

# GREMLIN

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**Carrie Vaughn's latest novels include the post-apocalyptic murder mystery, *Bannerless*, winner of the Philip K. Dick Award, and its sequel, *The Wild Dead*. She is the author of the New York Times bestselling series of novels about a werewolf named Kitty, and several other contemporary fantasy and young adult novels. Carrie has also written about eighty short stories, two of which have been finalists for the Hugo Award. She is a contributor to the Wild Cards series of shared world superhero books edited by George R.R. Martin. Visit her at [www.carrievaughn.com](http://www.carrievaughn.com). Carrie's latest tale soars into the sky and beyond in a quest to understand a . . .**

## GREMLIN

### Part 1

Natalia Voronova slammed against the side of the Yak-3's cockpit, her head and leather cap hitting the canopy. Her ears rang, her vision splotted, but she shook off the pain, blinking through her goggles.

The world outside lurched.

"*Nyet!*" she yelled and hauled back on the stick. She wasn't quite in a spin yet; if that happened she'd soon be nothing more than a streak of debris on the ground below. Another Stalingrad casualty.

"Voronova, you hit?" a voice scratched in her radio headset.

Her wingman, Elena Kirova. Natalia was too busy to answer coherently and growled instead. The Yak fought her, drag pulling down even as she worked to get the nose up. And then, she was level, soaring, the engine a healthy rumble instead of a screech. Vibrations traveled under her seat, up through her hands, and she searched for the least hiccup. But the Yak was hers again. She opened the throttle, roared ahead, and looped back to the fight.

"Natalia!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she called back to Elena. "Got hit with some debris. Coming around for another run."

Patrols had spotted the formation of German bombers, and the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment scrambled to intercept. The bombers had a thick escort of Messerschmitts, like a swarm of wasps. The cold, clean air filled with the noise of engines, the buzz of insects writ large.

All was turmoil. The dozen other fighters from her squadron, the dozen German

fighters working to draw them away from the bombers. She could dismiss the bombers; that task belonged to another wing. Her job was to occupy the fighters.

Fear was ice in her arms and legs. Fear told her not to move, that if she hid, maybe she would be safe. But it was far too late for that, thousands of feet in the air, closing on the enemy. Ignoring her racing heart, she relied on her training, the memory embedded in her body, and the overwhelming desire to kill German planes.

Natalia scanned for Elena, who had broken from the fight to look after her and now raced along off to her side. The fighters banked and juked to keep out of each other's sights. She followed the arcs and rolls, trying to predict where each plane might end up next. Shoot not where they were but where they'd be a heartbeat later. And if she were very lucky, one would pass right over her crosshairs, and she'd have the instincts to press the trigger in that same moment, before her mind knew what she was seeing.

This moment happened, a Messer swooping down, right in front of her, lingering for her benefit and offering itself as sacrifice. She fired, the gun bratted out a line of bullets—and she missed. Burning trails flung off into the air, and the German fighter soared on, unscathed. Natalia swore and thumped the side of the cockpit. She *had* it—

Then the aircraft fell to pieces anyway. Scraps of metal curled and scattered, popped rivets tumbled like confetti. The engine exploded, trailing black smoke, and the Messer turned into a cloud of debris and smoke, containing a glimpse of a tumbling body that may or may not have been flailing, slapping itself in search of a parachute release it couldn't find.

She was so close she flew through the debris. Scraps of it thudded against her canopy—she ducked reflexively. Her propeller stuttered, cutting through something that fell into it. She opened the throttle, and the engine roared back, stayed strong.

In two seconds of smooth flying, she made a visual check. All her instruments—altitude, pitch and yaw, engine RPMs—all steady. Canopy wasn't cracked, remained secure. No apparent bullet holes in the fuselage. Wings still in one piece. Except—looking on the right, something was caught on that wing's leading edge. A scrap of fabric? A round mass, dark gray, incongruous. Surely nothing like a body; she was sure the pilot had tumbled away to whatever fate held for it. She glanced back at the wing, and again expected the wind to take hold and whip the object away. But it stayed. And . . . did it move? Buffeted by the wind, it clung.

And then it slipped over the edge, under the wing, out of sight.

She was seeing things. Or going crazy. She supposed it was inevitable, through all this war, this fighting.

Elena laughed over her radio. "Natalia, you got him!"

"But I didn't," she murmured, baffled, looking out at the wing again, waiting for what she had seen to reemerge.

While she had been preoccupied with the disintegrating Messerschmitt and what had fallen away from it and onto her, the air around her had cleared. The forest ahead was blooming with explosions and smoke—the bombers had dropped their payloads early and fled for home, the remaining fighter escort offering cover. A voice on her radio was telling her to break off, they were done, their mission had been successful.

Elena repeated, "Natalia! You scored! Your first kill!"

She was sure she hadn't hit it. She'd been chasing the fighter, yes, lining up for another go. Then it had just . . . fallen apart. How could she explain what she'd seen? No one would believe her version, because what she saw was unbelievable.

"Let's go home," Elena radioed happily.

Whatever had happened—Natalia left it behind. One of those things. Optical illusion born of the sun, smoke, and chaos.

Her Yak, a sleek, bullet-shaped fighter, rolled to a stop at its spot on the flight line, the propeller winding down to stillness. Her mechanic, Lina, ran up to plant chocks under the wheels. Natalia didn't wait for help, but yanked open the canopy herself and slid down to the right wing to look. To prove that nothing was there, that she'd imagined the whole thing.

"Natalia!" Lina called. She was a short, sturdy woman in grease-stained gray coveralls, her gloved hands propped on her hips.

Natalia held up her hand, keeping Lina at bay. Reaching, she ran her hands over the wing's edge, studied the skin, touched every rivet. Nothing, just as she thought. She sighed.

"Something wrong?" Lina asked, approaching cautiously. Natalia must have had a crazed look in her eye, lingering alarm from the strange flight. By now, the other pilots in the squad had landed and were running over, cheering. Celebrating a victory Natalia didn't feel.

"What's the matter with her?" Elena, flight cap off and brown hair coming out of its braid, asked Lina.

"Don't know, she's spooked."

"She scored her first kill. Maybe it's got her rattled?" Her wingman called, "Natalia? Don't think about it like you killed someone. Think of it as protecting your friends. You saved us!"

In her mind's eye Natalia saw the body again, the German pilot tumbling, his parachute out of reach. She almost argued again that she didn't kill anyone, it had been a mistake. But she suspected she'd already lost that battle. She hoped they didn't try to give her a medal for it.

"Give me a minute. I just want to make sure the debris didn't hurt the plane." Her comrades stayed back, waiting for her to perform this small ritual. They all understood—your plane was your life. They all developed rituals.

Wings were fine, wheel wells were fine, propeller was fine. But tucked inside the engine cowling, Natalia found what she didn't want to find. An anomaly. A thing that didn't fit, that might have slipped from air to wing and then to engine. A hint of a surface that wasn't metal. Smooth, it seemed oily, iridescent. It had the soft give of flesh. And it was shivering. Natalia flinched away.

"Natalia?" Elena asked softly.

She must have frozen in shock. She didn't know what to do. If she said anything, she'd sound hysterical. Part of her believed this must have been a hallucination. She'd breathed in too many petrol fumes. She shook her head and managed to speak calmly. "You all go on ahead. I just need a minute more. I'll meet you at command."

"Don't be too long." Elena glanced back with worry as they walked off down the flight line.

This couldn't be real. Natalia wanted to have her breakdown in private, to spare Elena the burden of trying to put her back together. Trembling, she took off her gloves and touched what must have been skin—supple, warm, like leather. The thing uncurled from its hiding place. A pair of boneless limbs gripped the edge of the metal, and a flattish head with two silver eyes, round and unblinking, looked down at her. She yelped and flinched again. Apparently this was real. Some Nazi trick or secret weapon tumbled out of the sky to curse her.

They stared at one another. The creature coughed and shivered harder. It folded in on itself, as if it thought it might still go unnoticed, and Natalia saw the cuts and abrasions across its back. The shining skin split open, exposing gray flesh. The kind of wounds that tumbling, shredding metal might make. The impossibility of it fell away before the obvious fact that it was hurt and scared.

Doing good was so difficult in this terrible war. Often, she and the others felt less like they were fighting for victory than they were simply fighting for a few more days of life for themselves and their country. If they could hold on a few more days . . . Like clinging to an engine cowling while injured. Who knew what might happen, if only you survived? Later she would wonder why she took the creature in, but suspected it came down to the chance to perform one small act of kindness.

"Shh, it's okay. Let's see what we can do for you."

She opened the zipper of her jacket, making a much nicer pocket for the creature than cold metal. The thing took more coaxing, but it uncurled, revealed itself to be no bigger than a melon but powerful, sinewy, all muscle, with four limbs ending in strong, curling appendages meant for gripping. It slipped inside her jacket and rolled into a still ball.

Now what was she supposed to do?

She zipped up the jacket, steadied her expression, and walked to join the others, who had gathered at the command dugout. Elena gasped when she noticed Natalia. At first Natalia thought she'd done a terrible job of hiding the injured creature—they could all see it bulging out of her jacket and were horrified.

She couldn't show them. How would she explain? *This* brought down the German fighter, not me. Natalia didn't have time to worry; Elena was on her, fussing.

"Nat, you're white as snow," Elena said. "I didn't realize how rough that flight was—you need a drink. Come on, we need to toast you and get your kill recorded."

She must have been in shock, maybe a little bit frozen, but she hardly noticed the chill from the flight. She didn't have to think right now, because the women surrounded her and pressed her forward. Their hands on her arms and shoulders were meant to be comforting, and the touches brought her back.

The creature had pressed itself closer to her body, clinging to her flight suit, and was invisible under the jacket. Just another fold of leather.

Elena Kirova rattled down the stairs and announced that Natalia had scored her first kill, and Captain Markov, a stern man with a pockmarked face and kind eyes glared seriously and asked for the whole story, and everyone talked at once while Lina produced a bottle of vodka, far more than her daily ration should have allowed, but the captain didn't say anything because if he discharged her for having too much vodka, he would have had to discharge them all, and the squadron was already short of pilots.

"But I didn't," Natalia finally said when Markov looked at her for her side of the story. "It wasn't in my sights at all when I fired. The plane just fell apart."

In the pause, she could hear disappointment settle, making the air heavy.

Then Elena put a hand on her hip. "Well, I saw an explosion. Something hit that plane, and I'm sure it was your bullets."

"There was so much smoke you probably didn't see it clearly," said one of the other pilots, and the other girls nodded and made affirming noises.

"Besides, those Messers are such garbage it doesn't take much to make them fall apart. You probably didn't have to hit it *much*."

It wasn't true, Messerschmitts were tough, but everyone laughed, because this was war and this was how they talked. Lina put a cup of vodka in her hand, and Natalia gratefully drank a large swallow of it, and relaxed into the shock of heat flowing from her gut.

The creature shifted, and she smoothed down her jacket, willing it to settle. It did.

Markov played at being stern, but a smile crinkled a corner of his lip. "How about we record it as an assist? You were there, you fired at it, you witnessed it."

"I won't argue with you, Captain."

Everyone cheered.

“Did you see what happened to the pilot? Did he land, can we get a prisoner?” Markov asked.

“I never saw a parachute,” she said.  
They cheered again.

\* \* \*

On the airfield at twilight, Natalia could pretend they weren't in the middle of a war. A lone engine rumbled, a mechanic making tests. A cluster of people stood at the edge of the tarmac, passing a canteen and trading stories. Laughing, now and then. A few others walked to the dugout that housed the kitchen. They'd survived another day, and now the setting sun cast familiar shadows. A chill in the air hinted at autumn, and one could imagine walking home to a warm fire, tea, and family, all the way it should be. She closed her eyes for a just a minute, and imagined.

At the kitchen dugout, Elena put a hand on Natalia's shoulder, looking into her eyes like she could see into her mind and what was stewing there. “You're sure you're all right?”

“I'm a little shaken,” Natalia admitted, because yes, something was wrong, everyone could see it. She needed to deflect their attention. “But I'll be fine. A good dinner and some rest will have me right again.”

“A good dinner, here?” She snorted. No one this close to Stalingrad had eaten well in months.

Inside the kitchen was crowded, folk arriving early to make sure they got food that wasn't scraped up off the bottom of the pot. Watery soup and coarse bread, same as always. At least it was hot. The warmth helped ease some of her nerves.

Grinning, Elena called to the cooks, “I hear there's rat in the stew, is it true? That you catch rats from the barracks and put them in the stew?”

One of them called back, “One of these days we'll say yes, and then what will you do?”

Natalia kept waiting for the thing curled up inside her jacket to move, make a noise. Break free and charge across the room, horrifying everyone. How would she explain it? While it shifted now and then, curling a limb or adjusting its head, it stayed hidden. She didn't know what she was worried about. Instead of hiding it she ought to tell someone, make it someone else's problem. Or just leave it somewhere. A wooded copse lay a hundred meters away; it would probably be happier there.

“I'm going to take a walk,” she told Elena and the others. “Clear my head. I'm fine, really I am.” Worried expressions answered her, but they let her go.

Tugging a stocking cap over her short-cropped, dusky brown hair, zipping up her flight jacket, she smuggled out her cup with a last bit of soup in it. Just a little, no one would notice. Walking too quickly, glancing over her shoulder in too suspicious a manner, she found a spot behind a storage bunker and unzipped her jacket. Maybe the thing had died, and she wouldn't have to worry about it. But no, exposed to the air it uncurled, stared at her, and smacked its wide, frog-like mouth. It was like some undersea creature, a stout salamander. How had it ended up in her engine cowl?

“Hungry?” she asked it. “Come on, you must be hungry,” Natalia murmured, pressing the cup to the thing's thin, rubbery lips, tipping it to draw the liquid close. She couldn't see anything like a nose on it, but surely it could sense the food.

Soup touched its skin; it flinched back, gave a violent shake, almost throwing the cup from her hand. She tried again, murmuring to it as she would to a kitten, and it hissed at her.

Maybe she'd offend it into running away.

For a moment it stood on her lap, on the very tips of its limbs, and seemed poised to do so. But when it looked around, opening its mouth, revealing not teeth but bony, shining plates within, its gaze settled back on her jacket, on the side pocket. Grabbing the edge, it pulled itself toward it. She was too startled to stop it. It plunged its

head inside and rooted around.

"Hey! What are you doing?" She tried to pry it off her, but those limbs were powerful, and once they curled around a thing they didn't let go. She put both hands around the creature's body and pulled—the pocket ripped. Metal crunched, and Natalia cried out. Her father's pocket watch, which he'd given her for luck, which she'd kept close this whole damn war, and the thing had it in its mouth.

Finally it looked up at her, its jaws working slowly, metal shavings and bits of springs falling out of the corners of its mouth. It seemed so contented, the silver eyes gone dark and dreamy. The watch might have been fine caviar, the way it savored the pieces, turning it over. She could hear scraping, crunching. Those terrible plates, able to chew metal.

"How could you?" she murmured, tears falling. She scrubbed them away with her sleeve, furious at herself. All this time, this whole war, she hadn't cried, not once. She wouldn't cry, no matter how long the war went on, no matter how hard things got.

"I was only trying to help you, why would you do this?" she hissed, and it stared back, uncomprehending.

She meant to throw it. Peel it off herself and throw it into the woods as hard as she could. She twisted its limbs, intending to rip it off her however she could, then stomp it into the ground. It made a plaintive squeak and gripped harder, hugging bunched-up fabric in what might have been desperation. Pure muscle, it clung to her with its whole body, until her legs gave way and she sat on the ground, her lungs wrung out, her whole self exhausted.

The creature whined softly and burrowed into her pocket. It chewed twice more, the last bit of her father's watch crunching and disappearing.

She studied it, this parasite. The next step was to take off her jacket and leave it behind. There was a solution to this. She saw, then, that the cuts and abrasions on its back had healed. The oily skin was smooth, uninjured.

"What are you?" she said.

The creature curled up against her. The silvery tint in its eyes seemed to dim. Maybe it slept. It weighed so little, she hardly noticed it was there. It had come from thin air for her to find. Maybe she never should have looked. But it was here now.

Natalia didn't take off her jacket, didn't leave the creature behind. She knew why the Messerschmitt had disintegrated, and she couldn't let the thing loose near the airfield and the dozens of planes parked there.

She didn't know what she was going to do.

\* \* \*

That night, Natalia lay on her bunk and stared at the dark ceiling, listening to the snores around her. She'd folded up her jacket with the creature still inside and put it under her pillow. If it tried to escape and get into anything, she'd know it. She couldn't sleep, waiting for it to do something.

A scuffle sounded at the next bed: Elena, throwing back her blanket, scurrying over, and pulling back Natalia's blanket to crawl into bed with her. No good arguing with her about it. Natalia pulled up the blanket over them both, arranged their wool-clad legs and feet so they could both fit, and settled in as Elena snuggled close.

"You aren't sleeping. I can tell," Elena declared in a whisper. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just . . . distracted."

She sounded bemused. "Did shooting down that Nazi really bother you that much?"

Again that image seared on her memory, the German pilot flailing, plummeting. "That's just it, I didn't shoot him down. He just . . . fell!"

"Then what's bothering you?"

*I have a demon living in my pocket . . .* "It's nothing. Really. I'll be fine."

"Quiet!" someone in the barracks hissed at them. The pair ducked further under

the blanket.

"It's the war," Elena whispered. "We have to keep our spirits up. We have to keep each other's spirits up if we're going to get through it."

"Yes. I know. Thank you for looking after me." Natalia hugged her friend back.

"So do me a favor, yeah? Take a deep breath and get some sleep."

"All right. I promise."

"Good." Elena kissed her cheek and rolled off the cot, tucking Natalia in before hurrying back to her own bed.

Natalia took a deep breath, rolled over and closed her eyes. And slept.

\* \* \*

On the other side of the airfield was a repair bay and machine shop, and behind this, a scrap pile. Nothing was ever really thrown out, but parts, chunks of broken metal, oil-covered gears, drive shafts and bolts and rivets, sections of plywood and misplaced canopies and propellers, were piled here, waiting to be used. With enough determination someone could probably build a whole plane out of the cast offs.

The creature could eat any of it.

At first, Natalia slipped a few bolts and screws inside her jacket. The creature grabbed them and shoved them into its mouth. Its chewing sounded like tearing steel, and she'd hide lest anyone hear it and wonder what was crashing.

Within a few days, they found a routine. Natalia casually strolled by the scrap pile when no one was watching, unzipped her jacket, and the creature leapt out, plunged into crevices of broken metal, chose its own bit of wreckage—usually something with grease on it—and returned to its hiding place, so fast it was almost invisible. She remembered not being sure she had seen it, when it landed on her plane.

Eventually it even learned to eat quietly.

She tried to leave it behind. She explained to it that it could live in the women pilots' bunker, sleep in a box under her cot, hiding there easily enough. But it refused to leave her. Her jacket became its home. When she folded it up on top of her trunk, it would stay tucked up inside, sleeping.

The creature came flying with her.

That first flight, she was nervous. It was a standard patrol, nothing to worry about. But this thing ate machines, and she didn't want it trying to eat hers while they were a couple of thousand feet up.

At the first sound of the engine stuttering to life, the creature emerged. Poked its head from her pocket, turned its silver eyes to the sky. It puffed up, seeming to draw energy from the sunlight. It pressed a limb to the side of the cockpit, letting vibrations pass through it. Its mouth cracked open in some kind of expression—but who knew what it was feeling?

When she pulled back on the stick, lifting off, and the plane climbed, it scrambled free of her jacket and pressed its face to the canopy. Like a kid against a train window, watching the land pass by.

"You like to fly, eh?" she asked it.

It stayed like that for an hour, until the patrol ended and she turned back for home. As soon as the tires bumped on the runway, it returned to her pocket, curled up and small, unnoticeable.

That was their routine. It flew with her because it loved it, and she couldn't say no. She understood, the allure of the fierce sun and clear sky above the clouds.

Then came the next battle.

\* \* \*

"You might want to stay there," Natalia said to her pocket. Her cap and goggles made the cockpit feel hot and close; if she tried to spread her elbows she'd bump them on the sides. She was contained. "This might get rough."

The squadron, Elena on her wing, raced toward the battle already in progress. This German bomber squadron had caught a patrol off guard, the escort fighters were hunting them down. The patrol radioed for backup, and here they were. Battling Germans was like trying to keep rats out of a barn—there were always more, they just kept coming.

Straight ahead, fighters swarmed. Bursts of fire and smoke decorated the scene, which seemed oddly silent and peaceful from this far away. One plane spiraled downward, trailing black smoke—a casualty. A Yak, from the profile. Natalia wondered if she knew the pilot. She couldn't think of that now.

The creature crawled out of her pocket as usual, planting its gripping limbs on the canopy, eagerly reaching for sunlight.

"This is going to get loud," she said, but the creature didn't pay any attention.

"Here they come!" Elena's voice cracked in her radio. The sharp rattle of machine gun fire followed, and Natalia pointed the Yak into a dive, getting out of the way even as she looked up for the enemy. A couple of Messers raced overhead, and Natalia hauled over the stick, banking and coming around to give chase.

The creature panicked. At least, that was what it looked like, and all over again Natalia cursed it. She couldn't be distracted, not now. Yet here it was, pounding on the canopy as if it wanted to get out.

"Hey, stop it!"

It reached up, stretching so that it seemed to double in length, gripped the canopy, and lurched to open it. Wind battered Natalia's face; she ducked away, squinting through her goggles.

"What are you doing?" she yelled against the blast of air.

The creature seemed to grin. Then it jumped.

She cried out and tried to track its path, which she assumed would have it plummeting to the ground. Well, she'd wanted it to go away, hadn't she? It had found her in the air; maybe it lived up here, somehow. She shoved the canopy back closed and flew. One of the Messers had come around, racing up her left flank. She climbed and rolled away, but it followed her. The staccato of gunfire would burst out any moment.

And then the plane fell apart. Orange flames licked out from under the engine cowling, and the propeller exploded, flying apart and showering the canopy with debris. With a horrendous coughing, the fighter dropped from the sky.

Craning her neck, she looked around. None of her squadron seemed close enough to have shot it; she didn't remember hearing gunfire. She certainly wasn't in line of sight—she was sure she wasn't the one who'd fired, even more than last time. She eased her Yak into an arc around the battle, trying to make sense—

And jumped in her seat when a *thunk* pounded into her wing. The creature sat there, grinning up at her, its limbs gripping hard. It was chewing, and bits of metal trickled out of its mouth, carried away by the wind.

Their squadron leader came on the radio. "Who shot that one? Did anyone see who got it?"

"I wasn't in line of sight."

"No, I didn't see."

Natalia said, "Maybe . . . maybe the engine just gave out. Malfunction."

"Huh. Maybe."

"Drat, I'd rather one of us get credit for it."

Perched on the wing of her Yak, Natalia's creature seemed to be savoring its meal. The fight was still going on. She remembered to look around, monitor her own squadron as well as the enemy fighters they engaged. Despite the battle, the air seemed still. Otherworldly. She could hang here forever, and all would be well.

"Natalia! Two o'clock!"

The radio blared, she juked her plane left, marked the roar of other engines. When she looked at the wing again, the creature was gone. But she knew, just knew, that it would return. No sense in wondering how.

It seemed both forever and no time at all had passed when the squad leader radioed for them to fall back. Natalia wasn't sure what had happened, how the battle had fared, if the German bombers had reached their target or been repelled. For now, she cracked her canopy open and waited.

A flash of movement, light glinting off oily skin, and the creature hauled itself up the canopy seam and slipped inside. Natalia imagined it had grown, or at least rounded out, full with a huge meal. It rested on the instrument panel, its limbs drooping, looking nearly drunk. She almost laughed.

"It isn't just machines you like," she said. "It's destruction. This war must be heaven for you."

It smacked its plated teeth a couple of times, then crawled back in her pocket.

\* \* \*

Natalia developed a reputation: nothing touched her. German fighters seemed to disintegrate around her. Natalia had the best luck, a guardian angel looking after her. Or something like it. Which was why, when Elena Kirova was killed, Natalia blamed herself.

"What happened?" Natalia asked blankly when Lina, her face puffy from crying, came to the barracks to bring her the news.

"Coming back from patrol this morning, that fog bank rolled in, remember? Collision. Another plane was trying to land and didn't see her. Other pilot got out fine, but Elena—" She shook her head.

Natalia sat on her bunk a long time. It didn't make sense. She should have been there; if she'd been there, she could have helped Elena, protected her. Natalia hadn't even flown that day, but if she'd been looking after her wingman like she was supposed to, Elena would have lived, she was sure of it. If she had confided in Elena about her creature, the strange demon living in her pocket—maybe Elena would have lived. Mealtimes became somber without Elena's jokes, but no one could bring themselves to pick up her banter. So they trudged on, day after day.

But after Elena's death, everyone wanted to be Natalia's wingman. Lucky Natalia. She didn't *want* another wingman. If she could have flown alone she would have, but it was safer, having someone in the air with you watching your back. She just didn't want anyone looking too closely. She should have told Elena about the creature. Elena would have given good advice.

The war went on. Rumors started of a planned American invasion, but came to nothing. The great Soviet army turned back a German advance at Kursk—lots of vodka flowed at that news. Liliia Litviak became the first woman fighter ace when she shot down her fifth plane. Then she was killed, like so many others. Meanwhile they flew, they fought, they died. This would go on forever; the terrible conditions, the constant roar of engines, the wait for news and the hope that it would be good. Eventually the news would have to be good, when it couldn't get any worse.

Natalia felt safest when she flew.

Air was a membrane. Air was timeless. Slow and endless, no obstacles to interrupt her transit. To fly was freedom. Her actions, hers alone, translated to power. The sun was purer here. Infinity came closer. The higher one flew, the more blue the sky became, until it deepened to the richest lapis, and then beyond to the black of space, so she'd heard. She had never flown that high herself. She had taken her Yak to the edge of its range, over thirty thousand feet, to where the air was too thin to breathe and the cold destroyed skin. To where the engine began to stutter and she risked it stalling. Her Yak was powerful, loyal, beautiful. But she never pushed it farther than

it could go. And so she'd lever over the stick, adjust the flaps, and dive down, back to safer altitudes, to gravity. She tried not to resent the tether that kept her grounded. She was lucky to fly at all, to even have this taste of the infinite.

If she could stay in the air, simply cruising, peaceful, she might not have minded the rest of it so much.

And then it was over. It was *over*.

\* \* \*

A voice chattered on the radio in the command bunker, and they could hardly understand it. Germany surrenders. Military is standing down. Victory.

The crowd of them gathering to hear the announcement stood in silence. There should have been cheering and fireworks, but they couldn't even speak. Natalia suddenly wondered what Elena would have said at this moment, and couldn't think of anything at all. There should be parades and dancing, and in the days to come there would be all these things. But right in this moment, there was disbelief.

"Now what do we do?" Lina asked plaintively. Someone began crying, and then they were all crying, then laughing. Elena should have been there for it.

Natalia did wonder what came next.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon, she fled to a spot behind the hangar, where she sat with her back to the wall. She'd found a leather courier bag. The creature fit perfectly inside and even seemed to enjoy nestling there, quiet and in hiding. She held the bag in her lap, and she and the creature looked out over a quiet airfield. She couldn't remember ever seeing it so still, not even an engine rumbling. The silence was almost painful.

She fed the creature rusted bits of scrap metal. It took each one and chewed it carefully, almost daintily. When it had enough to eat, it was calm.

"We can't go on as we have," she said. "There aren't Germans to hunt anymore. But we'll figure it out. I'll take care of you, I promise. I suppose I can find a place to live near a junkyard."

It looked back at her, its eyes like silvered canopies. She fancied she could read some understanding there. Some agreement. Some sense that it believed her, and trusted her.

"Natalia!"

The creature dived into the bag and she shut it up, quickly getting to her feet. She was just taking a walk. Nothing suspicious here.

"Natalia!"

"What is it?" She steadied her breathing and marched to the end of the hangar, where the shouting was coming from. She hoped she didn't look too flushed.

Lina almost bumped into her, coming around the corner. Her shirt collar was open, and her coveralls were still covered with grease, even though no one had really worked since the cease-fire announcement.

"There's someone here to see you at ops. Political officer." Lina didn't stand too close, as if whatever trouble had gotten to Natalia might rub off on her.

"Now?"

"You'd better go quick, don't you think?"

Oh no, was all Natalia could think. *Oh no*.

With the war over, this should all be done, yes? If she'd done something wrong—if she *looked* like she'd done something wrong—it shouldn't matter anymore. But it did.

The officer, Colonel Lebedev, was big, broad. He should have been punching Nazis on the front line. Maybe he had. With his lined frown and permanently furrowed brow, he didn't seem in the mood to put up with anything. That was what probably got him the political officer job. No one would dare tell him anything he didn't want to hear.

He invited her into the base commander's office, which had a door. The closed off

space felt like a luxury, and the silence within was heavy. After brief formalities, Lebedev invited her to sit in the chair across the desk from him. She didn't want to sit; she wanted to run. But she sat.

Lebedev folded his hands on the desk and studied her a moment. Then he asked, before any other nicety, "Have you ever smuggled anything?"

"What? No, sir." The courier bag was sitting at her feet. The creature inside was very quiet.

"Cigarettes, chocolate maybe? Coffee?"

She hadn't seen coffee in months. Maybe years. "I wouldn't know where to find any of that, sir."

"There are sources. Clever people have found ways to bring in such items and sell them on the black market. You know how it is." He acted so casual, like he was asking about the weather.

Horrified, she sucked in a breath. "That would be illegal."

Lebedev nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, it would. And yet, I've heard some stories. That you may be a little more secretive than you should? That maybe you have something to hide?"

She *knew* she flushed, then. The burning flashed over her cheeks and up to her scalp. She couldn't do anything to stop it. She had so little practice at lying. But she was able not to steal a glance at the bag at her feet.

"Your father . . . died in prison, I've heard? A dissenter? Do I have that right?"

Yes, he'd died in prison, but she'd never believed the charges. She'd worked so hard to prove her family's loyalty. To redeem his name. "Oh no, sir. He was loyal."

"Hm. All right then." He flipped through a file of papers on the desk, skimming them. Obviously a prop, all for show—his gaze didn't linger on the pages long enough to read anything on them. "You have quite the record. It's unusual, being a woman pilot, isn't it?"

"There are quite a few of us," she said, thinking of the two regiments of bomber pilots, her own regiment, women pilots all over the Motherland, Elena, Liliia, and all the others who'd been killed. Wondering if their service, their sacrifice would just be forgotten. Conveniently un-remembered.

"Of course. Do you know I heard Marina Raskova speak once?"

Raskova, Russia's greatest woman pilot. Godmother to them all, may she rest in peace. "I would have liked to meet her, sir."

"She was impressive. May I have a look in your bag there?"

"I—I'd rather you didn't." Her stomach dropped. She was doomed. She was finished, with this.

Lebedev smiled kindly, the expression of a venomous snake hypnotizing its prey. "Trust me, I doubt there's anything there I haven't seen before."

Her throat and nose clenched; she wanted to cry. This, after she'd just promised to protect the creature. She didn't know what to do, there was nothing she could do—

"Please, Comrade Voronova. Just a quick look. I'm sure you're not hiding anything."

Oh, but she was.

She picked up the bag, feeling like she moved as slow as glaciers, like her body was not her own. Maybe the creature could run, maybe it could escape. Her own fate was likely decided, but maybe the creature could find somewhere to live out its days safely and wouldn't be captured. She wouldn't have called it praying, since at the moment she didn't feel like she had anything to pray to.

She set the bag on the desk in front of Lebedev and returned to her seat. The colonel stood and opened the flap. Peered inside. Looked at her a moment. Then picked up the bag and held it upside down.

Nothing. Nothing fell out, there was nothing inside.

Natalia could have cried. Or laughed. Something. But she was confused, and her training—and the nerves that had kept her alive during two years of combat—held her upright, still and calm. Yes, of course she had expected this. She met Lebedev's gaze across the desk, tilted her head inquiringly.

"You carry around an empty bag?"

"It's a good luck charm," she said. "Silly, I know. It's embarrassing, really. That's why I'm so touchy about it. I'm sure you've heard very strange things about pilots. We're all quite superstitious." She even sounded like she knew what she was talking about.

"Hm. Yes." He felt inside the bag, as if searching for a hidden compartment. Shook it as if listening for rattling. Pressed all along the seams. Glared at her with suspicion again. But he found nothing.

*And where was the creature?* She donned a thin smile and very decisively didn't panic.

He set down the bag and pushed it toward her. "You may go, Voronova. For now."

"Yes sir. Thank you."

Grabbing the bag, she fled. She waited for the door to close behind her before peering into the bag herself—and there it was. The creature, big round eyes staring back at her. She swore it was grinning. Closing it up, she tucked the bag under her arm and marched away, so she could have a nervous breakdown somewhere safe. She fled to a storage closet, shut the door, turned on the light, and finally dared to open the bag again.

The creature flopped limbs over the edge and considered her.

"What did you do?" she asked. "Where did you go? You nearly stopped my heart."

Maybe it had turned invisible. Maybe it had fled so quickly neither of them had seen it. Maybe it really was magic.

"You don't need me, do you? You can take care of yourself. Maybe you'd be better off on your own." She slumped to the floor, put her head in her hands.

The creature reached, its limb stretching, and touched her wrist. Just a light pressure. Friendly, even. She smiled weakly.

"You saved my life, you know. I owe you."

It didn't speak. She wished it could, but that touch seemed to say everything. They were stuck with each other, no matter what happened.

This wasn't over. She was never going to be finished with men like Lebedev. Especially if she went to Moscow to try to get a job as a flight instructor, as she'd been thinking she might do.

She didn't know where she could go. Or . . . maybe she did. Away. She needed to go away.

\* \* \*

Two dozen Yaks crouched on the airfield. She had to do this now, immediately. That very night, even.

She didn't like flying at night. It wasn't safe. Not that anything she'd done in the war had been safe, but this was something else. The hard part was not being able to say goodbye to the girls—but she couldn't risk word getting out.

She knew the guard rotation. Knew when her best chance was. She didn't bring much with her: some rations, a canteen of water, a blanket, a change of clothes. Her papers, for all the good it would do her. She had never been without them and it seemed strange leaving them behind. And the courier bag.

What would Elena think of this? She'd think Natalia was mad. No—she'd kiss Natalia's cheek and tell her to go, to fly.

In the black of night, by the dim light of a waning moon, she stood by the hangar

and looked out at the lurking beasts, the row of aircraft, lined up along the stretch of runway. No one else was around. She opened the bag; the creature immediately climbed out, up her arm, and perched on her shoulder. It seemed at home there, sitting as it often did in the cockpit, tucked up against her leather cap, watchful. The silver eyes seemed to take in the light and glow.

“You think we can do this? We need to not be seen.”

It squeezed her shoulder, adjusting its grip. Or was it trying to tell her something? “I don’t know what you are, or everything you can do. But I’ll say what we need: to move fast, and quiet, and not be seen.”

The creature hunched down. It felt determined.

Calm. Natalia would do everything calmly. She moved along the shadow of the hangar, walking calmly. Someone would be more likely to see a flash of movement than a person simply walking, perfectly normal. She held the straps of her bags in a white-knuckled grip.

The creature sprang from her suddenly, landed on the wall, scurried along it like a spider. Hesitating, the creature looked back, clacked teeth in what might have been a warning. Continued on a few steps, looked back again, waited.

Natalia followed it.

At the corner it stopped, grabbed her shoulder, pulled her to the wall and held on tight. Then she heard the footsteps. Heavy boots on gravel, a steady stride. She held her breath.

The patrolling guard walked around the corner a moment later, a big, grimly staring man, rifle propped on his shoulder. The war might have officially ended, but he was taking this job seriously. He walked a few paces on, gazed out over the runway and flight line. Then turned back around. He’d see Natalia, and she didn’t have any reason for being here—

The creature kept pressure on her shoulder and stared at the guard with round, gleaming eyes. Neither of them moved. Even the air seemed frozen, though her face was burning.

The guard didn’t see them. Natalia would have sworn that when he turned around to continue his patrol he was looking right at her and the creature. She could almost have met his gaze.

But somehow, some way, he didn’t see them and continued on. The footsteps faded into the night, and they were clear.

She reached up and put her hand on the creature’s limb. An unthinking gesture of comfort. The creature clung back. It peeled from the wall and returned to her shoulder where it settled calmly. While she didn’t dare speak, she could finally breathe again. Together, they set off across the runway to the flight line.

Finally, she reached the Yak at the end of the row. Went through the fastest pre-flight check she’d ever done. The risk of not running a careful check didn’t outweigh the anxiety of getting caught. The creature held onto her shoulder, sitting tall, its head craned up and looking around—her own guard. She couldn’t tell if it did anything more—if it really did have some kind of power to make them invisible. But she relaxed some. It was standing watch, so she could focus on what she needed to do.

Removed the chocks from the tires. Checked the propeller, the fuel tank. Climbed into the cockpit. The creature was practically vibrating, jumping from her shoulder to the instrument panel, looking out. She was about to slide closed the canopy when it sprang out again, planting itself on the nose of the aircraft, limbs spread to steady itself, head lifted. Like the hood ornament on a fancy car.

It must have known what it was doing.

Once she started the engine, she had a minute or so to get in the air before anyone

stopped her. If they started firing at her, she'd be done. She'd deserve it.

She met the creature's gaze. "We can do this. Yes?"

It nodded.

She cranked the starter. Eased up on the throttle. The plane inched forward. Then it raced.

Everyone must have heard it. The growling engine of a plane after so much stillness must have woken everyone for a mile around. Natalia couldn't think about that. She had to keep moving down the path she'd chosen. She opened the throttle, pulled back on the stick, lifted the nose—Then came that moment, that thrilling stillness as the plane left Earth, as its wings carried it up, and up.

No one chased her. No other planes took off to follow her, to shoot her down. She climbed, leveled off. She escaped. She wanted to laugh and cry both.

She'd thought about where to go, and narrowed it down to two choices: north, or south. In either case she would run out of fuel before she left Soviet territory. She could think of little beyond getting across the border. Since she had stopped being able to see a future for herself, where she went didn't seem to matter much.

She chose south because the border was closer. And so she flew on as the sun rose.

\* \* \*

## Part II

Her first breath of Kuwait smelled like dust and burning oil. Captain Elena Kramer arrived on base jet lagged and exhausted, a bag full of gear over her shoulder, and stopped to stare at heat mirages rippling over the tarmac. Since everyone else had stopped too, she hoped she didn't look too hapless. They went through processing, got to their assigned bunks in prefab barracks that didn't have air conditioning, and were told to rest. Their tour started in the morning with flight checks. She couldn't think that far ahead, and once she sat, couldn't seem to summon the energy to lie the rest of the way down. So she unpacked. And immediately had to confront the one thing she hadn't intended on bringing to the war at all.

Sitting at the foot of her cot, she studied the vintage leather courier bag slumped on the concrete floor, a couple of feet out, in isolation. Like it needed its own space of air. It was just a bag. A mysterious old bag that she'd been instructed not to open until she deployed.

"For luck," her grandmother had explained, a serious and over-bright glint in her eye.

"Do you know what she's talking about?" Elena had asked her father later.

"She had that bag in the war," he'd said. "I think she thinks it brought her luck. She wants you to have it. Can't hurt, can it?" He'd shrugged.

Put like that, the bag took on talismanic qualities. Natalia Voronova had survived the siege of Stalingrad during World War II. She'd been a fighter pilot, which would have been astonishing enough on its own without everything else she'd been through, with the war, defecting from the Soviet Union after the war, trekking to America, and all the rest. She'd done the impossible several times over and lived to tell the tale.

"Take it on the plane with you when you fly missions," Nana Natalia urged her, and instead of disregarding her out of hand, which was the logical thing to do, Elena planned how she was going to sneak the beat-up old thing into the cockpit of her A-10. Because her grandmother asked her to.

"You love your plane?" Nana asked, her Russian accent plain, rounding the words, singing. The music of far away places and times.

Elena smiled by reflex. "Yeah, the A-10's a beast. Best plane that ever flew." Every pilot of every type of craft said that, insisted theirs was the best. But Elena was right.

Natalia clicked her tongue. “Not as good as my Yak, but what can you do? If you love your plane, it takes care of you. But bring this with you, for me.”

“But why?”

“Can’t explain. You must see. Just do it. Please, my Elena.”

An old woman’s whim. Natalia had seen war up close. Her hands held worry and tension when she squeezed her granddaughter’s. She knew what Elena was flying into.

Elena had carried that bag halfway around the world and now wondered why. There was writing on it, Cyrillic letters carved along the edge of the flap. She knew just enough Russian to be able to read it: *druk*. “Friend.”

The bag had a story. Was filled with a story Natalia hadn’t told her. But she would see, and this made her nervous. She second-guessed herself about what exactly Nana had told her. Did she open the bag now, or when she was in her plane? Now, Elena thought. Mostly because there was no way in hell she was going to open a mysterious bag for the first time while locked in her cockpit. She set the bag on her cot, opened the flap, cautiously looked in. A strange gray ball nested in the bottom, about the size of a cantaloupe, lumpy, unsettling.

Then the leathery ball uncurled and stared at her.

Elena screamed, a sharp startled burst, then clapped her hand over her mouth and looked around to see if anyone had heard. But no, she was alone in her curtained-off bunk. And the thing in the bag was still looking at her with round, unblinking silver eyes.

She shut the bag. Held it shut, found that she was gasping for breath. Her first thought, that her grandmother had somehow stashed a ferret in her gear and she’d carried it halfway around the world, was clearly not right. This wasn’t a ferret, though its body suggested coiled, sinewy muscles. It was dark gray, oily-looking, smooth-skinned. Strange. Not a ferret, guinea pig, or python. If she didn’t look at it again, she wouldn’t have to deal with it.

But she was going to have to deal with this.

She lifted the flap of the bag, looked. Yes, eyes looked back at her. And a wide, lipless mouth, which opened, showing steely plates where teeth would be if it was a normal thing, a recognizable creature. It made a noise, a growl, creaking like rusted hinges.

Elena shut the bag again. With shaking hands, she secured the metal clasp. Then stashed the bag in a locker, triple checking that the locker was really locked, that no one would stumble on this . . . this *thing*.

She had to make a phone call.

This wasn’t a simple endeavor. Personal calls were rationed out, there were wait lists, time limits. But this was an emergency. Could she convince the duty officer that this was an emergency?

“My grandmother,” Elena explained, trying to do puppy-dog eyes but it mostly came out as a wince. “She’s very old.”

This was met with skepticism. But she got her call.

Only belatedly did she calculate the time difference and make sure she was calling at a reasonable hour. She probably would have called anyway. This couldn’t wait.

Thankfully, Nana picked up after just a couple of rings.

“Nana, it’s Elena—”

“Oh my dear, where are you? Is everything all right?”

Yes? No? She didn’t know? “I can’t talk long, but I have to ask you. That bag you gave me, that you said not to open till I got here. The good luck charm. I . . . I opened it.”

A long hesitation. Elena imagined Nana sitting at her kitchen table, looking up at the ceiling.

“And how is Druk?” she asked finally, her accent rolling the “r” and landing soft on

the "k."

*What is Drook?* Elena thought in a panic. And how could she tell how it was?

"Nana, I can't keep it! I'm not supposed to have pets!"

"Elena dearest, is not pet. Drook will save your life. But you have to feed it junk. Scrap metal, broken machines. Before it goes looking."

"What?"

"Will you listen to your grandmother?"

"I don't understand."

"Bring with you. Tuck in your flight suit. Curles up very small, will be fine, no one will know. But Drook will save you, if you let it. Promise me, Elena." Nana had never sounded so fierce. This woman had killed Nazis, Elena reminded herself.

She could seal up the bag and shove it in the bottom of her locker. Stuff it in the trash. Nana would never know. Except it was alive. Clearly alive. Maybe she could set it loose in the desert . . . and then what?

"Promise, Elena, that you will keep Drook with you."

"Nana."

"Please."

Grandmothers. Nana was crazy. "Okay, yes, fine, I promise."

"Good. Then you will come home safe."

She had no way to argue with her. They could go back and forth on the phone for an hour and not get anywhere. Nana had already gotten what she wanted: that promise. And now Elena had to figure out how to follow through.

"So I feed it junk. What kind of junk?"

"Whatever they throw out at the machine shop. Any metal trash from the airfield. Will be fine."

She had to trust that Nana knew what she was talking about. "Okay. I love you."

"Remember! Stay safe!"

\* \* \*

It didn't make any sense, and just like so many other things in the military, when the big picture didn't make sense, you focused on your little piece of it. The job that was sitting right in front of you. Do this little thing, then the next, fix whatever widget needed fixing, and if you were lucky you might see the end of it and learn what it all meant. Or you'd just get handed another widget.

She checked a machine shop by the airfield. A big bin outside was full of unidentifiable components. Not trash, exactly. More like storage. Parts that ended up left over when a mechanic put a motor back together, that you couldn't for the life of you figure out where they went. When a vehicle broke down, but still had bits that might be useful somewhere else. Stuff no one could bear to throw out. It ended up here. Elena looked around, made sure no one was casually passing by, and grabbed a pocket-sized bit of steel and wire. Walked off, hands in pockets, hiding the stolen bit of trash. Nothing to see here.

She was working on faith, on trust, on habit. When your eighty-five-year-old crazy Russian grandmother told you do something, you did it, no arguing.

Back on her bunk, she continued on to the next step in the plan that made no sense. Try it, just try it. If Nana was right about this maybe she was right about the rest as well.

Elena set the bag beside her. Carefully unred the buckle and lifted the flap. "Hey there," she whispered to the thing inside. "Brought you something."

She offered the piece of broken machine.

The silver eyes might have flashed; the moment passed so quickly, she couldn't be sure it happened. It might have just been a quirk of the light. When it reached for the offering, the movement was the same. Maybe it had limbs, maybe it simply stretched.

Maybe its mouth reached, or maybe its whole body levitated, faster than the eye could see. A fraction of a second later, its mouth held the entire bit of detritus and crunched it, grinding between its terrible plates, and apparently savoring every sliver.

The chewing was loud, a squeal of tearing, crunching metal. Elena was sure someone would come running in to see what the disaster was. But no one did, and the creature's mouth worked, presumably swallowing, until it had finished the meal.

It settled on the bottom of the bag, curled up, humming to itself. Sounded a little like the engine on an old prop plane.

Nana had been there when she'd graduated flight school, when her wings were pinned on her uniform. Elena's whole, big sprawling family had been there, which was half embarrassing and half brilliant. They'd all been so proud. Nana had taken her face in her hands, kissed both her cheeks, and said, "You'll be a great pilot. The best. Is in your blood. You make me proud."

Sometimes that pronouncement felt like a burden.

\* \* \*

Elena's first flight in the desert was for training, to get used to the conditions before they started shooting at things for real. They'd heard stories from the pilots who were already here, about how the desert surprised you. Flying here wasn't like flying anywhere else; you needed to be ready for it. The squadron was busy, everything from regular patrols to search-and-rescue to close air support. Never a dull moment.

She did as her grandmother had asked: Take it with you. It will keep you safe. At first she didn't know how Nana expected her to accomplish this. Back in her World War II flying days it must have been easy enough to smuggle all manner of things on board those simple prop planes, little more than frames covered with cloth and wood, with engines and guns attached. Things were a lot simpler then. But this was 2003, and Elena was flying a jet fighter with a hundred things to keep track of and a thousand things that could go wrong. Introducing a variable, any variable, much less one that she had to keep secret?

Again, she had to work on faith. So she put a few wires and old spark plugs in her flight suit pockets, and coaxed the creature, Drook, out of the bag.

"Nana says to take you flying. Well—you ready to go?"

It lunged from the bag and slipped straight into the pocket. Obviously it had done this before and knew exactly what to do. Maybe it was even eager for it? Was it weird, that Elena imagined she could see expression in those unchanging silver eyes? Those thin lips couldn't possibly be grinning. Drook didn't seem like a thing that could grin.

It nestled in her pocket, curling up into a tight ball. Impossibly tight and small, given its size. As if it shrank to fit, and then it didn't move. If she hadn't know it was there, she might not have noticed. The weight wasn't much, not more than a pound or two. Didn't affect the hang of her flight suit. If she pressed her hand to that pocket, she could feel a lump. Her anxiety steadied just a bit.

Pre-flight check—nobody noticed. Drook stayed still as Elena did her walkaround, checking over the plane. It didn't even chew on the treats she'd left for it. Like it knew what to do, what was going on. What the stakes were. Drook had been with Nana during the war. What had it seen, what had it learned? This was weird. This was . . . Elena was going to stop questioning it. What happened, happened. Did she trust her Nana? Yes.

In the cockpit of her A-10, Elena finally felt at home. The seat cradled her. Her instruments and controls were within reach. Her helmet and oxygen mask fit. The sun blazed down, the sky was blue. The engines fired up and hummed with power. All was well.

The A-10 was an ugly, beautiful workhorse of a plane. Squat, stubby, nothing like

the sleek lines and inherent speed of a pursuit fighter. But the Warthog could do just about anything she asked it to. Elena wouldn't trade it for anything. Yes, this felt like home.

In her pocket, the creature wriggled. She settled her hand on it, just a light touch, and willed it to be still. *It's fine, everything's fine.*

Brucie, her flight lead, taxiing in the plane ahead of her, radioed in. "Firebird, this is Rodan, all systems go."

"Roger, all systems go."

After a couple of exchanges with the tower, they were cleared for takeoff. Elena's nerves hummed. She'd been off balance since she touched down in Kuwait, but now she knew exactly what to do.

Ahead of her, Brucie's Warthog raced down the runway and lifted off, a huge metal beast rising gently as a piece of fluff. She got her signal, eased the throttle open, and followed, until the tarmac fell away and she was airborne. The sky opened up to her.

They got to work.

This was the same sun that shone over Arizona; why did it feel so much brighter and harsher here? She knew the logical scientific explanations, that they were closer to the equator here, that less moisture in the atmosphere meant more direct sun. But it was easy to personify the heat, the harshness, as an enemy. Flying in the desert was tough. Mountains rose up when you didn't expect them to. Dust got everywhere. This didn't look like home. But as long as she was cocooned in her cockpit, Elena felt safe. The world spread out below. Something in her chest unknotted. Encased in metal, mask strapped to her face, sitting on top of a massive 30 mm cannon, she was in control. The roar of engines comforted her bones.

"How you doing back there, Firebird?"

"Fine. Great," she said, and meant it. In fact, she was happy.

Brucie laughed. "Don't have too much fun. We're at war, you know."

"Oh, I know."

"You need any pointers, you just have to ask. I'm right here. Any time."

"Just trying to help, that's the line, right?"

"I'm very helpful!" Up ahead, Brucie's plane wagged at her, tilting back and forth.

"Sure, you are," she drawled.

She'd known Brucie for four years, since their Academy days. They'd flown together for the last year. Made the whole thing feel even more like home. If Brucie was needling her, nothing could be too bad.

After five minutes or so of steady cruising, her pocket wriggled. The creature squeezed out—wasn't a whole lot of room to move around here, but it managed, slinking into her lap, sitting up to look around.

She switched off the radio, just for a sec. "Hey, what're you doing?"

It was looking. Just looking. For all the world like a curious cat, stretching its neck to press its broad face to the canopy, to have a look out. That was fine, Elena thought. Nothing too weird yet.

Next it climbed, defying gravity to step along the canopy, all the way over. It flattened against the top of the glass, seeming to melt, that nearly boneless body flattening, limbs reaching. Like it was trying to take in the sun. Embrace the sky. She swore she heard it purring. She understood the feeling.

It loved the sky. She wondered if it was supposed to have wings, but lost them somehow.

When it started pulling at the seam in the canopy, it let out a frustrated grunt.

"We can't open it," she told it.

The canopy of the Yak-3 that Nana flew opened manually, could be slid open from the inside even in flight, because everything on those planes was manual. If Elena

popped the A-10's canopy at this altitude, at this speed, it would rip off and send the plane into a tumble.

"It doesn't slide, it hinges. We can't open it, not like this." She hoped it understood her. She wasn't entirely sure the creature couldn't just wrench it open by brute force, and that would be bad.

It looked over its shoulder at her, silver eyes flashing reflected sunlight. It wouldn't be able to see her face, her eyes, not with the helmet's visor down and mask on. She wasn't sure that mattered. If she had to start wrestling with the thing, she would, but—

It was gone. No, not gone—it was sitting outside. Between one blink and the next, it had left the cockpit and was now clinging to the outside of the canopy. Elena gaped. It must have—teleported? Squeezed through a crack? But the seal was tight, how could it possibly—

She was traveling at around three hundred miles an hour and the creature just perched there, turned into the wind like a dog with its head out the window. Its mouth opened slightly, eating the air. And it seemed to be fine. Not just fine—happy. Like this was where it belonged.

"Don't go chewing anything up!" she called to it, shouting to be heard through the glass and the wind. "We need to get home!"

She swore that it glanced at her and nodded.

She watched it run up and down the fuselage, craned her neck back to see it peer into one of the engines, then run back to jump on a wing, then back to the plane's body. Did a little flip before hanging on the wing's leading edge and just clinging there, letting the wind buffet it. It was *playing*.

This was weird. Thank God Brucie was in front of her and not behind her where he could see all this.

Speaking of. "Firebird, you've gone quiet, everything okay?"

She keyed the radio back on. "Yes, fine. Just looking at the scenery." She sounded a little too desperate when she said that and hoped Brucie didn't pick up on the anxiety through the static.

"What scenery?"

Baked yellow desert surrounded them.

"I dunno, it's kind of . . . different."

He huffed. "Roger that."

The creature, Drook, returned to the canopy, settling at the very top and riding there quietly. Nothing to worry about.

She sighed a deep breath and focused on the job at hand. Simple shakedown flight. Everything by the book, everything normal. Except for the creature sitting on her canopy.

On approach back to base, she wondered if Drook planned on sitting outside through the whole landing. Which wasn't optimal at all. Somebody would see it, and she didn't want to have to explain. She wasn't sure she *could*. Brucie signaled their descent to the tower. As she prepped to follow him in, she tapped on the canopy. Drook looked, and she gave it a thumbs down. And it came back, slipping inside, perching on the edge of the instrument panel. Even watching carefully, she couldn't figure out how it did it. But the canopy wasn't, in fact, airtight, and Drook's strange and malleable form found a way inside. It slid back into her lap, and slipped into her pocket. Settled there just like before, and all was well.

"Well. I guess I have a mascot."

"What's that, Firebird?"

"Nothing. Thinking out loud."

"Roger."

She eased the plane to its landing, touching down smoothly. Entirely normal.

\* \* \*

Drook slept for days after, curled up in the bag under the bed. Elena could almost forget about it. Almost. Still, she collected a stockpile of scrap. She had this sudden sinking realization that she would need to take care of the creature for the rest of its life. No, the rest of *her* life. It was at least sixty years old already. She thought she might give it back to her grandmother when she got home. But Natalia would not likely take it back. Drook was hers now, whatever that meant. And it belonged in the air.

The deployment was long stretches of boredom eased by flight time. More training flights, including weapons practice, firing the A-10's massive cannon at junked cars in the middle of nowhere, turning them to dust. Drook loved the cannon, the distinctive, stuttering *brrrt* that rattled the whole plane. It would sit on the nose of the plane, its limbs spread out, and suck in the burst of smoke that washed over them when it fired. One of the most awesome displays of close air support firepower ever devised by humanity, and Drook made it look kind of cute.

She got so she stopped worrying about Drook so much. As long as it had time in the air, it tended to sleep, and as long as she kept it fed, it stayed quiet. She ticked off the days of the deployment on a calendar and began to think this was all going to go smoothly.

It didn't.

When the blow came, it wasn't what she expected. Elena was in the squadron lounge, reading a book, the earbuds of her iPod in, playing music to lock out the world and trying to ignore the heat. A siren belted out. A clean, simple, local one. This was on-base emergency services. Not an air raid, not a base-wide alert. This signaled an accident nearby. The handful of them glanced up toward the door, wondering what was wrong and hoping whatever it was wasn't serious. So she saw Chris Singer the minute he ran in. He was another one of her and Brucie's longtime friends and squadron mates, with buzz cut hair and average height. His gray T-shirt was soaked with sweat. He pulled himself to a stop on the doorframe and looked wildly until his gaze came to rest on her.

"Elli! Come on, it's Brucie." She'd never seen him panic before. Cold, steady, he never put up with Brucie's ribbing like she did.

She threw down her book and earbuds and ran after him.

When he grabbed her arm and squeezed, she knew it was bad. Before that, this was just a thing happening, she had to wait and see, which meant she could believe it would all be fine. But Chris was scared. He didn't *get* scared.

He dragged her out, past the barracks, toward the field.

The emergency sirens had stopped; the flashing lights hadn't. The vehicles came to rest just a couple of blocks away. That was why they'd been so loud. People had gathered. Some moved urgently, with clear focus. Others stood by, a perimeter of witnesses.

Standing on her toes seemed undignified, rude even. It made her a gawker and she was better than that. But she did get a view of the Jeep on its side, and the truck with its front end smashed up. One of them must have come around the corner without stopping. They'd collided, all their mass turned to battering rams. A fire crew was spraying foam on what was probably a gas slick poured on the street.

"Bruce was in the Jeep," Chris said by her ear.

That was when her stomach lurched. Chris must have been wrong. The scene couldn't be as bad as she imagined, because that would mean something truly terrible had happened.

"How do you know? Are you sure?"

She edged forward, pressing against the crowd of fellow gawkers. And if she could

get close, what did she think she could do? She should stay out of the way. Let the medics do their job. But the need to see drew her on, closer.

A booted foot, limp. Just a glimpse. Could have belonged to anyone.

An MP appeared in front of them. "I need you to clear out." He said this kindly, but he was a wall with no way to argue against it.

Elena stood rooted and helpless. She had a million questions, but couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"Let's go," Chris urged her away. In a daze, she followed, returning to the barracks.

\* \* \*

Word came just an hour later that Brucie didn't make it. The doctors did all they could, probably more than was reasonable. But likely he was gone before they even started. It was a ridiculous thing to try to wrap her brain around. This was a dangerous profession at the best of times, and they were at war on foreign soil. They expected plane crashes, enemy fire, combat. A dozen ways to die doing the job they'd signed up for.

Brucie could have stayed home, to be killed in a car accident.

Used to be, she'd walk across that stretch of tarmac on the way to the flight line. She found herself detouring around it. Making excuses to take some other route, even when it added ten or fifteen minutes to her trip. It wasn't a big deal, it was fine. If someone had asked her why she was doing it, she would have been surprised to notice that she was.

She imagined she would see blood there, soaked into tar and concrete. She was sure there would be blood, and she didn't want to see it.

They held a memorial, and it was just what it was supposed to be, Elena supposed. Appropriate, well practiced. They did a lot of these here. This one might have been a little more off balance than usual. She couldn't quite embrace the usual platitude, that he'd died serving his country. What service did a random accident provide? It was just one of those things that happened, when you put enough people in a small enough area with enough heavy equipment and sleep deprivation. It was one of the costs, and vibrant Brucie would slip quietly into a statistic.

A week passed. Two. She spent a lot of time in the air. A lot of time plugged into her music, trying not to think about anything. Routine was hard, but she needed it, and it carried her forward. Flying without Brucie was hard, but Chris stepped in. Nice, hearing a friendly voice over the radio. They reassured one another and allowed the other to pretend that nothing was wrong.

But for a time, she forgot about the leather satchel stashed under her bed, so that after a long day of flying patrols, forgetting to shower, eating out of obligation, and avoiding a certain spot on the road, she returned to her room, focused on being numb and wanting only to sleep, and found a small oily creature sitting on her cot, eating her iPod. Its limbs had appeared to ooze possessively over the device, hugging it. It snapped off the screen and used the torn edge to pry open the casing. It seemed to be savoring a circuit board, grinding it slowly in its bony mouth.

"What are you doing?" she cried out, and despair broke loose. She hadn't been feeding Drook; she'd forgotten, and everything was terrible. She sank onto the concrete floor right there and cried. She shocked herself with the force of it, gasping sobs coming from nowhere, shuddering through her. Covering her mouth to stifle them only made her cry harder, and her eyes and nose ran rivers. She told herself not to wipe her face all over her shirt, and then immediately did it, and now on top of everything else she'd have to do laundry. Conduct unbecoming an officer.

The thing stopped chewing and looked back at her. It perched, frozen, and seemed confused, uncertain which way to jump. With a crunch and snap of plastic, the creature broke off another piece. Elena didn't have the heart to stop it. Not even to yell at it.

Then, it reached out a limb, offering her the broken bit of plastic and wire. She could almost hear it saying, *You should eat something*. She couldn't remember if she had eaten that day. What else could she do but take it? She tucked it away in her hand.

"Thanks," she murmured. The creature went back to eating. She thought about trying to wrestle away what was left of the iPod—all her music, one of the things keeping her sane here. But she didn't. She felt too heavy, right at the moment.

"What are you?" she asked it. It glanced up. Maybe it understood her. How would she know? Footsteps sounded outside. Elena snapped back to herself and scrambled to retrieve the creature's bag, tossed aside. She anticipated a battle—this thing could hold onto a plane flying hundreds of miles an hour, she couldn't just pick it up and shove it into hiding, she'd fail. But as soon as the creature saw the bag, it climbed in, making itself small, staying quiet. Elena latched the bag shut and hid it under her bed.

Chris walked in. He knocked on the frame, but she'd left the door open. She started pacing along the side of the cot to work off her nerves and to keep from looking back at the bag and giving it away.

"Hey," he said, which seemed awkward and inadequate. "You, um. I know you're not okay. Sorry. I won't ask that."

Her voice was stopped up. She didn't know what to say. Her brain was full.

"Did you—oh. What happened to that?" The iPod's last few pieces lay strewn on the cot.

"I dropped it," she said instantly, no matter how ridiculous that sounded.

"Oh no. Um. Maybe someone can send you a new one—"

"Yeah. Maybe."

"I'm sorry."

She took a deep breath, which didn't shake too badly, and she was able to meet his gaze. "Do you maybe want to go get some food?"

\* \* \*

"You know who you are named for, yes?" Nana Natalia asked.

Elena curled up on the chair in the common room, the phone pressed to her head. She had ten minutes for this call, and had to get in as much as she could.

"Aunt Elena," she said.

"And who was she named for?"

"Your friend in the war," Elena said. "The one who died."

"It was so stupid, how she died. Bad weather. It's not like now, with all your radar and instruments. The other pilot couldn't see her. They couldn't see. Stupid, stupid." Natalia still sounded angry, all these years later. Which suggested that Elena would never get over losing Brucie. *Stupid, stupid.*

"It happens, and it's stupid. But you must go on because your friend, he would want you to, yes? Like even now I hear my Elena say, you must go on, Natalia Voronova. You must, for us all. Your friend would say this, yes?"

"Yeah, he would. Nana, is this ever going to end?" Would people ever stop shooting each other. Would they ever stop dying far from home for stupid reasons.

"I don't know, Elena."

The next person in line for the phone pointed at her watch, and Elena nodded. "I have to go now. Thanks for talking."

"I love you. Stay safe and come home. And say hello to Drook for me."

"I love you, too."

\* \* \*

Elena could murder the world, given ammunition enough, and time.

This afternoon found her and Chris over Baghdad, targeting enemy gun placements on the far side of a bridge that was about to fall to U.S. forces. Standard mission, the A-10s would roar in, take out enemy firepower, clearing the way for the

good guys. Radio chatter came fast as Elena and her wing coordinated with the marines on the ground. Ground troops had taken cover to let the planes and their cannons have the space.

Elena leveled off for her approach. A thousand feet in altitude, she could see buildings, windows, doors, individuals moving on the ground, palm fronds swaying under the wash of her passage. The dirty brown Tigris River snaked ahead, and on the other side of a bridge, a gun emplacement behind sandbags. She'd vaporize it in seconds, and this filled her with satisfaction. Brucie'd been gone for a month and she was still angry. So nice to be able to point that anger somewhere, to be able to wreak useful destruction.

She radioed Chris that she was starting her attack run. He confirmed, staying back to keep watch. Drook perched on her shoulder, eyes pressed to the canopy. She'd kept it well fed, after the iPod. It seemed calm. Drook loved the gun.

The A-10 was at heart a cannon with wings. The gun was huge, loud, iconic. Diving in, her target, the enemy fortifications, appeared right in front of her. Perfect. She breathed out and squeezed the trigger. The thirty-millimeter roared under her, releasing an explosive, staccato *brrrrrrrrrrap*. The cockpit rumbled with it. Drook's mouth opened and it hissed with a sound that might have been laughter.

Below, enemy positions turned to puffs of smoke and expanding debris.

She eased the stick and pulled back in a climb, arcing left. The lay of the land scrolled out under her. Hers and Chris's planes circled the area. They'd survey the ground, see what else needed to be taken out, come around for another pass. Methodical, thorough. The marine commander's voice came through the radio with a litany of joyful curses. The cannon's destruction was impressive from the air; epic from the ground.

A new sound rattled through the catalog of other noises. Elena's hindbrain sorted out the different sounds, identified them. The roar of her own engines, the rumble of Chris's plane, various explosions on the ground—and something new. Gunfire, coming from enemy positions.

"We're taking fire," she said calmly.

"Roger," Chris radioed back.

Another explosion boomed, and her plane bounced with the screeching, rattling racket of metal hitting metal. Elena looked over; smoke bled out the leading edge of her craft's left wing.

She swallowed hard, brought herself back. This was fine, this was going to be fine.

Another metallic racket, an explosion, and her plane lurched. She hauled back hard on the stick, fighting to keep level.

"Mayhem, I think I'm hit."

"Roger, Firebird. Head out, let's take a look."

She cranked over the stick. Nothing happened. "It's okay, it's gonna be okay," she murmured. Drook couldn't hear her through the mask. Too much to do, too few seconds . . . Warning lights glared on the instrument panel, a couple of gauges pegged into the red. Nothing responded, not the stick, the rudders, anything.

She didn't want to bail out over the middle of Baghdad. *Couldn't*. There had to be another way.

"Firebird, what's happening?"

"Hydraulics are out. I'm switching over to manual. Just till we get out of town."

A pause, a moment of static. A couple of distant explosions burst in the distance, along with a rapid staccato of gunfire. The firefight below was still going on. At least she'd managed to take out the big guns.

Mayhem answered, "Okay. Roger."

Flying a plane like this on manual—with cranks and wires, physically wrestling

it instead of relying on hydraulics—wasn't impossible. It just didn't happen very often. Or ever. She almost asked Chris if he'd ever heard of anyone getting out of a fire-fight on manual. Decided it didn't matter, she'd do it, and that was that.

She cut hydraulics. Next time she hauled over the stick, she put muscle into it.

The plane responded. Finally. Banked right. Mayhem was just off her left side, the damaged side; she could see him through the canopy. He waved, gloved hand in front of helmeted head, and she waved back.

"What are you seeing out there?" she asked.

"Elli, you are shot up to hell," he said flatly. "Bullet holes down the fuselage. Chunk of your left wing is missing. Make that two chunks. You're falling apart, Firebird."

Yeah, okay, not really what she wanted to hear. "I'm stable. Flying stable right now. Give me five minutes."

Her options opened up if she could get back into friendly territory. Cranking on the pedals, settling the flaps, she headed out. South, back to Kuwait. Chris stayed close.

"I don't see fires. Can't tell if you're leaking," he said on the radio.

Fuel gauge read steady, so fuel lines probably hadn't been cut, at least not enough to matter. Just the systems that made it possible to fly. She was bracing her whole body to keep the stick in place, as the plane tried to tumble out of her control. A line of smoke still trailed from the broken wing.

"We're not gonna make it," she murmured.

A pattering sounded overhead—footsteps on the inside of the canopy. Drook crossed the canopy and dropped down on the instrument panel. It clacked its mouth a couple of times, glared hard at her. At least she thought it was glaring.

She unfastened her mask, switched off her radio.

"What?"

It jumped into her lap. She didn't have enough room to flinch. She started to shout, but it moved quickly—down to the floor, where it grabbed her feet. Spread limbs over the pedals. Then sprang back up, clinging to the instrument panel and looking all around, scanning the dials and gauges. As if it could read. Maybe it could.

A kind of rickety buzz interrupted the plane's usual rumble. She didn't know what it meant, if something new had broken.

Elena said, "The hydraulics went out. All we've got is manual now. If we don't blow up first. Can you help?"

It made another circuit around the cockpit, touching everything, the bolts on the control panel, seams around the cockpit.

"Firebird, you okay over there? What's happening?"

She wondered if Chris could see Drook moving inside the cockpit, or if he just thought it was her freaking out. She clipped her mask back on, switched on the radio. "Fine. Systems stable."

"We'll be in friendly territory soon. I've called for support."

Drook paused in front of her, pressed a limb to her sternum and met her gaze. Held it for a moment. *Drook will save you*, Nana had said.

Elena's breathing steadied. This was going to be fine.

Drook touched its limbs to a seam in the canopy, squeezing itself impossibly small, flat as it could go—and it was gone. She looked on either side of the cockpit, trying to figure out where it went. Couldn't find it.

But she trusted.

"Firebird. Elena. What's your status?" Chris did a good job of hiding it, but he was tense.

She spared another glance at her wing. One of those hits—RPG probably—had eaten out half the wing. It was hanging on by rivets. It should probably be disintegrating, sending her poor plane spiraling into the hard-packed desert below. She

ached with the effort of flying by wire. Drook was out there, somehow keeping the wing intact. At least, intact enough to continue. Would it stay stable long enough for her to land?

She ought to bail out. In friendly territory, it wouldn't be so bad. Rescue helicopters would arrive quickly to pick her up. But so much could go wrong in any bailout situation. Focusing a moment on the rumbling under her seat, on the vibrations traveling into her hands from the stick, she made a decision.

"Chris, I can land this."

"You don't have to show off."

"I'm not. I've got this. Though, you know, we might want to call the crash trucks."

"Jesus," he muttered, and she grinned. "All right. Let's go home."

Over the next hour, the plane flew steady. Then the base appeared ahead, approaching far too quickly. Then the wide-open stretch of runways, and the landing.

Chris hung back to watch, to talk her through it. Approaching the airfield, she could see the emergency crews standing by, fire trucks and ambulance, waiting for the worst. She could still change her mind. Abort the landing, head back out to open desert and ditch the plane.

She released the landing gear, and wheels ground into place. On manual, she didn't have brakes. She didn't have anything. She'd have to come in slow as she dared, but not so slow that the plane would stall out entirely. Stay level while cranking the flaps down as hard as she could. Hope she didn't flip over, tip sideways, plow into the tarmac. A million things could go wrong.

But they wouldn't. Because somehow, some way, this didn't feel as hard as it should have. When she pulled back on the stick, it was like something else tugged on the wires with her. Same with the rudders. Nana Natalia was looking out for her.

Don't think, just do. Her muscles worked, easing the plane closer, closer. The tarmac rose up. Beige-washed buildings and desert rushed past her. . . . And she touched down with a lurch, tires squeaking on blacktop. The plane raced on. This strip was built for C-130s, it went on forever, she had time.

At the sound of thudding steps she looked up, and Drook looked back at her through the canopy. Dangling wires hung from its mouth, and her eyes widened. She didn't want to know where it had grabbed a bite from. At least they were on the ground. It squeezed small, back through the canopy seam, and curled up on her lap.

At last, the A-10 slowed, shuddered to a stop. She powered down the engines, shut off fuel lines, electrics, made sure nothing was going to blow up at the last minute. Elena imagined she could hear metal popping, creaking. As if the whole thing was about to break apart.

An engine roared overhead; Chris had stayed with her through the landing and now climbed, wagging his plane at her. She waved, even though he wouldn't see it. He'd come around to land on a different runway; this one was now filled with emergency vehicles, racing toward her.

She slumped back in the seat, staring at sky through her helmet's visor, and unclipped her mask. Until she opened the cockpit, she had this last moment of peace and quiet. A little bubble of calm, a space between now and then, when she would have to explain what had happened. When she would have to understand it somehow. For the next few moments, she could simply be.

Drook remained on her lap. Its color seemed off, a sickly slate instead of its shining, oily gray. It didn't seem to need breath, but if it did, it would be panting.

"How many times did you save Nana's life?" she whispered, considering it. "Where in the world did she find you?"

The creature cracked open its mouth, seemed like it really was about to say something. But it didn't. Sluggish, it found its nest in her flight suit pocket and settled

into sleep.

She so wished she could do the same, but outside, flashing lights and fire truck sirens and shouting voices all wanted her attention. A mechanic was rolling a ladder up to the cockpit. Elena wasn't sure she'd be able to stand once she hit the ground, but she'd have to find out sooner or later. Patting her pocket to make sure Drook was settled, she pulled the latch, popped the canopy, and let in the world.

\* \* \*

"Ho-lee *shit*," Chris stated, speaking for all of them.

That was the general consensus from the rest of the squadron, surveying the damage her poor bird had taken. If the RPG that got her had been a couple of inches further down, the whole wing would have been blasted off. As it was, no one could quite figure out how it was still attached, much less able to provide enough lift to get her home.

Elena had her suspicions, but she wasn't going to say them out loud. The plane had sustained other damage—bullet holes down the fuselage, bites taken out of the rudder. The engines had apparently swallowed debris, but hadn't more than hiccupped.

"Hogs are tough, we know that," she said, patting the nose of the wounded plane. This was an acceptable answer that everyone agreed with.

"That was some flying," Chris added. "You'll never need to buy your own drinks again."

She chuckled. If she had the choice, she'd rather buy drinks than have to nurse a busted plane home like that. But right now she felt calm. Pleased, even. Satisfied. Every now and then, she touched the small, unnoticeable lump in her pocket.

"Brucie would say I had someone upstairs looking out for me," she said. The thought didn't send her crashing into a hole of grief. She kept it together. She was going to be okay.

After a moment's hesitation, Chris laughed. "Yeah, he would. You'll get a Distinguished Flying Cross out of this." He seemed happy to have been the witness to the whole thing and was much more eager to tell the story than she was.

"Yeah, we'll see," she said. And what would Nana say to that? *I told you so*, was what she'd say.

\* \* \*

### Part III

This was exactly the way Elli imagined it would be, when she finally went interstellar. Stepping into a station bar filled with spacers, human and alien, overlooking the dockyard viewports where ships passed by, carrying the shadows of deep space with them, reflecting the light of distant stars—that was the moment that made it all real. She was here, and she was part of it.

Captain Lau put a hand on her shoulder when they walked through the door, called for silence, and announced, "This is Elli, our new pilot!"

Lau was a familiar face here, and Elli was now part of his ship, the *Yosemite*, part of his family, and thus made welcome. Everyone raised cups and cheered, and she shyly waved back. She was one of them, and she almost laughed for the joy of it.

She accepted a first drink and then listened to stories. Who'd been to what planet, how far out they'd gotten. Who'd met the most different species—one engineer had been the only human on a ship once, and had learned to speak Traskian, which he demonstrated. Everyone was impressed. Who had survived what disasters—reactors going dark a dozen light years from anywhere, M-drives offline. Breakdowns that were never supposed to happen but did, inevitably. *Everything* could happen out

here. Everything did.

“. . . the environmental coupling was just *gone*, I'm telling you," Zed, *Yosemite's* engineer was explaining about a previous ship he'd served on. "We knew the system was broken, we got the ship stabilized so we could get in and look. But it wasn't broken. It had vanished."

"What, someone toss it out by accident?" another spacer countered, and there was laughter.

"Explain to me how someone throws out a part that the ship can't run without," Zed said back.

Another pilot, Douk, grinned and said, "Maybe it was a gremlin. Just making trouble."

Most of the gathering laughed. A few didn't. Elli didn't. She held her breath and made note of which of them stayed quiet, looking pensive. Like they might have known something.

One of the quiet ones was Prestige, captain of the *Greentree* and a friend of Lau's. Lau introduced Elli to her special, since Prestige used to be a pilot herself until she got her own ship. Maybe Lau wanted her to have a role model. Elli crept up to her, offered to buy her a drink in exchange for a story, which was how things were done.

"Gremlin," Elli said.

"Yes?" Prestige raised a brow.

"You didn't laugh."

"And?"

Elli took the risk. "About this big," she held her hands apart, a little smaller than her own head. "Dark gray skin, perfectly smooth. Silver eyes that don't blink. Eats ship parts."

Prestige's brown skin paled. "You've seen one. My God."

Well, yes, Elli almost said. She'd done a lot more than that. "I keep hearing stories," she said instead.

"Like, that it's good luck to see one, or bad luck? They're a portent of death? Or that they'll come save you at the last minute, but only if you have faith, if you love your ship like your own mother? Those stories?"

Elli didn't believe any of that. The reality was so much more complicated. "Or that if you go far enough out, farther than any human being's ever been—that's where they live."

They were almost speaking in whispers now, letting the party roll on around them.

"You want to know where they live?" Prestige asked.

Elli *needed* to know. She licked her lips. "I . . . I have a friend who wants to know." That sounded transparent, didn't it?

"It's all just stories, you know. Ask anyone. They'll tell you it's just stories. Even the deep dark has ghosts."

"Especially the deep dark?" Elli said.

"Yes. Just so." Prestige leaned in, spoke even softer. "Go to Tau Crosspoint. If anyone anywhere knows, it'll be there."

The answer sounded true. It would to anyone who didn't laugh at ghost stories.

"Thank you," Elli said.

Prestige offered a thin smile. "I want the story, when it's all done."

"Yes, sir."

\* \* \*

Elli adjusted the breath tubes at her nose. Wouldn't do to appear before the committee and pass out from oxygen deprivation. Tau Crosspoint Station's atmosphere was almost human-friendly, but not quite. Some human spacers liked to show how tough they were by going without supplemental air here. She believed that space was difficult enough without giving yourself more challenges.

The ancient bag hung from her left shoulder, and she tucked it more firmly under her arm, careful to keep it from getting jostled by passersby. The leather was centuries old. Brown, dark with oil and handling. Stiff, but not cracked. Somehow, it survived. Deep and wide enough to fit a couple of hand terminals and a jacket, maybe. A word in an ancient alphabet was carved on the flap. Elli took it on faith that the word was a name.

"You ready for this?" she whispered to it. The bag wiggled, just a little. She took that to mean yes.

The waiting vestibule outside the conference room was plain, just a couple of wide pan-species sofas and a screen showing a view over the station docks, an ordinary yet endlessly fascinating scene of ships sliding in and out of frame, maintenance drones with running lights flashing zipping back and forth. She could watch it for hours, and imagine stories about who was there, where they were coming from and going to, and why. In fact that was one of her favorite things to do at any station, find a cafe selling tea or maybe even real coffee and sit with a view of the docks display and just watch.

"The committee will see you now," the control pad by the door announced. Elli had settled her nerves, but they jangled all over again. She didn't really want to do this. But she had to. She took a deep breath and approached. The door slid open for her.

The committee governing interstellar relations on Tau Crosspoint had a lot of official names, and a lot of unofficial tasks. It didn't manage the station, or have jurisdiction over individual species. It had no real military or enforcement authority. But it did handle all the issues that didn't really fall under any other jurisdiction. They helped when someone was stranded, when people had an argument, or an idea for a project that might make things better. They were there to stop conflicts before they rose to the level of governments and armies.

Elli stood before them now, in the middle of a round room, in lighting that was too dim for her, but optimal for a dozen other space-faring species. Five committee members sat behind a long table. None were human, which raised the question of whether they could sympathize with her request, or if this would seem like yet another tiny human obsession.

She had done her research, she could identify them: Cymborg, Trask, Eleroid, Lizardian, and Mantish. The names weren't their own, but human attempts to categorize beings outside their experience, with no Earthly analog. No matter how much time humans spent off Earth, their DNA remembered their distant cousins and looked for the familiar. At least they were all about her size—none taller than two meters or so, or shorter than one. She could relate to them, she was sure of it. They had translator devices clipped to their clothing. All she had to do was speak. They were waiting for her.

She lifted the flap on the bag and stated simply, "This is Drook."

It emerged, stretching one oily limb then the other, peeking out with silver eyes, matching gazes with each member of the committee—when there was a gaze to meet—and didn't cringe, didn't hide, didn't admit it was afraid. It climbed out, slipped up the bag's strap, and clung to her shoulder, tucking itself under the fall of her shoulder-length hair. Its grip was cool, light. The odd creature, oily gray with silvered eyes, no bigger than her own head, gazed calmly.

She thought she would have to explain, that she would have to apologize for telling ghost stories. For believing in ghost stories: There was a species living in the dark, very rare, very secretive. Nomadic, possessing nothing most people would recognize as civilization. They could survive anywhere. They lived on scrap metal. If something went wrong with your ship that you couldn't explain—blame them. If something broke down in the deep dark, every engineer or mechanic would wonder, just for a

moment—was it one of them?

The first time Elli read one of those ghost stories, in the memoir of some adventuring interstellar pilot, she knew. She just *knew*. She started telling her own stories, and she only had to speak a sentence or two, and everyone who spent any time between stars knew.

She heard the stories and carried that leather bag with her for five more years before she got up the courage to do something about it. Another year to even figure out *what* to do, and then a year to work her way out to Tau Crosspoint, requesting transfers, piloting a dozen different ships on a dozen different freelance gigs. She was logging a lot of hours, was getting to where she could request any piloting berth she wanted. But first she had to see the committee. And she thought she would have to explain.

But the Trask committee member let out a tiny squeak and said, “Is that what I think it is?”

“Oh! I never thought I would see one. I never thought!”

“They’re real.” The Cymborg turned eagerly to his fellows. “They’re real!”

Amazed, Elli watched and listened as they leaned forward, put limbs on heads in wonder, murmured quickly to each other. The Lizardian cried, milky tears on golden scales.

They already knew the stories. She didn’t have to explain anything.

The Cymborg led the council. In the dimmed light his metallic skin was almost black. “Pleased to meet you, Drook.”

From her shoulder, she felt Drook lean forward, a little too eagerly.

“You’ve already eaten,” she whispered, and it grumbled a little. But she didn’t think it would do anything embarrassing.

“Pilot Elli, can—can we look at Drook more closely?”

She approached, and they leaned in to study it, sighing in wonder. Drook bore it calmly. It knew what was at stake here.

“And—what can we do for Drook?” the Cymborg asked formally.

Drook stretched up, standing tall on her shoulder, and whispered in a breathy, creaking voice, sucking in air, pushing it out again as an analog to speech, only one word at a time, but it was enough: “Home.”

Elli continued. “We’re trying to find out where it came from, and how it ended up on Earth. And how to get Drook home again. Do you know anything? Any of you?”

She hadn’t been able to find anything in libraries because it was all stories, legends from the dark, passed along from spacer to spacer. Most species had been interstellar for centuries longer than humans, and traveled to places they hadn’t been yet. Maybe some alien archive would know about Drook. *This* was the kind of problem the committee solved.

It was the Mantish committee member whose translator device whispered, “Yes.”

Elli smiled. Even Drook smiled, wide mouth opening and letting out a sigh.

Then the Mantish being said, “But there’s a problem.”

The others nodded, murmuring pensively, and they said a word. At the same time, they each spoke or made a noise in their own mode of speech, and the translators all said, “Hunters.”

The Cymborg explained: Few had ever seen one of Drook’s people because they never revealed themselves. They had an enemy. Coming into the open meant being captured, and these creatures, the gremlins as Elli’s family had always called them, were such useful tools. Such useful weapons, with their affinity for machines and destruction. They could survive in heat, cold, and vacuum. Their enemy would fling thousands of them into battle, and then forget them. Dispose of them.

So they hid when they could. Escaped, if they were captured.

“Might this have happened to Drook?” the Eleroid’s translator asked. The being

itself was silent.

Drook, enslaved by an enemy, alone and far from home, managed to escape. Near Earth, where it went to ground and survived. Somehow.

Elli looked at Drook. It didn't react. Didn't debate this account of its history, didn't offer corrections. It could have, if it wanted to. So if it wasn't perfectly accurate, it was close enough.

"It must have happened a very long time ago," Elli said sadly. Centuries.

"Then Drook is lucky to have found you," the Trask stated. "You should be proud."

When Elli left Earth her mother had given her the leather bag, that her mother had given to her, and presumably so on, back for generations. Elli didn't know where it had started, or how. Just that it was her responsibility now, and she had an itch on the back of her neck that told her this might be destiny.

Drook looked back at her; she saw herself reflected in its eyes. It settled more firmly on her shoulder and said, "Yes."

After that, things happened much more quickly than she expected. Everyone wanted to help. They found her a ship, a single-seater scout craft meant for speed and fast jumps. A set of coordinates on the far end of a galactic arm. Advice and strategies: stay quiet, stay nimble, keep your eyes and sensors wide open. Yes, yes to all of it. The committee members all came to see them off at Tau Crosspoint's docks. Drook reached out and touched each of them in farewell. Elli was crying herself by then.

The Lizardian, who'd cried when she first met Drook, took them aside. "Are you ready to face this? Are you willing to take the risk, to travel to its territory despite the danger? Drook, you are likely safer here."

"But it's alone," Elli said. It was obvious. She had a choice, yes. She could say no to the journey. But then who would help Drook?

From her shoulder, Drook nodded and murmured, "Alone."

It had been alone for centuries. The Lizardian nodded, whispered a prayer of its people over them, and watched them go.

They launched.

\* \* \*

It took a month of jumping to reach the coordinates she'd been given. Once there, she immediately marked and entered outbound coordinates in case they had to leave in a hurry. Ship's systems were steady. So, they were here, as far out as any human being had ever gone, near as she could figure. Felt like cheating—breaking records wasn't what she was here for.

At a full stop now, she unstrapped from the crash chair and let herself rise from it, weightless. After deceleration, her craft drifted, powered down, in orbit some hundred and sixty light minutes out from the small, blue star. It lent a sharp focus to the system, a bright stab of light against the black. This was something of a sparse asteroid belt, a few dozen irregular hunks of rock stationed too far apart for their gravitational forces to draw them together. She ought to be nearly invisible, hiding out here.

Pushing off from the chair, she steered toward the storage compartments behind it. She didn't have far to go—the scout ship was tiny. From the center of the cabin, every surface was no more than a couple of feet away.

She unlocked a cabinet, drew out the antique bag. Opened the latch, let light into the depths.

"You can come out now," she said.

Drook uncurled, oily skin gleaming. Looking up, its eyes sparked silver. She held out her hand; its limbs reached. It shuddered, seeming to scowl as its body started a slow tumble in null g. Elli had latched her foot to an anchor point and was stable. Drook grabbed her hand and clung.

“Here, got something for you.” From a second cabinet she drew out a tub of junk. She’d collected for weeks to get enough for the trip, odds and ends from station repair bays that no one would miss. Drook was usually hungry after a long sleep.

She shoved the bag back inside before it drifted out of reach, while Drook exchanged perches, clinging to the edge of the tub, stretching possessively around it. It knew the routine, and reached into the lid’s aperture to draw out a chunk of wire and titanium. With a better sense of its bearings, it clutched the prize to its chest, looked around, and launched for an anchor point toward what was currently up. Elli stowed the bin back in the cabinet and grabbed a pouch of food for herself from another before returning to the chair. She strapped in and sucked down protein puree. Tasted like honey and lavender.

Anywhere else, the metallic screeching of Drook’s chewing would have been cause for alarm. It sounded like an airlock door ripping loose, or an engine bursting a plate. But no, Drook’s hind limbs wrapped around a steel slot in the bulkhead while its forelimbs shoved scrap metal into its mouth, and those thick plates it had for teeth did their work.

When the grinding of metal stopped, she glanced over her shoulder. “You want to see where we are?”

Drook was designed for weightlessness. It had spent a lot of time in gravity, but back on the shipboard environment it adapted quickly. It stretched, keeping one limb on the bulkhead anchor, only letting go when the back of the chair was in reach. New perch secured, it compressed, turning itself into a lump, peering out with those big reflective eyes.

She called up images from the external monitor and brought them into focus on the wall display: in the center of the display, the small searing star they now orbited. She ran a scan looking for heat, for radiation that shouldn’t have been there. Just because she couldn’t find any other ships didn’t mean they weren’t there. But if she couldn’t see them at the moment, they likely couldn’t find her either. For now, they stayed hidden.

“You recognize any of this?” she asked the oily lump lurking at her shoulder.

“Some. Been long.” It might have sighed, another expression it had learned from the humans around it.

She expanded the angle on the view, called up a three-sixty projection. The image flickered as the computer stitched together the view from multiple feeds. Using the crash chair’s touchpad she could zoom into any coordinate on an overlaid grid. Look at which far distant specks of light were rocks, reflecting the star. Or which might be something else. Not that she was really looking for anything—a dozen different sensors had a much better chance of seeing anything than she did, from a blip of heat to a transmission burst. But using her eyes gave her something to do. Made her feel like she was doing something, anything.

This was going to be a long wait.

\* \* \*

Perfunctorily, she finished the food packet and dropped it in the recycler. Drook mashed down a couple more pieces of scrap. She didn’t think it’d start in on the ship if they ran out. If it had to, it could go into hibernation again. It would be better if it didn’t, though. When the time came it needed to be awake.

Two days. Three days. A week, they waited. The ship was a good one, the air filters, environment systems were prime. It was only her imagination that the cabin started feeling close and ripe. Drook could pace around the inside, leaping from handhold to handhold for exercise. She had to tie herself down to a jogging strip and use resistance bands.

She tried to be patient. Drook understood patience and didn’t seem bothered.

“It’s fine, we expected this,” she murmured.

She changed position once each day, moving along the asteroid field's orbit. Ten degrees every day. They could survey the whole orbit in under two months. And if they didn't find anything . . .

"I'm sorry if this doesn't work," she said on the twelfth day. She wanted something to happen. She wanted this to work.

Drook seemed the calmest it had ever been, almost melting into whatever perch it took. Even hibernating, it had never seemed so relaxed. Maybe this really was home.

How did it feel, returning home after hundreds of years? She wasn't convinced that length of time meant the same to it. It had never been able to explain exactly how much time had passed since it arrived on Earth, where it had come from, and how it had traveled so far. It shouldn't have been possible, but here they were. That sense of destiny pricked on her skin, the feeling that the universe itself had granted her a task.

For a while, they watched the feed direct from the monitors: no filters, no scans, not even a coordinate grid. Drook perched on the chair at her shoulder, settling into a rounded lump. The eyes never blinked.

"How did you do it? Survive all this time, until you could come back home?"

The gremlin breathed, "Natalia."

"She put the name on the bag," Elli suggested. Drook hissed air through its plated teeth, its word for yes.

"I'd have liked to meet her," she said. Talking out loud to herself, mostly. It kept them both company.

"Pilot," it said.

"Yeah? Nice." Whoever Natalia was, she didn't have to take care of Drook, Elli supposed. And then it all would have gone differently. But Natalia had taken care of Drook. At least enough to carve its name on a leather bag. And maybe that was why Elli was out here as much as any other reason. Someone else had helped Drook; how could she not?

\* \* \*

In the middle of a sleep cycle the monitor beeped. A gentle, innocuous sound, meant to get the attention without startling. An electronic "pardon me." It repeated a minute later, just in case she'd missed it the first time. Elli scrubbed her face to wake herself up and called up the log. Something was out there.

It took awhile to find. A point of energy caught by passive sensors didn't necessarily tell where the source of the spike came from, and definitely didn't say what it was. That would take some hunting—without giving away her own position.

Drook launched from one anchor point to another, then came to its usual spot on the back of the chair. It tensed up, its limbs bracing, and made a low, eager growl.

She couldn't do anything until more data came in. A positive identification. Was it natural, or artificial? Satellite or ship, and if ship, some guess as to motive. Was it looking for them, or passing through by chance? What would it do if it found them?

Collecting data took time. Elli steadied her breathing, settled in the chair, stayed calm. No sense in letting her heart race on. Too soon to let adrenaline have its way.

Drook stayed rooted, motionless. Not even a tremble. It just watched.

Over the next hour the energy emanating from this new source remained steady. Artificially generated, the profile of a ship burning engines to enter orbit. Spectrographic ID came in. Radiowave analysis. The monitor offered a scrolling list of possibilities of what was crossing the system, deleting options until only one remained. She wanted the visual to make sure, to have this threat secure in her mind. An emotional need, not at all a technological one, but that was all right. She focused the monitors on the coordinates, magnified the image again and again, until she knew what she was looking at.

The Tau Crosspoint committee had warned her. They'd had more rumors than

data, stories passed down among their own ancient spacefaring peoples. If she went searching for Drook's people, they told her, she would find their enemy. Sleek, dark, bristling with weapons, ready for war. Hunting.

Drook planted itself against the monitor, pressing flat, trying to get closer to the image. She'd seen it do this to dozens of view ports and windows, as if seeing to the outside wasn't enough, it needed to get close, to touch, to feel. To *be* there. This small scout craft didn't have anything but small, perfunctory viewports. Vid feeds were more useful, more detailed, precise. But it wasn't direct, and Drook grumbled, mouth curling with frustration.

The scene outside changed slowly, as slow as space, objects racing on orbits and trajectories that nonetheless were slow on the scale of an entire galaxy. The Hunter ship crept along; it would be hours before Elli and Drook would know if they'd been spotted. Hours before they knew if anything else moved in this sector of space.

"Well, on the one hand, if they're here, some of your people probably are too," she said.

It hissed a *yes* at her. Drook's people were very good at hiding. If they'd seen Elli's ship, they didn't trust it enough to show themselves. This was why.

Drook snapped at the monitor, teeth scratching at the display.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she asked, sitting up.

Stuck on the bulkhead above her, it trained silver eyes on her and sighed, an expression of frustration. Or of decision. It had so few expressions capable of being read, but she imagined she was pretty good at interpreting what they were. Drook had made a decision. It was trying to tell her.

Later, she realized it was also saying goodbye. It didn't try to tell her more because it knew she wouldn't be able to help. It was sparing her from offering. Maybe she understood it all in that moment, but like with so much else where Drook was concerned, it wasn't explicit. It happened too fast to think of. It was like photons hitting your retina and simply conveying light.

"What?" she asked. "What are you doing?"

Drook was above her, then in an atomic blink was in the back of the craft, at the airlock. It looked back at her once more, its changeless gaze unable to convey everything she wanted to know.

Then she realized what it was going to do, and she shouted, reaching while she bounced against the crash chair and bulkhead. It flattened itself to nearly nothing and squeezed the very edge of a limb into the seam. She could have been watching carefully in time-lapse, microseconds stretched to hours, and she still wouldn't have been able to see it, the exact moment and process by which Drook pried open the door. It shouldn't have been able to do it, but it was strong, impossibly strong, and the door cracked. It didn't need much space, micromillimeters through which to flatten itself and slip and do the same to the exterior door. Micro millimeters still meant disaster.

Elli raced for the emergency pouch strapped to the back of the crash chair. Mask on. Air first. The rest could wait.

Drook was at the exterior door, extruded limb wedged into the seam, hauling open a door that should have been impossible to manually open. Alarms blared, warning lights flashed from every control board. With a horrible wrenching noise, the exterior door popped. Once again, only a millimeter, but that was enough. Both for Drook to squeeze through, and for the ship's atmosphere to turn into rushing wind.

The mask covered her face, a tube ran to the chair and the ship's air supply. She was breathing, she would keep breathing, she would be fine. She maneuvered from the chair to the bulkhead, pulling herself hand over hand until she reached the interior door. Just a couple of millimeters to close it, assuming Drook hadn't broken the mechanism. Popping a control panel, accessing automatics, and finally springing a

manual crank from its compartment, she braced her feet and hauled. Nothing. She tried again—too soon to panic, she still had a couple of options. And then the door lurched back into place. The wind stopped. She flew, tumbling down, bouncing up, until she flattened and bled off momentum, reaching for the nearest handhold, which was actually the rounded slope of a storage compartment with just enough of a lip for her to hang on to. She settled, assessed.

Drook was outside the ship.

It had always loved view ports. Every station and ship they'd been on in the years since leaving Earth it had found bubbled windows to press itself to, eyes staring out, studying the spacescapes outside. Following the paths of passing ships, their running lights reflected in its silvered eyes. She had always thought it wanted to know everything that was happening, had an affinity for all the machinery and activity of these islands of life in the cold.

She now suspected it had wanted to go outside the whole time. Elli turned what vid feeds and scanners she could on it. It perched on the rounded exterior of the hull, and instead of clinging, its limbs spread flat with as much surface area as it could manage, it reached. Stretched, as if tasting whatever particles drifted by. It sparkled briefly as a bit of moisture on its skin sublimated.

Did it feel closer, now? Closer to . . . everything? Surely it could see better on the ship's feeds, safe inside the hull.

Or maybe it couldn't. Maybe this was exactly where it belonged, and she would never understand. If she couldn't have understanding, maybe she would need to be satisfied with faith. Against the backdrop of space, of light and shadow, Drook seemed at home, a spot of silver gazing at the nearby star and glowing with its energy.

The Hunter ship approached, relentless. The inexorable power of inertia carried it, and Elli's nerves stretched to a breaking point. Did she fire her own thrusters, draw attention to herself, hope she had enough speed and space to escape? Did she wait? What did Drook want her to do? Not that she could ask it now. Could it have answered her? Did it even know? Why hadn't it told her what it had planned? Because this was faster. Drook needed speed.

When a set of thrusters flared on one side of the Hunters' ship, its path arced closer to her, and she knew she'd been spotted.

Air vents hissed—environmental controls replacing the atmosphere that had been lost when Drook popped the airlock. She shut that down, conserving power. Her portable air supply would last a couple of hours, and by then she'd know if she was about to be dead anyway, or not. Right now she needed thrust, maneuvering. She needed to get behind one of these rocks, get a chance to hide. Maybe fool the Hunters into looking somewhere else. She hoped Drook would be able to hang on.

She strapped into the crash chair, made sure the keypad was secure and in reach. Held her breath at the moment of truth, when she brought the reactor back online and opened up the fuel lines. The ship hummed, the lights inside brightened a few lumens. This would be Drook's warning, if it wanted to come back inside. If it wanted to do anything.

It had opened its mouth, baring the plates that were its teeth, and might have been shouting. She couldn't hear it, couldn't read it—but now, finally checking the feed again, she saw what she'd missed, when she'd been so focused on that approaching behemoth.

One of the nearby asteroids had moved. Not drifted, not traveled on a normal orbit. It had *moved*. Drook was shouting—if it was shouting—at it. The rock, not very much bigger than her own ship, tumbled with purpose in between her and the Hunters. Her feeds squawked an alert, their signals blocked.

Drook jumped. Elli shouted, a reflexive burst in anticipation of seeing it tumble into

the black, lost and drifting. But that didn't happen. She should have known it wouldn't. Drook had a target. The shifting asteroid waited for it. Drook reached, stretched, limbs splayed out, ready to grip. Gleefully, it seemed, it crashed into the rock.

At that moment perspective shifted. Her ship, the vid feed, the asteroid, all conspired, drowning her in light at just the wrong angle. She couldn't see exactly what happened, not without playing back a recording and filtering the glare. But she took advantage of the anomaly. If she couldn't see, maybe the Hunters couldn't either. And maybe if only her ship was visible, if they only saw her, she could distract them, draw them away from Drook and its people. She was sure it was with its people, that this was home, that they had always made a home among the rocks and debris in the cold dark, and that this was what they had been waiting for. All that waiting, and now her heart was racing. She tried to catch her breath and relax into the crash chair. Fired thrusters.

Straight up. Away from the Hunters, the asteroid. And Drook.

After this, it wouldn't be able to find its way back to her. But it didn't need to. That had been the plan the whole time, she told herself. Her job now was to get out. And get the Hunters away from her friend.

Her ship blasted onward with as much energy as she could put into it. She ought to be flaring bright on anybody's scanners. The chair cupped around her; she sank into it, growing heavy. She adjusted the vid, tried to maintain a view of what was happening. The asteroid. The oncoming Hunter ship.

"Come on, come on," she murmured. Maybe she should launch a flare, to really make sure they saw her.

And then what? If they did chase her? She supposed she'd figure that out when she had to. She hid once, maybe she could do it again, and started mapping nearby asteroids—bolt holes, just in case.

Elli turned off thrusters; the ship continued racing on inertia. Back on the feed she stripped out everything but the Hunter ship, and the asteroid where Drook had fled. She couldn't see it now; it was too small, too far away. The two points were heading toward each other. The Hunters didn't change course. Didn't turn, didn't seem to react to her flight. She wasn't their prey.

She was about to punch in the keypad command to launch emergency beacons. She didn't bring Drook here to hand it over to what it had escaped, once upon a time. She had to *do* something—

The star exploded.

But no, that was only what it seemed like, when the vid burst with a blinding light. She ducked away, catching only a second of it before the feed automatically shut down. The cabin went dark. Her ship tumbled off its trajectory, propelled by a shock wave. Elli spent a full thirty seconds stabilizing the ship, thrusting to a stop. Now weightless, she strapped herself more firmly to the chair, checked the ship's power, and restored the vid feeds to see what had happened. It couldn't have been the star that blew up or she wouldn't be here. But maybe . . .

She checked, checked again. Focused the view closer, panned out to take in half the system, filling the cabin with the projected light of the star. Pulled off her mask when she fogged it with her own panicked breathing. The ship's atmosphere had returned to normal.

She'd tagged the Hunter ship on the monitor, she knew exactly where it was, where it should have been. And now it wasn't there at all. Instead, a debris field smeared out along its former path, an arc of metal and other materials flashing in starlight.

The asteroid, the small innocuous chunk of rock Drook had so focused on, should have been nearby. But Elli had lost the tag she had on it. Somewhere between accelerating outward and tumbling out of control, her view of the confrontation had shifted, and now she was back to looking at a field of nondescript rocks, caught in their

orbits. And that new debris field.

Food for Drook and the others.

\* \* \*

She had supplies to wait out here for another month. She could put herself into medical hibernation and survive for six months, if she had a reason for it. But really, she'd done what she came here to do, and Drook was home.

Though she'd lost track of the asteroid that was somehow their home, she was able to monitor the debris field. It kept shrinking. Its trajectory brought it in contact with the asteroid field, and though she didn't see how it happened, though she never saw any individual piece vanish, the Hunter wreckage was disappearing. Being harvested.

Relaxing into low-g, she watched for a time, the view of the star and the light and shadows the rocks cast on each other. Took some readings and mapped some coordinates, to bank some data that might be useful. To bring some stories back for the committee.

The whole time, she knew Drook wasn't coming back. But she gave it a chance. If it wanted to.

Three days, she let the batteries fill, made some little repairs, caught up on reading and napped. Watched the asteroids, looking for a rock that moved wrong. Didn't find one. And so, deciding to be satisfied, she fired up the thrusters and headed out of the system, to a jump point, and then home.