,” she said, swiping at the tears trying to wend their way down her cheek. “I’m fine. Everything’s fine. I appreciate you both being here.”

Mika sat down beside her, hands warm against Ava’s cold palms. “Can you tell us what this is about?”

“Bandal rum,” she said, her lips almost numb. Was she in shock? Maybe she should drink something warm, like tea. Definitely not whiskey, she thought, and barely squashed a hysterical giggle.

Sloane stepped closer, gaze sharp. “What about Bandal rum?”

Rising, Ava moved to the hidden bar and pressed the release button, clenching and unclenching her hands as the panel slowly slid away, revealing the whiskey bottle and two half-full tumblers.

“Voila,” she said, waving at the drinks. “Smell for yourself. I think my brother is trying to send me a message.”

Sloane made it to the bar first. She sniffed one of the glasses, grimaced, and held it out to Mika. While her girlfriend took a cautious whiff, Sloane asked, “Why do you think your brother is to blame?”

“The timing, for one. Also, Nick has always loved dramatic irony, and—” she raised her voice slightly for the hidden transmitters—“what else would you call poisoning an alien sympathizer with off-world alcohol?”

“Your security team is solid, judging from the escort we received,” Sloane said. “How could your brother get to you here?”

Mika’s frown matched Sloane’s, and Ava could almost see their mental gears spinning in unison. According to protocol, Sloane and Mika would have been escorted to the executive elevator by a pair of armed guards—former special ops agents—and, once they reached the executive floor, would have checked in with another guard. In theory, the system should have prevented most people from entering or leaving her office.

Ava shrugged, hugging herself again. “I don’t know. That’s why I called you. I’m not sure who to trust.”

“Who at Hyperion has regular access to your office?” Mika asked.

Ava ticked off the list on her fingers: her current assistant; her former assistant; her security team; her mother (though probably not at this juncture); Victoria; and the custodial staff.

“That’s a lot of people,” Mika said, frowning.

“Victoria, our CEO, isn’t here right now, if that helps. She’s working from the New York office for the rest of the summer.” Victoria, she was fairly certain, wanted to spend her weekends at her house in the Hamptons, thus the move. But good riddance, as far as Ava was concerned. The less she saw of her mother’s cousin, the better. She was pretty sure the feeling was mutual, judging by the lack of anything other than essential contact Victoria had sought even before heading back to the New York office.

“Okay.” Sloane nodded decisively. “So, let’s work the case.”



She and Mika exchanged a look that seemed almost too private, and Ava looked away. They totally got off on investigating cases, didn't they? She could see the attraction. Science was all about solving puzzles, too, and working on a puzzle with someone definitely involved intimacy. Still, she stood by her decision not to involve Kenzie at this juncture. The last thing they needed was her girlfriend beating down the door—or worse, Galaxy Girl beating up Hyperion's janitorial staff or security personnel. Ideally, Ava wanted to keep this as quiet as possible. Since no one had actually died from ingesting the alien rum, she thought she might even succeed.

Mika pulled out her phone and selected the recording app. “Why don't we start by going over the sequence of events.”

Ava described the late meeting, trying to keep her voice steady as she remembered how close Ned had come to swallowing the poisoned whiskey.

“I don't suppose your guest was from off-world, by any chance?” Sloane asked.

“No. He was a longtime friend of my mother's, actually, before turning on her in the press last week.” To her own ears, her voice had lost some of its shocky quality. Now anger was beginning to rise inside her, dark and heated.

“No one actually drank the whiskey, though?” Mika asked.

“Correct.”

“Good thing you recognized the—” Sloane froze, her eyes on Ava.

Clearly, she had just realized what Ava had already sussed out: The would-be assassin had chosen a poison that Ava recognized only because she was dating an off-worlder. Coincidence, or unsubtle hint that Sentinel knew that Ava's girlfriend wasn't human?

Mika glanced between them. “What am I missing?”

Sloane shook her head at Mika, eyes full of warning—apparently, she too realized the room likely wasn't secure—and glanced back at Ava. “Do you think your brother meant to actually harm you?”

Ava eyed her steadily. “I'm not sure.”

“Could it have been a warning, then?”

“Maybe.” She moved back to her desk to shut down her laptop. The sooner they were out of here, the better.

“Any idea where he might have gotten a hold of alien rum?” Mika asked.

Ava eyed Sloane. “I feel like you could probably answer that one better than I can, Agent Shepherd.”

Sloane visibly fidgeted under Mika's enquiring gaze, and *interesting*. Did Mika not know how free her girlfriend was with the contents of Panopticon's evidence locker? Actually, that tracked. Mika didn't seem like she would approve of Sloane “borrowing” certain off-world items for her little sister's enjoyment.

“You're not going to tell me what I'm missing, are you?” Mika asked.

“Not here,” Ava said, gesturing at their surroundings meaningfully.

“Fine. But as you said, the choice of alcohol does seem deliberate,” Mika said.

And not just because Nick considered Ava a traitor to the family cause. She glanced at Sloane and saw her own fears reflected in Kenzie's sister's eyes. If Nick—and by extension, Sentinel—knew that Kenzie wasn't human, did that mean they knew she was Galaxy Girl? Worse, had they guessed that she was Zattalian, an all-powerful unicorn among Earth's off-world refugees?

Sloane shook her head and ground out, “God damn it! I *told* her what could happen if she—”

“If she what?” Ava challenged, the dark, twisted core of her anger driving her to stare Sloane down. “Got involved with a Westbrook?”

Sloane stared back, her own brow furrowed, until Mika touched her elbow. Then Sloane’s shoulders fell, and she veered away, heading to the window to stare out across the city.

Ava followed her gaze, checking again for Kenzie’s masked figure racing the seagulls. The twilight sky was hazy now, lights flicking on in neighboring buildings like the fireflies Ava remembered from summering with Bea’s family in the Hamptons. After a childhood in the city, she’d been amazed by how, when you turned onto a country road at night, nearby fields would light up in response to the passage of your vehicle’s lights over the long grass. She’d always wondered what message the headlights were transmitting, what response an entire field of insects might reply with.

They didn’t have fireflies here on the West Coast, as far as she could tell. But as a bonus, there were significantly more queer people and off-worlders. That was a trade-off she thought she could probably live with.

“All right, then,” Mika said, moving closer. “I think we have enough to get started. We’ll see what we can turn up, okay?”

“Okay.” As they hugged, Ava whispered quietly into her ear, “Check my security team.” She slipped her hand into Mika’s jacket pocket and dropped the post-it note with the IP address and password they would need to access her security server. She only hoped it would be enough.

Mika squeezed her a bit tighter. “Got it,” she whispered. Then she stepped back and offered a reassuring smile.

“Do you want us to walk you out?” Sloane asked.

“Actually, that would be great,” Ava said, and quickly set about packing up for the night. The last thing she wanted was to be alone in her mother’s old office, the room awash with the eerie reddish-orange glow of sunset.

As she sat in the back of the Range Rover a few minutes later, Ramón occasionally stealing glances at her in the rearview mirror, Ava hoped she had done the right thing by looping in Kenzie’s sister and her girlfriend. Now, Ava just needed to tell Kenzie what had happened. They were supposed to meet for dinner after her patrol, which meant Ava should have time for a shower. It would be her second of the day, but after the evening’s events, she could use the relaxing warmth of her new apartment’s steam shower. Maybe it would even chase away the chill that had taken up what felt like permanent residence along her spine.

Her brother’s face flashed in her mind’s eye, triumphant and taunting, followed by her mother’s, dour and disapproving. Maybe it hadn’t been them at all. Perhaps the would-be poisoner had been an actual stranger motivated by political fervor. One could hope, couldn’t one? Then again, as the General had been fond of saying—an Albert Camus reference, if Ava wasn’t mistaken—holding out hope was as foolish as despairing was cowardly.

God, no wonder their family was so dysfunctional. Amelia and the General had both eschewed emotional health in startlingly maladjusted ways.

Ava rested her chin on her upraised hand and closed her eyes, trying to push away memories of the Thornton-Westbrooks. She didn’t need any of them. She knew, in fact, that she was significantly better off without her brother and even, perhaps, her adopted mother playing an active role in her life. Somehow, though, that didn’t make their betrayal any less painful.

If only feelings could be reasoned with.

## Chapter Two

Kenzie didn't *mean* to eavesdrop on her sister and Mika's conversation. It just sort of happened. One minute she was out patrolling the city and enjoying the sunset over Puget Sound as usual, the cry of seagulls and the blast of the ferry horns echoing pleasantly over the usual noise of traffic, and the next she'd spotted Mika's motorcycle cutting through downtown, Sloane holding on behind her. They were going well above the speed limit, which was typical for Sloane but not so much for Mika. Curiosity—and mild alarm—piqued, Kenzie dipped down closer, allowing her enhanced hearing more freedom than she usually did. If Sloane or Mika were in trouble...

Even with her super hearing, Kenzie only caught bits and pieces of her sister's ranting: "Didn't I say nothing good would come of this?" And, "Fucking *Romeo and Juliet* bullshit." And, "Kenzie was happy for like, *ten minutes*, and now this happens."

Before Mika had properly parked her bike outside Panopticon, Sloane was already stalking away, helmet under her arm and curses falling from her lips. She only stopped when Kenzie landed with an audible thud on the sidewalk beside her.

"What do you mean, now *this* happens?" Kenzie demanded, hands on her hips. "What happened, Sloane?"

Sloane looked to Mika for help, but she only shrugged as she pocketed her keys and approached them. "Um," Sloane said, dragging hand through her short hair, "I really don't think I should be the one to tell you."

"Tell me what?" Kenzie said, feeling her blood pressure rise commensurate with the panic flooding her amygdala. "Is it Ava? Oh my god, is she okay?"

“She’s fine,” Sloane said, hands rising in a placating gesture. She held Kenzie’s gaze. “She’s okay, I promise. But there was an incident at Hyperion, and she asked Mika and me to look into it.”

“What kind of incident?”

Sloane looked at Mika again, who nodded subtly. Lowering her voice, Kenzie’s sister said, “Someone spiked the booze in her office bar with Bandal rum.”

Sloane had barely finished her sentence when Kenzie launched herself skyward. She didn’t remember consciously deciding to fly. One moment she was on the ground outside Panopticon and the next she was blurring through the city toward Belltown. *She’s okay*, she told herself fiercely. Sloane had promised. But another thought followed immediately: *For how long?* Even now, Ava could just as easily be cold and still, her heartbeat silenced, her empty body being prepared for burial beneath the Earth’s surface. Or being readied for the fires of a crematorium, because hadn’t she said once that she planned to be cremated when she died?

Oh, god, *when* she died... Kenzie dropped a few feet in midair before recovering and pushing onward even faster.

New plan: She was going to get Ava and take her to Vancouver right now, and Ava would have to stay there until Kenzie determined that Hyperion was safe. No, that *Seattle* was safe. Because if Sentinel could reach Ava at Hyperion with its ridiculously strict security protocols, they could reach her anywhere. Anywhere they knew she was, anyway, which was where the secret Vancouver apartment came in.

But even as one part of Kenzie’s mind coolly plotted the “extraction,” as Sloane would have called it, another part tried to reason with her non-responsive pre-frontal cortex. In reality, she had no right to manhandle Ava, nor did she have the right to disregard Ava’s autonomy. Ava was

her own person and would not look kindly on being kidnapped, not even by Kenzie. Especially not by Kenzie. Besides, Kenzie's code of conduct wouldn't allow her to use her powers in such a way. In theory.

She was almost to Ava's condo when she remembered she wasn't allowed to come in hot in daylight unless it was an emergency—*didn't attempted murder count as an effing emergency?* Reluctantly, she veered toward the closest safe roof. In moments, back in her normal clothes with her hair in a messy jumble around her shoulders, she was half-flying, half-sprinting to Ava's building, where she leaned into the buzzer and waited impatiently for Ava to answer.

The fact that she didn't respond was hardly reassuring.

With her back to the building, Kenzie drew in a breath and closed her eyes, extending her senses outward to track the heartbeat that lulled her to sleep most nights now. *There*. She opened her eyes and used her enhanced vision. Ava was on her way home, only a few blocks away now. Kenzie could wait for her. She could.

She couldn't wait. Too rattled to remain still, she raced down the street toward the corner where Ava's Range Rover was about to appear, arm already lifted to flag down the car.

Ramón drove past her at first, but then the brake lights flashed and Ava rolled down her window. "Don't say anything," she said quickly under her breath.

Kenzie heard the whispered warning perfectly and stood where she was, hands clenched in her jacket pockets.

"Darling, I thought we said we'd meet at my place?" Ava said aloud.

Kenzie noticed Ramón's gaze fixed on her in the side mirror and forced a smile. "It's such a nice night," she said, "I thought we could walk. Besides, I had the best interview today and I couldn't wait to tell you about it."

Ava's laugh sounded rueful. "I've had quite the interesting afternoon myself," she said. "But I need a shower. Can the walk wait?"

"Of course," Kenzie said.

"Wonderful. Hop in." Ava's smile held a hint of tension as she put the window back up.

Ramón unlocked the door, and Kenzie slid inside. "Hi Ramón," she said.

"Kenzie." He nodded at her in the rearview mirror and guided the car back into traffic.

Ava's gaze still held a note of warning, so Kenzie merely gripped her hand as Ramón parked the car in the garage and radioed to the security team waiting upstairs. Then he escorted them to the elevator, keeping his eyes directed outward at the shadowy garage as they waited for the elevator car to arrive.

As the doors slid shut on Ramón's back, Kenzie whipped toward Ava. "What happened?" she asked in a furious whisper. "Sloane said someone tried to poison you at work! Why didn't you call me?"

Ava rubbed her forehead as if one of her infrequent migraines was threatening. "I didn't want to interrupt your patrol. I was going to tell you over dinner."

Kenzie hesitated, torn between anger and empathy. Ava should have called her, shouldn't she? But she looked so worn down that Kenzie couldn't in good conscience berate her. Besides, she wasn't angry with Ava. She was furious with the anonymous perpetrator.

Kenzie sighed and scooted closer, her touch on Ava's arm tentative. "I'm sorry. I just got scared."

Ava looked at her, eyes damp and vulnerable. "I was going to tell you, I promise."

Kenzie nodded as the doors slid open. "I know."



Two security guards waited in the entryway, and a mask descended over Ava's face as the two men stood up straighter. "All quiet?" she asked, her voice brisk.

"Yes, ma'am," said the younger man while his partner unlocked Ava's door.

"Make sure you get your dinner break in."

"We will," he said, smiling.

Kenzie gave him a short nod and brushed past. For a security guard, he was a little too quick to smile for her taste.

Inside, Ava kicked off her heels and hung her blazer and purse over the back of a nearby chair. "Are you staying?" she asked, padding toward the kitchen. Her voice was as withdrawn as the look on her face, which made Kenzie pause. She wanted to drop in on Sloane and Mika at Panopticon and see what they were up to with the investigation. But if Ava needed her...

"Do you want me to stay?"

"Honestly, I wasn't expecting you until later," Ava said, untucking her blouse from her dress pants as she moved through the kitchen. "All I really want is to take a ridiculously long shower."

Kenzie hesitated. But what if Nick's goons had followed Ava home? What if something else happened, and Kenzie wasn't here to save her? On the other hand, Ava didn't seem to want her company, and her security team *was* just outside.

"If I go downtown for a little while, will you be okay?"

"Yes," Ava said, turning to face her. "I'll be fine." In the low light of the hallway, the shadows beneath her eyes—worse since Nick's escape—looked even darker.

"Promise?"

Ava sighed, gazing past her. "I can't make that kind of promise, Kenzie, any more than you can."

“No, I know.” Why was it so difficult to figure out the right thing to do, the right thing to say? “Do you want me to pick up dinner?”

Ava turned away again and continued to the bedroom, where she flicked on the light. “I don’t care.”

“Hey.” Kenzie caught up to her beside the beautiful dresser she’d helped Ava pick out from the Pottery Barn catalog. “Can I at least give you a hug?”

Without a word, Ava turned and let Kenzie enfold her in a careful hug, her face cool against Kenzie’s neck, her arms twining loosely around Kenzie’s waist. They were as close as two people could be, and yet, in that moment, Ava seemed as remote as a star.

“I love you,” Kenzie murmured into her hair. “I’m so glad nothing happened to you.”

Just for a moment she thought she might have said the right thing as Ava softened in her arms and exhaled, low and long. But then she was pushing away, her walls shifting back into place.

“See you later,” she said, dodging Kenzie’s gaze.

Stung but trying not to feel it, Kenzie turned and left the way she had come.

The sun had mostly set, so she used the cover of darkness to blur to an alley and strip down to the Galaxy Girl costume she hadn’t taken the time to change out of earlier. Then she dropped her clothes at a safe roof not far from Ava’s apartment and flew to Panopticon, where she landed on the upper balcony and waited for the security guard to let her in.

Good thing the director had granted her official access to non-classified floors. This meant Kenzie could speed through the building without setting off alarms. Using her enhanced senses, she soon found Sloane and Mika in a conference room near central command, where Sloane was somehow still going off on “Nick effing Westbrook” and “the whole GD anti-alien movement”

while Mika and Rodriguez, another super-gay Panopticon agent whose first name Kenzie was fairly certain she'd never learned, peered into a laptop.

"I mean, seriously," Sloane was saying as Kenzie paused outside the conference room, "how do they not realize that most of these people are refugees just looking for a safe harbor?" Mika must have given her a look, because Sloane added, "What?"

"I'm having a hard time reconciling this version of you with the one who was all ready to shoot that Pendran on Capitol Hill."

"Oh." Sloane cleared her throat. "I guess I just needed to be educated."

"In more ways than one," Mika said.

"Gross," Rodriguez said at the exact same time Kenzie muttered, "Ew."

Clearly, that was enough eavesdropping. She turned the knob, startled when she discovered the door was locked. She could have broken it easily, but that would have led to an inordinate amount of paperwork. Instead, she knocked. "Agent Shepherd? It's, um, Galaxy Girl."

She felt incredibly stupid referring to herself that way, but what could you do. Here at Panopticon, she was supposed to be the friendly neighborhood vigilante, not Sloane's sister and definitely not Ava Westbrook's girlfriend.

The door flew open. "What are you doing here?" Sloane asked, her non-verbal cues indicating her feelings about this decision.

"I heard about the trouble at Hyperion and wondered if I could help."

Over Sloane's shoulder, Kenzie noticed Rodriguez watching the exchange with narrowed eyes. Was her voice modulator working? It better be. Otherwise, the super-gay, super-smart Panopticon agent wasn't going to be fooled for long.

Sloane gritted her teeth as if she were trying to hold back a yell—she totally was, Kenzie knew—but she held the door wider and waved Kenzie inside. “Fine. Your skills might come in handy. But you have to listen to what I say. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” She couldn’t stay that long, anyway. An hour, maybe two, tops. By then, she hoped Ava would want some company—not to mention, some food. Ava might not be hungry, but she needed to eat.

As the trio researched a list of Hyperion’s security department employees that Ava had provided access to, Kenzie realized why Mika and Sloane had asked Rodriguez to help. She was a total tech stud, finding back doors into site after site while the other two took notes and brainstormed motive and opportunity. Mika had once said that she enjoyed “the aggregate beauty” of police work. Her favorite part of an investigation was assembling the big picture that all the small details created. Sloane, meanwhile, seemed happiest when the dogged pursuit of evidence resulted in a confrontation with a suspect and a chance to use one of the bureau’s many weapons, half of which were literally out of this world. Add in Rodriguez’s mad techie skills, and they had a badass crime-fighting team even without Kenzie’s superpowers.

The Hyperion server Rodriguez gained access to contained contact and biographical data on every member of Ava’s security team, almost all of whom were former Navy Seals or Army Rangers. As a reporter, Kenzie was a little envious of Rodriguez’s ability to poke around wherever she wanted. She wasn’t the only one, either. Mika pointed out that SPD would have had to wait hours or even days to obtain a judge’s permission to investigate a suspect’s private data, but Panopticon agents didn’t seem overly concerned by the American legal process. With probable cause established, Rodriguez could simply start infiltrating bank accounts and cell phone records.

Kenzie could see how that freedom of access would be important when innocent people were in imminent danger, but law enforcement agencies ran the risk of becoming all-powerful, despotic organizations if they were allowed to operate without oversight or restrictions. That was why the Alliance suffered from so much bureaucracy—the insane amount of checks and balances in place could make for slow progress in some matters, but an organization as powerful as an intergalactic union of sentient beings couldn't afford to ignore the dangers of despotism. Anyone who'd ever watched *Star Wars* knew that much.

Still, the investigation ran smoothly without the standard legal hoops to jump through. The team worked steadily, and by the time the hour and a half Kenzie had allotted for herself had passed, the trio of humans had a pretty good idea who the mole on Ava's security team was.

“Don't arrest him without me!” Kenzie said, backing away from the table that took up half the conference room.

“Where are you going?” Sloane asked, frowning.

“I'm just going to grab a bite to eat,” Kenzie said over her shoulder, already blurring away.

Behind her, she heard Mika say that actually, she could use a dinner break, too. Rodriguez agreed. Thank goodness humans needed food as much as she did.

Kenzie didn't have time to wait for a meal to be prepared, so she swung by the downtown Whole Foods, ignoring the gawks and gapes (not to mention the photos and video recordings) she inspired in her Galaxy Girl outfit as she stacked a dozen sushi trays in a plastic bag and then waited impatiently to check out. She kept a wad of cash in a hidden zipper pocket for just such an emergency. As Sloane had pointed out, her identity wouldn't stay secret for long if she whipped out a credit card emblazoned with her real name.

Ten minutes later, she was back in the elevator to Ava's penthouse, watching the numbers light up incrementally slowly. Finally, the bell dinged, and she stepped out only to come face to face with the smiling young guard from earlier. After her visit to Panopticon, she knew considerably more about him: He'd done ROTC in Utah before ending up in the Rangers; had been honorably discharged after two tours of Afghanistan; and wasn't as young as he looked. At least he wasn't the one who had betrayed Ava—as far as they knew.

"I come bearing sushi," she said, holding up the paper bags when Ava opened the door.

Her girlfriend looked considerably softer and warmer now, dressed in black fleece pants and a gray wool turtleneck sweater. Her hair was still damp from the shower and curled around her shoulders in the way Kenzie loved, and her skin had taken on a rosier hue. Even her eyes seemed warmer as she gazed at Kenzie with a slight smile.

"Of course you do," Ava said, but her voice seemed more affectionate than irritated.

"I got you a dragon roll," Kenzie said, waving one of the bags.

"Well, in that case..." Ava held the door wider and waved her inside.

Soon they were seated at the breakfast bar divvying up sushi containers, gas fireplace flickering in the background. The condo's track lighting could be overly harsh, but the floor lamps Ava had added to every room created a softer, cozier atmosphere.

"So," Kenzie said around a mouthful of edamame, "nice shower?"

"It was. What about you? Did you go back on patrol?"

"Not exactly." She hesitated, trying to decide how much to share with Ava. Then she remembered how it had felt to learn after the fact that Ava's life had been in danger, how Jane liked to say that lies breed faster than rabbits. "Actually, I went to Panopticon to see how the investigation was going."

“Panopticon?” Ava sat back from the breakfast bar, her eyebrows lowering thunderously. “What the hell? I was trying to avoid getting my father’s people involved. That’s why I called Sloane to begin with.”

Kenzie rarely heard Ava mention her father in relation to Panopticon. She blinked, momentarily distracted by the thought that her sister used to work (indirectly) for Ava’s father. “I think the investigation is off the books. They’re only working with Rodriguez, and, well, me.”

Ava stared at her, and gradually, Kenzie noticed, her shoulders began to relax, her tense grip on her chopsticks easing. “Must have gone over well when you showed up.”

“I mean, I don’t wanna brag, but it was pretty spectacular.”

Ava laughed as if in spite of herself, and Kenzie took that as a win. Not that she wanted Ava to repress any negative feelings, but laughter was healing, and Ava could use all the healing energy she could get.

Kenzie filled her in on the case as she steadily demolished her share of the sushi, which even Ava could admit was “decent for a grocery store.”

“Are you going back after dinner?” Ava asked when she’d finished.

Kenzie’s head tilted. “I don’t have to,” she said, though it pained her to make the offer. Part of her worried what might happen to Sloane and Mika (and Rodriguez) if she wasn’t with them when they went to question the suspect. After all, they had taken the case as a favor to Ava and, by extension, Kenzie. If something happened to any of them...

“It’s okay,” Ava said, reaching out to touch her hand. “I’d rather you help your sister than babysit me. Just let me know what happens.”

Another part of Kenzie worried what might happen to Ava if she wasn't here to protect her—a fear that seemed to have taken up semi-permanent residence in her brain. “I wish there were two of me. Then I could be in two places at one time.”

Ava gave another soft, slightly surprised laugh. “I’m not sure my heart could take two of you. Anyway, think of how your sister would worry.”

At that moment, Kenzie’s phone gave a telltale buzz. Speak of the devil... She kept her hold on Ava’s hand as she checked the message: “Sorry, I can’t make it for dinner,” her sister had written, which was code for *Get your ass back here now*.

“Sloane?” Ava asked.

“Yep.” Kenzie blurred her empty takeout dishes to the recycling bins in a drawer near the sink and made quick work of the clean-up. Then she blurred back to Ava’s side and tugged her into a hug. “See you later?”

Ava pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “Yes, please.”

She tasted of avocado and shrimp tempura, and it was all Kenzie could do to pry herself away from Ava’s warmth and the condo’s comfortable coziness. She would be back, she promised herself as she waved at Ava from the doorway.

*Soon.*

#

It really was incredible what you could accomplish when not required to adhere to state or federal law. By eight they were sitting in an unmarked car outside the suspect’s house, and by eight-thirty they were back at Panopticon interrogating him in a holding cell. Mika kept commenting that she had never been involved in an operation that was so fast and efficient—and



so thoroughly *unconstitutional*. Kenzie couldn't really say the same. Being a vigilante necessarily meant operating outside the law. But as a reporter, she agreed with the sentiment.

The suspect—Christopher Blake, according to Hyperion's records—confessed readily, something else that apparently didn't typically happen in mainstream police work, if Mika's barely concealed astonishment was anything to go by.

"Was anyone hurt?" Blake asked, his voice anxious even as he regarded them with flat, resigned eyes.

"No," Mika answered. "Miss Westbrook discovered the poison before anyone could drink it, so you're only looking at attempted murder charges. Still, you're facing serious time. Do you want to tell us why you did it?"

"I would, but I can't," he said, his eyes the same dull gray as he stared straight ahead, shoulders stiff, fists clenched.

"Let me guess." Sloane entered the conversation for the first time. Her eyes and voice were softer than Kenzie would have expected. Playing good cop seemed the opposite of her usual approach: punch (or, as appropriate, *shoot*) first and ask questions later. "You were contacted by an intermediary and given a set of instructions you were told to follow, and if you didn't, a loved one would die."

Blake's eyes widened just a little, and Kenzie detected the sweat beginning to bead on his forehead.

"And then you wiped the security tape so there would be no record," Rodriguez put in, "and altered the on-site server log."

He looked at Rodriguez, gaze a little less blank. "How did you know?"

She smiled coolly. "All in a day's work."

In the course of the evening, the investigation had turned up information about the built-in fail-safes in Hyperion's security system, including a remote back-up server that only Ava and her head of security had access to. Blake hadn't known about the remote server, and they weren't about to tell him about it now. That server had allowed them to work out the who, the when, and the how of the attempt on Ava's life, and now Ava should be able to rest easier knowing that her security team was no longer compromised.

It wasn't quite ten when Kenzie nodded at the outside guards—a new team for the night—and knocked on Ava's door, only to find it open a crack. Heart quickening, she hurried inside and followed the sound of running water to the master bathroom.

Ava glanced up, soap suds clinging to her skin, a well-worn headband holding back her unruly hair. "You're here. That was fast."

"Why was your door unlocked?" Kenzie demanded.

Ava blinked at her. "Because you texted to say you were on your way over."

"Oh. Right. But..." Kenzie stopped herself. If Ava felt secure with the extra security cameras in the condo's lobby, garage, and elevator, not to mention the armed guards stationed outside her penthouse, then far be it for Kenzie to burst her bubble. She had a feeling that the results of the investigation would do just that, anyway.

"I'll be out in a second," Ava said, and began to rinse her face the way she always did, slowly and methodically, one quadrant at a time.

The mildly OCD way Ava washed her face at night was one of the quirks Kenzie had discovered in the many nights they had spent together. As she headed out to the living room to wait for Ava, the thought struck her that she might never have had a chance to watch Ava wash her face again, and she stopped in the center of the room, staring unseeingly at the picture

windows that overlooked Seattle Center and the Space Needle. If the Bandal rum had found its target, Kenzie might be here alone in Ava's flat tonight, thinking of the last time she had seen Ava, the last time she'd held her, the last time they'd kissed. How none of those things would ever happen again. How life, for Kenzie, would never be the same.

She closed her eyes as images of the old asteroid storm returned, chain reaction blasts lighting up against her eyelids as particle collider after particle collider exploded in small, oxygen-deprived bursts. She knew what it was like to lose family. She never wanted to feel that again, and yet here she was surrounding herself with people whose lives seemed so tenuous, whose daily survival seemed questionable. What was she doing? Why was she living here on this backward planet with people who seemed always one step away from death? Who had decided Earth would be good for her and vice versa, when all the evidence pointed to the contrary? Maybe her Alliance caseworker was a self-righteous Wingarian monk from the Andavian system who believed in forcing their belief in non-attachment on everyone around them.

*Bastard.* She'd never liked Wingarians. No doubt the xenophobia was mutual.

She didn't hear footsteps approach, so when Ava stopped beside her and touched her arm, she almost leapt through the ceiling. Literally.

"You okay?" Ava asked.

Kenzie took a calming breath, but she still felt dizzy. "I think that's my line," she said.

"It can be mine, too."

The next breath shuddered out of her. "I could have lost you today."

She heard Ava sigh, felt Ava wend their hands together. "Yes."

Kenzie flinched at the brutal honesty. "Ava, I don't know if I can..."

Ava pulled her into a hug, rubbing her back soothingly. “It’s okay,” she said. “Nothing happened. I’m here.”

*But for how long?* Kenzie wanted to ask. Only she knew Ava couldn’t answer that question any more than she could.

She buried her face in Ava’s hair, inhaling the delicate lavender of her face scrub and the floral scent of her expensive perfume. She was here. She was safe. Kenzie would do anything to make sure she remained so. *Anything.*

Ava pulled back. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

Kenzie nodded. “Yes, please.”

A little while later, with Ava seated beside her at the kitchen island and a cup of blueberry tea warming her from the inside out, Kenzie offered an update on the investigation.

“*Blake* poisoned the whiskey?” Ava repeated. “Really?”

“Sloane and Mika think he was blackmailed into helping,” Kenzie told her. “Honestly, he seemed relieved to learn that no one had gotten hurt.”

Ava nodded slowly, cupping her mug of tea in both hands. “Any idea who he was working with?”

“Are you asking for ideas, or do you want to know about evidence?”

“Both.”

“No evidence,” Kenzie said, “but I think all of us agree that this has Nick’s figurative fingerprints all over it. Not only because he just got out of prison, but because he has motive, opportunity, and access, to quote Mika.”

Ava sighed and dropped her forehead onto her arms. “God, my brother is such a dick!”

“If the rhyme fits, why would you acquit?”

A laugh shook Ava's shoulders, and she lifted her head, mock glaring at Kenzie. "Excuse you, I am trying to feel sorry for myself over here."

Kenzie held up her hands. "I saw an opportunity and I went for it."

"That's what she said."

"And by *she*, I assume you mean me and not some other woman, right?"

"I always mean you," Ava said in the low, sultry tone that was guaranteed to get Kenzie hot and bothered.

Was it inappropriate to want to make love to your girlfriend only hours after she survived a murder attempt? But no, Kenzie decided, leaning forward to press her forehead against Ava's, it was the only reasonable response to eluding death's grasp.

"Is this okay?" she murmured, pressing kisses against the corner of Ava's mouth.

"More than okay," Ava said, wrapping her arms around Kenzie's neck and tugging her closer. "Take me to bed, please."

The ache in her voice matched the ache in Kenzie's heart, and she complied with Ava's wishes.

"I love you," Kenzie said a little while later as she pressed Ava into the mattress, already thinking about how she was going to torment Ava until she begged for release.

"I love you, too," Ava said, her voice raspy and low, her fingers curled into Kenzie's biceps as if she would never let go.

Honestly, Kenzie would be okay with that. More than okay, even.

But while sex might temporarily drive away her sense of impending doom, even the bliss of multiple orgasms was no match for the worry plaguing Kenzie. She was still flushed and breathing hard, still spiraling down when she found herself thinking of Vancouver again, of the

safety of anonymity that the Taammeni headbands offered. It wasn't too late. She could still sweep Ava away to safety. Once they put some clothes on, of course.

But then she remembered that bodily autonomy was a serious thing, and that Ava guarded hers the most of anyone Kenzie had ever met. Kenzie could no more steal Ava away from Seattle against her will than she could track Nick down and end his life in cold blood. Which was to say she *could*, but she wouldn't allow herself to cross that line. She turned onto her side away from Ava, hiding her face in the luxurious pillow. Ava's pillows were the softest ever because she was a literal billionaire who could take care of herself—except when it came to her murderous family, apparently.

“What's wrong?” Ava asked, rubbing her back.

“I have to tell you something,” Kenzie found herself admitting.

“Good or bad?” Ava's voice was drowsy, or maybe merely exhausted.

“Not the best. Promise you won't be mad?”

“How can I promise I won't be mad if I don't know what you're going to tell me?” Ava asked, infuriatingly rational despite her evident exhaustion.

Kenzie had no argument for this. Sighing, she turned to face Ava and confessed, “I thought about taking you to Vancouver earlier and leaving you there. You know, until I could make sure you were completely safe.”

Ava was quiet. Then she said, “Kenzie, you can't do that.”

“I know that. You're still here, aren't you?”

“I'm no damsel in need of rescuing, either,” Ava said, invoking the phrase Kenzie had used after Antonio had tried to ruin Game Night.

But Kenzie didn't give the response she knew she supposed to. Instead, she told the truth. Or, *her* truth, anyway: "You kind of are, though."

"No, I'm not." Ava moved closer, peering into her eyes. "You know that, right?"

"Umm..." Kenzie gazed back at her, taking in her beautiful green irises that changed color depending on the lighting, her clothing, her mood. They were as ephemeral as Ava herself, a quality that simultaneously fascinated and worried Kenzie. "I think we should agree to disagree on this one."

"Whatever." Ava shook her head and rolled away.

"Ava," she said, scooting closer. When she didn't get a response, Kenzie wrapped her arms around Ava's soft frame and tugged until they were spooning. Ava *did* need to be protected, just like Kenzie sometimes needed protecting, too.

"I love you," she whispered, pushing aside Ava's thick hair to rest her chin on her shoulder.

Ava softened slightly against her. "I love you, too," she whispered back, folding her arms over Kenzie's.

The sound of traffic drifted up from the streets below as usual, but that wasn't why Kenzie couldn't fall asleep. Every time she closed her eyes, a rush of chaotic images swept over her. And since Ava was already upset with her, Kenzie's brain decided on its own that she might as well go all in because she found herself saying, "There's something else I have to tell you."

Ava stiffened again, not enough that a human would notice, but then Kenzie wasn't human, was she?

"It's not a big deal," she added, "or, I guess it sort of could have been, but I didn't actually go through with it so that makes it less of a big deal—"

"Kenzie," Ava interrupted. "Just tell me."

*Right.* “Okay. I’m not proud of it, but I actually considered paying your brother a visit in prison. To, you know, make sure he could never hurt you again. Ever.”

Ava didn’t say anything at first. Then: “You did?”

“Yeah. More than once, actually.” She should have, too. If she had, then Ava wouldn’t have found Bandal rum in her office whiskey stash, and Kenzie wouldn’t have to worry quite so much about her girlfriend’s safety. Although, if Ava had found out Kenzie had killed her brother, they probably wouldn’t still be together.

“Please don’t kill him,” Ava said. “I know he’s terrible, but he’s still my brother.”

“I won’t,” Kenzie said, trying to convince herself she meant it.

“Thank you. Although I do get why you would fantasize about something like that.” Ava hesitated, and then, unexpectedly, she offered up her own secret to the warm, comfortable darkness: “I thought about shooting the man who killed my mother. I even took my father’s gun to his apartment over Christmas break my senior year at Deerfield.”

Kenzie could feel how tense Ava had grown in her arms, barely breathing, her limbs rigid.

“You did?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t shoot him. I just watched him get drunk in front of his television and then I drove home.”

“What stopped you?”

“Honestly? He was kind of pathetic, and I decided he wasn’t worth breaking the law or my own moral code for.”

“Cool,” Kenzie said, and then winced at her own glib response borne out of awkwardness.

It wasn’t “cool,” not any of it. Except maybe the part where they trusted each other enough to share such truths. But was Kenzie trustworthy on this? Killing Nick might go against everything



she believed in, but if Ava hadn't recognized the scent of the alien rum, if she had consumed enough to send her system into shock or, worse, had actually died, would an intangible moral code be enough to stop Kenzie from tracking Nick down and ending his life? She was pretty sure she knew the answer to that question, and it definitely wasn't *cool*.

Visions of broken bones and ruptured blood vessels dancing in her head, she closed her eyes and gathered Ava closer. Slowly, incrementally, Ava's heartrate and breathing evened out as Kenzie held her, senses attuned to the woman in her arms and to the sounds of the city far below. At some point she would sleep. At some point she would *need* to sleep. But that point probably wasn't going to come tonight.

Because like it or not, admit it or not, Ava needed watching over, and that was what Kenzie intended to do.

## Chapter Three

Ava paused outside Sloane's house. The last time she'd visited this block, she and Kenzie had made out against a tree near the sidewalk before Ava had headed to New York and Kenzie had faced down her parents, who very much had not approved of the idea of Ava and Kenzie kissing. Somehow, Ava doubted their opinion had changed.

Had Sloane's? Today's brunch invitation seemed to indicate that Kenzie's sister was at least more supportive of their relationship than the elder Shepherd-Hendersons, but Ava wasn't entirely convinced.

"You okay?" Kenzie asked, glancing back at her, hand poised to knock on her sister's front door.

"Of course," Ava said, smiling in a way she hoped was reassuring.

Kenzie had asked her that same question half a dozen times a day in the week since Nick's failed assassination attempt, and honestly, her concern was starting to feel a bit oppressive. Ava wasn't okay, nor was she sure when she might be. But she was here because she owed Sloane and Mika for finding the mole in her security team. Jack, her local chief of security, had reported that he'd instituted protocols to make sure there would be no repeat. Ava hoped he was right. Even Nick should be afraid to tangle with the older man, who was rumored to have taken part in the operation to capture Osama Bin Laden.

Mika answered the door and greeted Ava and Kenzie with hugs before leading them back to the kitchen, where Sloane was glaring into the oven as if personally affronted.

"I'll just..." Kenzie said, gesturing at her sister.

“Please,” Mika said. “Ava, can I get you an Irish coffee?” When Ava hesitated, Mika held up a whiskey bottle with an expensive label. “I promise it’s safe. The seal was still on until about a half hour ago.”

Kenzie glanced over at them, her expression indicating that the joke was too much too soon, but Ava pretended not to notice. “That sounds great,” she said, forcing another smile. She had been alone so much lately—or alone with Kenzie—that her social skills felt a bit rusty. Perhaps alcohol on an empty stomach would make her a decent brunch guest. Bea, she felt certain, would approve.

Mika poured a spoonful of brown sugar into Ava’s coffee mug and added a generous slug of whiskey, topping off the concoction with what looked like genuine whipped cream. Then she held up her own drink, already half gone. “Cheers!”

“Cheers.” Ava clinked Mika’s mug and took a sip. The whipped cream was sweet, the dark roast the perfect temperature, the whiskey just the right strength. Her insides instantly warmed, and she gave Mika a genuine smile. “Well done.”

“Thanks. Given that you have a family connection to Ireland, that feels like a huge compliment.” When Ava’s eyebrows lifted—she didn’t recall mentioning her Irish roots to Kenzie’s sister and her girlfriend—Mika leaned closer. “I’m not sure you appreciate just how much Kenzie talks about you.”

“All good things, though,” Kenzie called, eavesdropping shamelessly.

“Kenzie,” Sloane said, her tone exasperated.

“Sorry,” Kenzie said, her smile sheepish, and turned back to help.

While the sisters worked on the menu, Mika led Ava out to the covered patio where a restaurant-grade heater made the cool early summer morning warmer than it otherwise would

have been. In New York, the summer day would have been sticky and hot by mid-morning, but Seattle's climate offered neither heat nor humidity this early in the season. Ava was starting to appreciate that fact. With Kenzie's encouragement, she'd even picked up a couple of lightweight fleeces from REI, one of which she was currently wearing.

"Green to match your eyes," Kenzie had suggested, holding up the jacket in question and leaning in to kiss her sweetly right there in front of God and country.

Kenzie might have been new to women-loving-women relationships, but she didn't seem to flinch away from public displays of affection the way some newly queer people did. Probably, Ava thought, being a Zattalian among humans loomed as the greater difference in her mind.

"So," Mika said as she took a seat on an Adirondack chair near the heater, "Kenzie says you own a working farm in Ireland."

Ava nodded. "It's a sheep farm, actually, and it belonged to my biological mother's cousin. The estate agent suggested I sell it, but my mother grew up visiting that farm every summer so I decided to lease it out instead. There's a lovely family living there now, and I visit every so often to see to repairs and just generally soak up the atmosphere."

"At which point you ride a four-wheeler?"

Kenzie really did talk about her, apparently. "Of course," Ava said, grinning over the top of her mug.

"Man, we totally need to have a Shepherd-sisters-plus-partners trip to the UK at some point."

Ava blinked. Given the constant current threat of her crazy family wreaking death and destruction, she couldn't even begin to imagine a time when she and Kenzie would be able to take a lesbian double-dating vacation to Ireland.

The conversation shifted then to Antonio's recent news: He had finally earned his pilot's license after months of lessons and training, and now he wanted to fly them all out to San Juan Island some weekend day for lunch and sight-seeing. Kenzie, however, admitted that she'd been spying on his lessons—"To make sure you were all right!"—and when she had described a solo training flight where it had taken him three passes to land the plane, the rest of the Super Friends had suddenly realized that all of their upcoming weekends were booked.

"I was just practicing," he'd insisted, his face red, while Kenzie stuck her tongue out at him.

"She doesn't forgive easily, does she?" Ava commented.

"Actually, Sloane says she forgives people who hurt her almost too quickly," Mika said. "But Antonio didn't mess with her, he messed with you. Kenzie is much more protective of the people she loves than she is of herself."

Ava frowned, tracing the rim of her mug thoughtfully. Kenzie's demonstrated lack of self-preservation was not Ava's favorite trait, but she supposed Kenzie wouldn't be the hero she was without it.

"Have you seen the TikTok videos of off-worlders coming out?"

Ava nodded. The sheer proliferation of #outofthisgalaxy tags was inspiring, and Ava couldn't help but be proud of her girlfriend for inspiring a younger generation to step out of the shadows and claim their identity proudly and boldly. And yet, the backlash was just as real.

"Have you seen the number of attacks on off-worlders?" Ava countered.

Mika nodded, her eyes troubled. "Two steps forward one back... But at least we're moving in the right direction."

Not if Ava's family had anything to say about it. But she only nodded and took a fortifying sip of her coffee, wiling the alcohol to spread its chemical warmth throughout her chilled body.

The food issues were soon resolved, and as Ava sat down beside Kenzie at the farm style table in the formal dining room a little while later, eyeing the dishes of toast, fresh fruit, and quiche spread out before them, she had to admit that her earlier worries about spending time with Kenzie's sister had been for nothing. It was nice to be looked after like this. With Kenzie's enormous appetite, meals required an inordinate amount of planning. Ava had grown tired of take-out recently, but the fact was she didn't often have time to prepare the amount of calories Kenzie required on a daily basis. Having Sloane take care of that particular challenge on a weekend morning felt like a genuine treat.

"What are you two doing for the Fourth?" Mika asked conversationally as she unfolded the cloth napkin beside her plate.

Ava stole a glance at Kenzie. "We were planning to head to LA to hang out with Bea, but—"

Kenzie's gaze snapped up from her plate. "Wait, what do you mean we *were* planning to go to LA?"

Ava tried to swallow down her defensiveness. "I'm just not sure this is the right time. Work is busy, and after last week, I think I might want to stick closer to Seattle for a while."

Kenzie was frowning at her, and yes, Ava could see the wisdom of having this conversation privately before airing it in front of Kenzie's big sister, but it was a little late for that. Sloane had already perked up noticeably.

"If you guys are sticking around, that means you can come up to Bellingham with us," she said.

Jane and Benjamin, Ava knew, threw an annual Fourth of July barbecue for their friends and neighbors. Somehow, she doubted she was invited.

"Yeah, I don't think so," Kenzie said, scoffing at her sister.

Sloane scoffed right back. “Why not? Mom and Dad will be on their best behavior in front of the neighbors, and you guys would only have to be there for a couple of hours. It’s the perfect plan—maximum benefit with minimal risk.”

Sloane actually had a point, Ava had to admit—much as it pained her to do so.

Kenzie glanced at Ava. “I don’t know,” she said, her tone less certain now. “We’ll have to see.”

Ava looked down at her plate, hoping her existential dread wasn’t emblazoned on her forehead in neon lettering. With Amelia’s betrayal so fresh, she didn’t think she could take being rejected—*again*—by Kenzie and Sloane’s mother, too.

“But...” Sloane started.

“The fireworks will be amazing from your new place, Ava,” Mika said, shooting her girlfriend an obviously admonishing look.

“Totally,” Kenzie agreed. “You’re in for a treat. The fireworks actually shoot off the Space Needle. Talk about up close and personal.”

“How are you settling in to Belltown?” Mika added.

Ava seized upon the subject change gratefully, describing the small changes she’d made to the condo since moving in: adding remote-operated window blinds throughout; installing dimmer switches in the living room and hallway; and hanging artwork, some of which Kenzie joked was “on loan” from the New York apartment.

“Dang, Ava, how many properties do you own?” Mika asked, her smile teasing.

“Including the new place? Three,” she admitted, swirling the melting cream around in her coffee cup.

“Well done, Kenzie,” Sloane said, holding up her hand for a high five.

To her credit, Kenzie ignored her sister's gauche—to Ava's sensibilities—gesture. Or maybe she was simply too enamored with her food to notice. Hard to know which with Kenzie.

“You know,” Ava said, glancing at Mika, “you're welcome to stay at the beach house in Malibu whenever. I'm hardly ever there.”

“Thanks,” Mika said, her words for Ava but her smile for her girlfriend. “Maybe we'll take you up on it.”

Ava hoped they would. It was the least she could do after what they'd done for her.

She caught the thought—not every action required an equal reaction, she reminded herself as she took a bite of quiche. Mika and Sloane had helped solve the case of the off-world rum, as Ava had taken to thinking of it, because Kenzie cared about her and because it was a job they were both accomplished at. They'd seemed genuinely happy to help and had explicitly stated that they didn't want any type of reward for their efforts, but Ava hadn't really believed them. She'd been raised in a family that operated within a transactional relationship system, as her old therapist had called it. That meant she had been trained to expect reciprocation in most situations, especially those in which she gave or received assistance.

She could still hear her father's deep voice intoning, “Promises make debts, and debts make promises. Don't forget that, Ava.”

Damned Westbrook ethos. It was a harder pattern than most to unlearn, she had found over the years.

But even her father's long shadow couldn't overcome Ava's enjoyment of brunch with Kenzie. Her girlfriend's pleasure in the food before them was contagious, and her gaze was as gentle as her touch as she offered up strawberries and smiles in equal measure. Even Sloane seemed softer, kinder, as they lingered over coffee and stories of their friends and co-workers.



This meal felt like a welcome break from the chaos that lurked just beyond the warm, safe confines of Sloane's house. Even the sounds of the city seemed remote from here atop Queen Anne, and Ava caught herself daydreaming about a sunlit house of her own, with a yard and a garden and a porch swing where she and Kenzie could... Oh. So not a house of *her* own, but a house of *their* own.

Ava was still pondering the thought when Mika retreated to the refrigerator and, in a flourish, brought out a cake, its cream-colored frosting decorated with tiny orange carrots.

"Carrot cake?" Kenzie's eyes widened. "I didn't know we were having cake!"

Sloane leaned in toward Ava. "The trick to getting Kenzie to eat her vegetables is adding sugar and hiding everything under cream cheese frosting."

Kenzie rolled her eyes at her sister as she helped herself to a large piece of cake. "It's really good," she said around her first bite, smiling at Mika with frosting in her teeth.

Ava hid a smile and took a bite. Kenzie wasn't wrong. The cake was quite good.

"Thanks," Mika said. "I've been working on the recipe. Your sister says your family takes their cakes very seriously."

"I was telling her about the unofficial competition at the Fourth of July party," Sloane said, giving Kenzie a meaningful look.

Kenzie's smile slipped immediately. "Don't, Sloane."

"Don't what?"

"Don't bug me about the party or I'll take this whole cake and fly out the window," Kenzie said, lifting the cake platter in her free hand and holding it above the table.

"If you do that, then you won't ever know what second dessert is," Sloane said, shrugging as if the idea didn't bother her in the least.

Second dessert? Was that like second breakfast? Apparently, Kenzie wanted to know, too, because she immediately placed the cake platter back on the table.

“It’s cool,” she said, faking a laugh. “I was just joking! Obviously.”

“Uh-huh.” Sloane smiled around a bite of carrot cake. “Sure you were.”

Mika caught Ava’s eye, and they exchanged a look that Ava was pretty sure communicated a shared fondness for their girlfriends’ sibling rivalry. Could have been worse, as Ava knew from unfortunate personal experience.

A moment later, the peace of the morning was shattered as a series of cell phone notifications sounded. Sloane reached her phone first, and before Ava could do much more than exchange a concerned look with Kenzie, the Panopticon agent was setting aside her napkin and rising.

“Come on,” Sloane said to Mika, whose mouth was drawn into a grim line from whatever she’d read on her own screen. “I’ll drive you.”

Kenzie held out a hand. “Wait! What’s going on? Can I help?”

“Sorry, Kenz. Police business,” Sloane said.

Kenzie was standing now, too, food forgotten as Mika disappeared into the hallway. “But you’re not a police officer!”

“I’ll let you know if we need you, okay?” Sloane glanced at Ava. “I’m sorry about this. Feel free to stay and finish the cake.”

Ava, who had grown up with a father on active duty, nodded. “Be safe.”

“Thanks.” Sloane grasped Kenzie’s shoulder for a brief moment. “I promise I’ll be in touch if we need you, okay?”

Kenzie pursed her lips, her nostrils flaring slightly. “You better.”

Mika strode back into the room, leather jacket and gun holster in place. “Come on,” she said, her demeanor just as changed as Kenzie’s sister’s. “We need to go.”

With a silent wave, Sloane followed her girlfriend from the room. A moment later, Ava heard the garage door open, followed by the roar of a motorcycle starting and zooming away as Kenzie stood in the middle of the kitchen, her body so tense it almost seemed to be vibrating. Was it fear? Worry? Apprehension? Probably, Ava thought, all of the above.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“No.” Kenzie’s head tilted, eyes glazing over, and Ava realized that she was trying to tune her senses to whatever it was that had brought brunch to such an abrupt end.

Ava’s purse was draped over the back of her chair, and she reached for her phone. Twitter could be a hell site, but it was handy in situations like this. But before she could navigate to local news, Kenzie gasped.

“What?”

Kenzie blinked at her. “The police are saying there’s an alien riot on Capitol Hill. I have to go.”

“An alien riot?” Ava echoed, as stunned as Kenzie looked. As far as she knew, there had never been so much as a peaceful demonstration by Earth’s off-worlder community. Her brother’s image flashed before her, and her fists clenched. *Sentinel*.

Kenzie was already moving toward the patio door. “Do you want to stay here, or do you want me to take you home?”

“I’ll stay,” Ava said, mainly because she knew that if there really was a serious situation threatening the city, her security team would hasten her off to a secure location the second she showed her face downtown.

“Okay.” Kenzie paused at the sliding glass door, frowning at Ava with the same worried look that had plagued her all week. “Will you be all right on your own?”

“I’ll be fine. But Kenzie, you can’t fly without your suit.”

Kenzie’s smile was grim. “They’d have to be able to see me to figure out who I am. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

A moment later, Kenzie blurred into the sky so quickly that Ava’s human eye couldn’t track her. Just like that, she was alone in Sloane’s house.

The urge to snoop, she realized as she stood in the quiet kitchen, was strong. She’d grown up in a family that fully believed in the survival of the fittest, and she’d learned that knowing more about your adversaries was always advantageous. Not that Sloane was her adversary, exactly. Anyway, she also understood that as a Panopticon agent, Kenzie’s sister probably liked to bring her work home with her, which meant she might well have surveillance cameras hidden around her living space.

Honestly, what Ava wouldn’t have given to have been born into a less technologically advanced time. Those pioneers on the Minnesota plains had no idea how good they’d had it in a world without camera phones or GoPros mounted on drones. Of course, dysentery and hypothermia were unpleasant in their own ways, and wide-spread homophobia, misogyny, and racism hadn’t exactly made life easy, either. Clearly, there were some tradeoffs.

To distract herself from her current surroundings, she focused on her phone again, scrolling through a few threads on Twitter regarding the “alien riots” on Capitol Hill. Apparently, a police officer had attempted to arrest an off-worlder on a charge of breaking and entering, and the off-worlder and their neighbors had not reacted well to the officer’s show of force. Reinforcements

had been called, rocks and broken bottles had been thrown, and riot officers were currently amassing in Seattle's queer neighborhood, all but guaranteeing a terrible outcome. And there was absolutely nothing Ava could do about it other than worry about Kenzie and the others currently rushing to join the fray.

Resolutely, Ava set aside her phone and surveyed the kitchen, noting the dirty dishes in the sink and the crumbs and other detritus littering the counter. A washcloth rested at the corner of the sink, so she rinsed it out and set to work. She liked cleaning. Or, maybe she didn't *like* it, exactly, but the process offered multiple payoffs. Besides being a worthy method of distraction from stress, her frequent cleaning jags benefited whatever space she happened to occupy. Bea, however, was more hedonistic (according to Bea), and liked to accuse Ava of being a neatnik.

As if Ava would ever find that particular moniker insulting.

"Alexa," she said when the sink was clean, "play '90s R&B for girls' night."

As Sloane's Bluetooth speaker system belted out Mary J. Blige's soulful tones, Ava turned to putting away the leftovers and loading the dishwasher. When that was done, she checked the cabinet under the sink for soap. But as she peered into the cabinet's dim interior, she froze. Was that—could it be? She leaned closer. It was! A package of Mr. Clean Magic Erasers, one of her absolute favorite-ever cleaning tools.

"Oh, this party is on," she said to herself. Because, yes, that was how she rolled when everyone she cared about vanished to risk life and limb for the public's safety.

By the time another half hour had passed, the kitchen was really beginning to shine. Ava had taken breaks here and there from her compulsive cleaning, even sitting down at one point to watch a video of Kenzie in her Galaxy Girl suit speaking to a small crowd of disgruntled off-worlders who were outnumbered at least two to one by a counter-protest that had

“spontaneously” appeared at the same time as the riot police. Ava didn’t mind admitting that she had blinked back tears as she’d listened to her extraordinary girlfriend galvanize the crowd of off-worlders with messages of hope and faith. This whole situation smelled like a setup meant to cast aspersion on the alien refugee community, but Kenzie’s courage and unswerving optimism were a hundred percent genuine. She suspected the crowd knew that, too, because shortly after Kenzie’s speech, both sides stood down and went their separate ways. Galaxy Girl had struck again, saving Seattle’s humans and off-worlders alike. Ava only wished she could see her brother’s face, knowing that his latest stunt had backfired.

Actually, scratch that. She had no desire to see her brother’s face ever again.

“Are you magically erasing my sister’s kitchen?”

The voice made Ava scream a little as she whirled from scouring the refrigerator handle.

“Kenzie! Don’t do that!”

Framed in the patio doorway, Kenzie laughed and held up her hands. “Hey, don’t let me stop you. Looks like you’re on a roll. I just have one question.”

Ava set her hands on her hips, channeling superhero pose to chase away the memory of her embarrassing shriek. “What’s that?”

“Did you find second dessert yet?”

“Oh my god, you’re such a dork.”

“That’s not what Twitter says.” Kenzie winked at her. “Seriously, though, did you?”

“Don’t you wish you knew.”

Kenzie gasped. “I can’t believe you would betray me like this!”

“Slow your roll,” Ava said, and opened the oven door to reveal her recent discovery.

“Wait. Are those cinnamon rolls?”

“They are.”

Kenzie blinked heart eyes at her. “Noice! And nice pun, too.”

“We aim to serve,” Ava said with an exaggerated wink.

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“It’s just a saying.”

“Oh, right. I knew that.”

Over the tray of homemade cinnamon rolls—another of Mika’s brunch contributions—Kenzie filled Ava in on what she knew about the events on Capitol Hill. The off-worlder the police had attempted to arrest had insisted they were innocent, claiming that the human who had accused them was lying. The police, however, had given the human witness more credibility than the accused off-worlder, which had happened before in similar cases. In the past, however, the refugee community hadn’t felt empowered enough to protest.

Kenzie paused in demolishing her third cinnamon roll. “Do you think it’s my fault that they took to the streets like that?”

Ava considered her response carefully. “I don’t think it’s your *fault*, exactly, but I do think that you may have inspired them to stand up for themselves. That’s not a bad thing, Kenzie.”

Her girlfriend hunched her shoulders. “I don’t know. Someone could have gotten hurt today.”

“Yes, but they didn’t, thanks to you. I saw your speech, by the way, so trust me when I say you’re definitely the reason the crowd dispersed.”

Predictably, Kenzie downplayed her role in the peaceful resolution, but Ava pulled up the video thread on Twitter to respectfully disagree. Kenzie scrunched up her face and winced, though, so Ava relented. She didn’t particularly like to watch herself on video, either.

Again, those pioneers really didn’t know how good they’d had it.

Ava had just set her phone down when Sloane strode into the kitchen, Mika at her heels.

“You guys are still—wait, did you have second desert without us?” Sloane looked outraged, and Ava couldn’t withhold her snort of laughter.

Kenzie froze. “Um, I’m sorry?” she mumbled around a mouthful of frosting.

“It’s fine,” Mika said. “Besides, what did you expect, honey? We left your sister in your kitchen with one of her favorite brunch items warming in the oven.”

Kenzie swallowed her overly large bite of cinnamon roll and pushed the tray towards her sister. “We saved you some.”

“Only because we got home in time,” Sloane said.

Kenzie didn’t argue. “Any news from Panopticon?” she asked as Sloane set about making a fresh pot of coffee.

“Nothing I can tell you.”

“Aw, come on.”

“As long as you remain a vigilante operating outside of the law, there’s only so much I can share with you,” Sloane said with the self-righteous air of someone who believed they had moral authority on their side. Or, at least, the air of an older sister who didn’t have to tell her little sister anything if she didn’t want to.

Mika slid into the seat beside Kenzie, already munching on a gooey cinnamon roll. “I can fill you in,” she said, ignoring the look her girlfriend shot her, “but there really isn’t much to tell. We’re still working the B&E case, and until it’s closed, any information we might be able to share is limited.”

“Do you think the suspect really did what they’re accused of?” Ava asked.



Mika shrugged. “As much as I would like to be able to trust my colleagues, I think we all understand how the Police Department works. It pains me to say it, but not everyone in my unit is there because they care about justice.”

Kenzie’s ritual demolishing of the tray of rolls slowed. “What are you guys talking about?”

Ava touched Kenzie’s hand gently. “There might be other forces at work here.”

“Like Sentinel,” Mika added. “It might be that anti-alien extremists are behind both the allegations and the confrontation this morning.”

“But why would they...” Kenzie’s voice trailed off. “Oh. Got it.”

Her shoulders slumped, and Ava wished there was something she could do to make everything better. But that would involve foiling Sentinel’s plans, and at this point, she had no idea how to do that.

“Enough shop talk,” Sloane announced as she dropped down beside Mika and reached for a roll. “I think it might be time for a little couples Cranium. What do you say? Are you two brave enough to take us on?”

Ava trotted out the smile she routinely employed to intimidate her professional competition. “Bring it, Shepherd.”

“Oh, it has already been broughten,” Sloane said, exchanging a no-look high five with her girlfriend.

Kenzie scooted her chair closer again, her frown smoothing out. “You guys are going down.”

Ava winced while Sloane groaned, and even Mika recoiled slightly.

“What?” Kenzie gazed around the table. “What did I say?”

“You should probably ask your girlfriend later,” Mika said. “Another cinnamon roll?”

Kenzie nodded, her latest social faux pas taking the back burner to cinnamon-laced sweetness. Ava hoped that her brother and his minions never figured out how food-motivated Seattle's resident superhero was. Otherwise, Kenzie might be in trouble.

The thought of Nick going after Kenzie cast a momentary shadow over the scene before her, but she blinked it away. She was here with Kenzie now, and they were both safe. That was not something she intended on taking lightly. Sentinel might continue to operate in the shadows, but at some point, they would make a mistake. At some point, they would reveal themselves. And when they did, Ava would be ready.

In the meantime, Ava and Kenzie had some Cranium ass to kick. Because the Westbrooks weren't the only family with a corner on sibling rivalry. Fortunately, the Shepherd-Hendersons had long since designated Game Night—Game Morning?—as their preferred method of mutual destruction. Clearly, Ava had been born into the wrong family.

“You okay?” Kenzie asked softly during a break in the good-natured bickering.

“I'm good,” Ava said, and pressed a kiss to the corner of Kenzie's mouth, tasting the cinnamon-sugar goodness still lingering there. “You?”

“Same.” She smiled into Ava's eyes, her own expression more genuine now, and then her eyes flicked down to Ava's lips. And that was all it took, just a look laced with promise, to get Ava's body thrumming.

If all went well, she thought, Sloane and Mika wouldn't be the only ones going down today. Ava was sooo going to enjoy explaining Kenzie's faux pas to her. Much, much later, of course. Right now, there were games afoot, and Ava fully intended to live in the moment—especially if the moment included securing bragging rights over Sloane Shepherd.