

# ONE

# MARE

I was plunged into Hell.

The lid to my stasis bed shattered into a thousand shards. Each small piece of aluminosilicate glass showered my near-virgin skin and grated against it as if angry wasps swarmed me. I felt the blood trickle from my ears and down my neck before my eyes were able to separate light and form simple shadows. My wrists and ankles were still bound with clasps designed to limit movement while in stasis, their metal bonds swelled against my weak joints. I writhed in compulsive agony, pleading with my hands to break free and move the glass from my eyes.

Screaming hurt, I discovered. My throat clenched under the foreign sensation, sending me gasping for air as my head sought upright gravity in the most animal way. I summoned deep, focused breaths. One by one, I loosened my body to the best of its ability despite resting atop a bed of piercing sand.

Sight. Sight first. I can't help myself if I can't see. The ship's cries were dreadful, and I wished I were deaf and not blind in this moment. I shuddered and focused on calibrating my vision. The pungent sulfuric smell of exploded RDX nauseated me, making it more difficult to see straight. The whole awakening was an onslaught upon my senses. Overload would kick in-

Wait.

RDX.

The explosive compound in the shaped-charges lining the lids of the stasis chamber was RDX. Those shaped charges were designed for an emergency so dire that we would need to get *blown* out of stasis. The lid must have been jammed, either an electrical short or a mechanical failure. If it weren't for this explosive wake-up, I would have been stuck in stasis forever...

My breath quickened in panic. I whimpered like the little girl I used to be, the noise so childlike and pathetic — my confidence, pride, all gone. I wasn't the perfect vision of a Martian MARE that everyone would expect during such dire straits. The vision of a bronzed woman, her eyes and hair and skin all galvanized with the hard foundry of Mother Mars. Bred from the union of two humans, not a machine nor a vat. Nature's true space walker, selected and hardened for the terrors of the deep system.

I was none of that right now. What made me a MARE was replaced with the violent flames of fear that wracked my chest.

I flexed my wrists — still clasped. I think someone overlooked part two of this emergency procedure.

"Percy!" My tongue fell lazily into my throat, and I gasped more while trying to focus my hearing over the conquering of the klaxon. I've no idea how long I've been in stasis, my lack of strength reporting long enough to forget how to use my tongue to speak. It was an effort to get it seated in the curve of my teeth. I bit into it, holding it up and stopping it from suffocating me.

Strength. I need strength now. I gritted my teeth and snarled, I even felt a molar chip. The clasps were designed with a specific resistance to prevent accidental breaking free. Strength. God, I wish I had some of that. How weak was I right now? Weaker than any dream-like fidget the clasps were designed to withstand.

My ears stopped bleeding while the ship's wails did their best to make them, the blood crusted over and chipped with every wrangling motion. I used my core and pressed the rest of my body against the broken glass, its painful effect lessening the more pressure I applied. I pushed, screamed, choked, squinted, all until one hand broke free. The second clasp was easier after that. My breath was ragged and oxygen starved, my muscles weren't prepared for this kind of exertion so soon after exit-stasis.

I fell from my bed with the grace of a drunk elephant. I expected

that, so I went feet first and crashed down on my knees and was met with shards of what was once the lid to my bed. My bare breasts at the bottom of my vision reminded me of how vulnerable and naked I was. It was such a silly thing to be concerned about in such an extreme moment. Nonetheless, I covered myself up with a hand that I couldn't afford to lend right now.

Shame, modesty, MARE. It wasn't all lost, it seems.

The glass lodged into my legs didn't hurt, the blood was just a lubricant that helped me move these starving muscles smoothly across the floor. My eyes focused on each knee as it stretched forward, its framed simplicity lending a reprieve to my newborn vision from the invasive lights the ceiling offered.

The klaxon still cried, its pitch and timbre molesting my eardrums in the worst of ways. How do I get the bloody thing to turn off? How am I supposed to handle this level of an emergency if I can barely walk? And where the hell is Percy? Never mind Percy. The crew, I need the crew. They must be stuck in their beds battling the same horrific nightmare I just emerged from.

They always said that a nightmare in stasis was a one-way ticket to waking up with untreatable schizophrenia or psychosis. What they never cared to mention was that waking up from stasis and plunging into a nightmare could be just as bad.

I crawled to the other four beds. The glass lids were in excellent condition, with the clamshell door resting in the open position. Okay, they must be handling this now. Why else would they have had a controlled exit-stasis? So... why the rude awakening?

I reasoned with myself that this was handled until I was convinced enough, then I fell onto my back. Small bits of glass lodged in my back and burrowed deeper on impact. It was such a strange feeling of serendipity to have in such a chaotic torment.

The crew was out of their beds, and they were handling it. So, I can rest. I can...

I woke up to hell again, only this time it wasn't such a surprise.

The klaxon still tore at my ears. My eyes adjusted better this time around, and I'm able to make out small details of the stasis bay that were once shielded behind blinding light. I lunged to my side

while crusted blood tugged on my skin, its sting forcing awareness into me in small iotas.

I braced my arms against the wall and used Newton's third law to heave myself to my feet, then traced my forearms across the cold metal as I made my way to crew-ops. Each step was like siphoning from the fountain of youth, morsels of strength growing in my legs as I willed my body forward.

It wasn't long before I couldn't use the walls as leverage anymore. Not my choice, for the record. Scorch marks lanced across them, their dark scars still radiating an unbearable heat that singed my palms on contact. It must have been a fire. That makes sense as to why I was blown out of stasis — something the onboard systems and Percy couldn't handle.

I stumbled forward. Without something to lean against, I tripped over clumsy feet as I fell to the ground. I hope that fires out, because I don't think I'd be worth a damn given the condition I'm in. I could help with a damage assessment, maybe. Advise on critical systems. Oxygen and CO2 imbalances, the power bus and solar arrays, whatever the hell else is in those emergency manuals. Thank god for checklists. MAREs are smart, but not robots. Sometimes I need to remind myself that it's a good thing.

The screens in the walkways flickered in and out. I waited at one and squinted for a good view. The constant surveillance of the *Narwhal* steadied on the main screen for a moment. The *Narwhal* was a giant, garage-shaped drone that was underway with a navigation link that followed my ship. We were her escort, and it's filled to the brim with a litany of autonomous terraforming drones. Giant is an understatement, given that it contains enough heavy equipment to excavate the entire Sahara Desert three times over. It sported a few new scars on her hull, just like the ones inside the ship that seared my hand. Still, it looked structurally intact. That made me feel only a little better. If the *Narwhal* doesn't make it, then this whole mission is pointless.

Counterpoint — It's also pointless if *I* don't make it. But that's sacrilege for a MARE, so that stays in my heart, not my mouth.

"Peyton!" I heard him before I saw him. "Oh good good good good good goo—"

"Percy," I coughed and spat up some blue shit on the floor. It

always happened after stasis. Whatever they pumped in you was blue. "Run it down. SITREP."

His matte black body stiffened. The dull yellow LED lights that gave him eyes lowered sadly. He rolled to her with a skinny arm extended outward, its V-grip hand opened in the way that he offered emotions his words couldn't.

I slapped it away. He could be a drama-bot sometimes, and the ship was on fire. I don't need a drama-bot, I need firefighters. "The crew, Percy. Where's the crew?"

He spun in a 360, it's what he did when he was perplexed. I was told AIs never get perplexed. Sometimes, I think they gave me a golden retriever instead. Meanwhile, a lovely family's pseudo-hound is explaining to them the importance of fuel consumption through varying thrust vectors.

"Well, Peyton," He said. "That's the problem. Where *is* the crew?" He darted to one of the few observation windows on the ship, the one that gave you a direct line of sight on the escape shuttles. He waved his arm in a wide circle that said follow me. My stomach writhed as I did. He asked a question, but is bringing me to the answer. I hated the suspense he lived for. I'm an engineer, not a poet, just tell me the problem without the theatrics. Fear held my throat tightly. The inky darkness consumed my view where escape shuttles were supposed to be. There was nothing...

Wait. There was one. I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't hallucinating in desperation.

There was one, though. One of three, but it clung haphazardly on only a single one of its tethers. Its precarious position was minutia at that point, because it didn't matter if I had an escape shuttle. Where would I go? What matters is that shuttles were launched, and my crew was missing.

"Percy..."

"Peyton?"

"When did you wake up from watch?" Watch was him running on-board systems while in idle. Like being in stasis but actually useful.

His eyes rolled inside of his head several times over, like watching the lottery being drawn on channel 3. "Shortly after your bed conducted its avalanche procedures." He said.

*Fitting name.*

I stared at the lonely shuttle in distress. The acrid scent of explosives, fire, and blood still caked my

nostrils. The *Narwhals'* readouts in crew-ops were all stable, mostly unaware of any beating it took. My mind instinctively scrambled into causal analysis. I, of course, thought of an asteroid barrage, a rogue cluster Percy hadn't accounted for. But that doesn't explain the scorch marks in the hall. I collapsed into a seat. It was Falk's, I could tell immediately with how my body swam in the indent of its cushion from her wide berth.

I scrubbed my face, the bristle of straggling glass shards coursing the already ravaged skin. "How screwed are we, Percy?"

His body shimmied. I thought of a golden retriever shaking water from its fur. "Very."