

1

“Rafi?”

The voice whispered through my quarters’ door with a wanting softness, the kind of caress that you usually don’t get when you’re hovering over Earth at 200,000 miles. The skin on the back of my neck tightened. I couldn’t tell whose voice it was, the airy whisper having a neutral tone. It was a sound similar to an air-pressure leak, indistinguishable from any other. I wiped the shaving cream off my face, my thoughts analyzing each option for who and why someone would be trying to pass secrets in the dark before the morning’s crew meeting. Before I could even get to that point, my beardless reflection stopped me.

It always happened after taking a week’s beard off; I couldn’t unsee it. Little Rafi from the Bronx. Seneca Street, right across from Ladder 48. I hated that kid as much as I loved him. Hated him because I couldn’t mend the reality in my mind that the kid from Seneca Street was the Commander of an international space station. Hated the feeling because, no matter how proud it made me at times, it made so little sense to the degree that I might just be loony. None of it’s even real. At least, that’s how I feel sometimes.

I pinch the thin skin on top of my hands until tears involuntarily welled in my eyes. It’s corny, but sometimes I need to know I’m alive and who I think I am.

“Rafael?”

The voice again, and no more whispering. It was Sylvan, my moon goddess. She hated it when I called her that, and I don't blame her. I cracked the door, the gesture feeling silly considering we've already broached every protocol, international law, taboo, et cetera known to the human convention during our time up here.

"Um, good morning?" I said, trying to hide the smile. "Can I help you, *Miss Vitale*?" I snuck a glance around the door. I know she isn't stupid enough to sneak through here while anyone else was around, but I couldn't help but check.

A roguish smile spread across her face, a long arm pushing the door back with me behind it. I fell onto my feet, suddenly a little embarrassed about the mess in my room.

"*Commander Beltran*," She offered something to the effect of a genuflection and a curtsy. It was one of those odd Lunan gestures that the moon colonist had manufactured shortly after their cries for independence — just one more way to be different than the "grounders" on Earth.

"Is something the matter?" I said, "An emergency?"

"Something like that," She threw her hands in the air. If any of the crew had seen her in here, it'd be over. I'd be relieved of command and shuttled off this station faster than you could cycle me out the airlock. I wouldn't only be tried for conduct unbecoming, but also for treason. Intimate relationships with a sovereign citizen of Luna during an official cold war, *while* leading the UN's premier peacekeeping mission?

I'd say I'll pass, but here I am. Doing that very thing. Did I mention I'm very ashamed of myself most of the time?

Sylvan never cared about protocols, etiquette, or even, at times, consequences. She's the product of families whose lineage is buried under impossible amounts of cash and has done away with the stuffiness that wealth brought. The whole aristocracy and prestige shtick had gone right out the window while power flowed in, like an inverse pressure system. Who would have ever thought the combination of apathy, wealth, and, not to mention, distance could cause so much turmoil? Consolidating that lethal concoction on Luna was, in hindsight, not the UN's most brilliant decision.

But money talks. And, when money wants to colonize the moon, then money will.

"So, what's that emergency?" My voice sounded resigned as if I were tired of her. That couldn't be more untrue. I was tired of lying to my crew *about* her.

"Well, Ren and El-

"Wait!" I held a hand up. "PAL, shut down." The 3 x 1.5 x 1.5 block of gleaming metal turned a 180 on its gyro, the face on the screen appeared to be yawning, and winked.

"When was I ever awake?" The perpetually curious voice said around another wink, then a blank screen as the block sank onto its gyro, dropping it a few inches to the ground.

"Okay," I turned back to Sylvan, "You were saying?"

She squinted at me. Her skin was pale, and the stinging white light of the room illuminated a river of blue veins that ran through her neck and receded into her blue eyes. Her red hair was vivid and earthy, no, Lunan. The combination of hair and eyes always reminded me that she was, in fact, an alien.

"You know," Her voice pondered through that devilish smile again, "I forgot."

Then she jumped on me. My internal clock told me I had 15 minutes to live this euphoric fantasy one more time before it became the death of me. Screw it.



I liked to enjoy the last moments of peace before each day started. The *Alexandria* hummed her sweetest tune in the ops cabin where the crew meetings were held. From the view of the cupola, the station's gigantic dome window, Earth hung silently against the black as if god them self were dangling it from a string. Seeing it from such a distance always made me feel less guilty about petty things like kissing people who don't live on *that* speck of land versus *that* whisper of wind. It was a foolish and humanly flawed way of thinking. At least, that's what I keep telling myself.

I heard them before they came in. As always, it was the similar suspects.

"Ave you no shame!" Eleanore's voice ramped towards me. I assumed the French firecracker's latest blitz would be aimed towards

Dmitri for another off-social comment that he would chalk up to ‘Slavic directness’. But, to my surprise, she was yelling at Ren.

Which, Oof, bad idea. He’s scary as hell. *I* don’t even want to mess with that guy, and I’m the Commander. They filed in one by one, each taking their seats and going about the same routines they always had.

First, there was Ren Mori, who picked his spot in the corner with at least two chairs between him and anyone else before he pulled out his notepad and began taking notes in Japanese characters (which, we all agreed, any form of communication at all should be done in English standard). Some battles were better left not fought.

Eleanore ‘El’ Rivière was behind him, her face still hot with accusations or hurt feelings, I couldn’t tell. She just angrily clanked a glass bulb of triple espresso onto the table while she passed glares at everyone else as if she were searching for allies in her most recent tirade.

Next was Dmitri Sokolov, who sauntered around like he was perpetually up to no good. He wore a conniving smirk as casual as a dog wagging its tail. You would never have known that he graduated top of his class at Roscosmos, Russia’s premier space program. The man was a genius, if only I could get him to work half as hard as he was smart. He was funny, at least.

In his all but literal shadow, Ji-Woo Kim sneaked in as if she didn’t want to be seen. It was a shame, because if I ran the marketing department at the World Peace Corporation (that’s not real), she would be my poster girl. Smart as a whip, intuitive as hell, and genuinely enjoyable to be around. And, she was *always* right, but most importantly, knew exactly when it was appropriate to stand your ass down and over ride your decision. If you can’t tell, she’s humbled me a few times before, but only in the sweetest way possible. Ji-Woo’s a planetary treasure, and South Korea is lucky to have her, is all I’m trying to say.

Lastly, while doing my best to be casual, there was Sylvan Vitale. We all know Sylvan, she’s the one from Luna — enough about her.

I waited a few moments for the chatter to settle. By now, everyone knows my timer is about 30-45 seconds on that matter. I admittedly get a little antsy when it goes over that unless it’s a good story, usually from Dmitri.

I coughed and tapped a stack of notes onto the table to straighten

the pile out. "HAMMER, what'd we miss?" I said over my shoulder. HAMMER, or Hybrid Autonomous Management Module & Engineering Resource (please, just call him HAMMER), clanked his bi-jointed 'legs' over to my side. He wasn't as mobile as PAL, his life destined to the confines of the ops cabin called for fewer design features in mobility.

"Commander and crew," the AI started, and El sneered her disapproval of its inhuman likeness, another daily check I've grown accustomed to. "During the period of darkness from 1200-0800 on 21 August of 2135, the Alexandria has ingested 45 terabytes, seven of which have been engineered, three of which have been cataloged."

"Blin!" From the cosmonaut, as usual. "Slow. Slow-slow-slow," He leaned back, his hands in the air. "We're never leaving."

I held a hand up, silencing him. "Go on, HAMMER."

"That is all." The flatness of the AI's voice made everything seem bleak.

I tapped my pen on the table, and everyone heard the metal clanking. It took every ounce of willpower not to look at Sylvan now. "And the war?"

"Still cold."

I felt able to laugh there. HAMMER's bluntness was a reprieve sometimes. I watch Ji-Woo write that down, as if she were tracking the days before humanity's first interplanetary war.

"I know," I said, making eyes with everyone but Sylvan. "Any update on *anything*?"

"The UN and Luna have scheduled energy summits to take place within the L1 neutral zone on--"

"The L1 zone?" I spoke over HAMMER, whose words continued to stammer out. He was bad at stopping himself when he got going. "Why are they coming here-" I stopped myself. "Oh, right. It's neutral."

"Correct."

I inhaled sharply and allowed myself to look at Sylvan, the look on her face taunted me. Mommy and Daddy were coming home, so it was time to hide the dirty laundry under the bed.

"Okay," I leaned forward towards the rest of the crew, dismissing HAMMER by closing him out of the circle. "If the UN council and the

Lunan houses are planning to meet in the L1, that means we're gonna have some heavy hitters snooping around our area of operations."

I watched their faces drop, they knew what that meant — dog and pony shows, the 'look at us and all the good we're doing'.

"But," I stamped a finger on the table. "That doesn't change our mission." Their shoulders lifted a little, all but Ren's, which had never really changed. "I don't know about you all, but I don't plan on volunteering for any extracurriculars to make some bigwigs happy. If that's something you're interested in, I know a few supply shuttles that make regular round trips back home. Feel free to hop on one of them.

"That being said, you heard HAMMER's report. This data is coming in slowly. *Too* slow. I haven't heard about any replacement crew yet, so until we do, we're it. Before, this was about climate. Expanding our resource footprint and storing the entirety of the world's knowledge in a location where the infrastructure and energy demands couldn't poke a hole in the ozone. But now, it means a little more. It means possibly preventing a war. I know none of you signed up to be peacekeepers, but we all work for the man in one way or another. Mission's the same, stakes are just a little higher."

I took a breath. Damn, I just talked a lot. I hate when I do that, I hope my words mean something to them. I nodded a few times as I moved my eyes between theirs. "So," I drew out. "Questions?"

El didn't hesitate, one hand slapping the metal table while the other flung into the air. "Can we address the el-uh-fant in zeh room? And no, *not* Sylvan." She turned severely to her right. "Ren."

Ren didn't move. I give the man credit, he was Marcus Aurelius' wet dream, a pure stoic. He didn't answer the what seemed to be an accusation, either.

I heaved a breath. "What about Ren, *our crewmate*, Eleanore?"

"What will Ren do when the UN and Luna go to war?" She barked, and the room erupted between just three of them: El, Dmitri, and Sylvan. But not Ren.

A few insults that cut no deeper than skin, but that was always the worst of it. I swear, Dmitri hopped in the mix just because he liked to argue.

"Hey!" I slammed the table. "We are an international crew. Up here, we owe our allegiance to each other more than to our warring

nations." I stared into El's eyes severely, I wanted her to know I was genuinely upset. "Up here, Japan's allies matter not. The UN's allies matter not. Luna's allies, and lack thereof, matter not. What matters is doing our job, and going the hell home." I fell back into my seat. I didn't even know I was standing. "Then, when you're home, do whatever the hell you want."

I exhaled and looked at Ren. He had his customary half scowl and cold eyes. I could have sworn he nodded, maybe even smiled a thank you. It was probably nothing, but that was just Ren.

"Class dismissed, go do your god damn jobs."

They shuffled out one at a time, Ren right behind El, without a single sign that he had just been insulted, accused, right in front of his crew. El could be a real snob sometimes. I'm thankful Ren was the way he was, even if it meant he was a terrifying human being.

"Woof," Sylvan's voice came to my side, "You good?"

I shook my head and blinked. "I'm not the one you need to be asking." I walked away from her, I didn't mean to be such an ass, but I was pissed. I had to hold this crew together for an indefinite period, not to mention the stakes of working to prevent a war were suddenly piled on our shoulders. God damn politicians and their idiocy. If engineers ran the world, maybe... never mind. That'd suck too.

I barely remember the walk back to my quarters, but when I stepped inside the room, PAL was lit up like Christmas.

"Thought I shut you down?" I tapped his metal block head when I realized he wasn't wearing a face—just the words 'URGENT' scrolled across the screen.

"Play message."

It was Virgil. My best friend back in Houston and was about the only person who made me feel like I wasn't so far from home. It was pure luck that he worked at Mission Control and had untethered communications access to my PAL. Personal Advisory Link, by the way. This robot's not my pal, no matter how much he tries to be.

Virgil's face was... panicked. It was odd, I've never seen him panic. The mission control team prided itself on how cool, calm, and collected it was at all times. They knew the astronauts were the ones going through hell, so they had to be the sturdy anchor when the seas get rough. Virgil panicked wasn't good. Ever.

"Rafi," He pressed his square glasses up on the bridge of his nose.

He was the great-grandson of a Tuskegee airman, aviation and exploration ran deep in his blood. If it weren't for a medical condition keeping him out of the cockpit, it'd be him commanding this crew and not me.

"Rafi..." He said my name twice. My chest tightened. "I've activated a veil around the *Alexandria*. The only comms that can get in or out are the United States'."

What the hell is Virgil saying right now?

"Luna's launched a third of their nuclear arsenal at our soft spots. It's happening, Rafael. The wars gone hot."

I fell back, everything on my desk clattering around my shoulders. My breath quickened as I stared into Virgil's eyes, my vision tunneling into a black dot.

Don't say it. Please, Virgil, do not say...

"We're activating you for Operation SNOW."

He said it.